COSCINOMANCY IN THEOCRITUS AND KAZANTZAKIS

BY

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“"The idea that modern Greece can have any teaching to impart concerning the beliefs of more than two thousand years ago seems seldom to have been entertained". These words, written by J. C. Lawson at the beginning of his pioneering study Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion (Cambridge 1910; reprinted 1964) over half a century ago now, may have lost a large measure of their validity in the wake of recent studies in social anthropology. Even so, the ancient world still contains some dark corners which the customs of modern Greece may legitimately be called in to illuminate. One such dark corner is the main subject of this short paper. It may best be introduced by a short passage from the third idyll of Theocritus. Here, by a typical Hellenistic inversion of the norm, the κώμος is taken out of its customary urban setting and transposed into the open countryside. The comast serenades his lovely Amaryllis before her cave, but in vain. His love is unrequited, as Agroeo, the local fortune-teller, has told him:

31 εἶπε καὶ Ἀγροεό τάλαθα κοσκινώμαντις,
 ἀ πρᾶν ποιολογεῖσα παραβάτις, ὅνειρ' ἐγὼ μὲν
32 τὶν δλος ἐγκειμασθ᾽, τοῦ δὲ μεν λόγον οὐδὲνα ποιή.

Gow’s translation runs: “And Agroeo too, that divines with her sieve—she that was lately cutting grass by my side, told me truth, how that my heart was wholly thine, while thou madest no account of me”.

It is Agroeo, the κοσκινώμαντις or diviner with the sieve, who catches our attention here. How did she operate? We gain little help from references in other ancient or Byzantine Greek authors.
The word κοσκινόμαντις is listed by grammarians (Pollux VII 188, citing the comic poet Philippides (fr. 37 Kock); Choroboscus in Bekker, *Ane. Gr.* II 193, 24 f.; cf. also Josephus or Joseppus, *Liber Memorialis* (Migne, *PG* CVI, 161 B)). Artemidorus II 69 includes sieve-diviners in a list of charlatans: all that they and others in the list say “one ought to consider false and without foundation”. Lucian, in his *Alexandros* or *The False Prophet* (42, 9 Macleod), talks in similarly disparaging terms about someone “divining with a sieve”. Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (6, 11), describes how old women, with sieves attached to their persons, visited herdsmen and healed their sick animals by the practice of divination, but he does not go into the method. And the anonymous metrical list of magical paraphernalia in the fourth-century great Paris papyrus includes “an old utensil, a sieve as my symbol, and a piece of bread” (IV, 2303 f. Preisendanz 1)) without further qualification or explanation.

In fact no passage of ancient Greek literature can help us understand how Agroeo in Theocritus used her sieve for the purpose of divination. The modern commentators on the idyll here admit defeat. Gow writes in his commentary (*Theocritus*, Cambridge 1952, II, 71), “The methods of ancient coscinomancy are not recorded”; and Dover (*Theocritus, Select Poems*, London 1971, 116) notes “We do not know how they used the sieves”. Experts on ancient methods of divination advance their own theories without providing any supportive evidence for them. Thus Bouché-Leclercq, in his monumental *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité* (Paris 1879), I, 183, claims that coscinomancy consisted of rotating a sieve that had been suspended by a thread or placed on a point, and the diviner then interpreted either the sieve’s movement or its orientation at

1) This is the only mention of a sieve (κόσκινον) or anything congeneric in any of the ancient magical papyri, so far as I know. There is certainly no other reference in the word index which Preisendanz attached to the ill-fated third volume of *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, which was virtually bombed out of existence on the eve of its publication (Leipzig and Berlin 1941). By good chance a few copies still survive, made up out of page proofs or photostats thereof. It is unfortunate that the recent reprint of *PGM* (Stuttgart 1974) saw fit to omit this word index, which retains its value despite its admitted inadequacies.