

# SIGNS OF THINGS TO COME: AN INTRODUCTION

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**T**he need to know what the future holds . . . most of us have that need at one time or another. Not necessarily simply wanting to know what horse will win a certain race, but desiring to glean at least an idea of where our lives are heading. The ability to divine the future is generally thought of as a gift. The very word *divine*—and its extension, *divination*—comes from “divinity,” the belief that to be able to peer into the future is a gift of the gods. In many early civilizations, the diviner or soothsayer held a court position, with his or her utterances being sought for state matters and in cases of war and natural disasters.

There is evidence that some form of fortune-telling was practiced in ancient China, Egypt, Babylonia, and Chaldea from at least 4000 BCE. Divination, augury, and soothsaying all were part of everyday life in ancient Greece and Rome. The oracles at Delphi and elsewhere were freely consulted. Various forms of divination are mentioned throughout the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments. But seeking knowledge of the future almost certainly goes back much farther than any of these. Early humankind was undoubtedly anxious about the seasonal changes, about the success of the hunt, about fertility, and about the welfare of the coming harvest. By repeated observation over several generations of such things as weather, animal habits, and bird migration, such happenings were aligned with the later results to give the basics of prophetic lore.

The Roman statesman, writer, and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE) said that divination is a truly religious matter since it predisposes a belief in a deity that has arranged a destiny for all humankind. Pythagoras (c. sixth century BCE), the Greek philosopher, is known to have visited Egypt and parts of Asia, studying Magian and Chaldean lore; the so-called

Pythagorean form of numerology is ascribed to him. Philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) wrote a treatise on physiognomy. Plato (428–348 BCE) is credited with a belief in fortune-telling.

Divination, or fortune-telling, is practiced in all cultures. What was once the prerogative of the shaman, and later became the jurisdiction of the priest, has today become the tool of anyone who has the inclination to try it. Tarot cards are read by all and sundry; astrological charts are cast and palms are scrutinized; crystal-gazers peer into the past, present, and future. For divination is not only the prediction of the future, but also the uncovering of secrets of the past and the present.

One of the earliest forms of divination was probably through dreams. Virtually everyone dreams, and many times a dream, on later reflection, turns out to have been a precursor of a coming event. From dreams, perhaps the path led to scrying—to gazing at a reflective surface and, through trance (light or deep), focusing onto events happening at a different time and place. Alongside these “internal” forms of divination are the “external” forms: observation of the actions of animals and birds, for example, and relating those actions to coming events. Other internal forms include automatic writing, use of pendula and dowsing rods, clairvoyance, cards, and tea leaves—all regarded as internal because their results depend upon sensory and motor automatisms and mental impressions. The external forms are dependent upon inference from external facts. Dice and other forms of sortilege, augury and omens, and casual meetings and overheard words are all beyond the immediate control of the diviner.

What induces people to turn to fortune-telling? It is usually fear, hope, or desire, along with simple curiosity. There is fear of future events not going the way you would like; fear of enemies, known or unknown; fear of illness, accident, hunger. There is also hope for what you desire. Many people also use divination for advice—to make an assessment of a career move or relocation, for example. A simple, daily card layout can smooth decision making. Much also has to do with an age-old belief that certain people are truly gifted with the ability to see the future, and then there is the desire to make use of their gifts. When the Romany, or Gypsies, first appeared in Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they found that they were looked upon as natural owners of such gifts. Persecuted as they were, the Roma did not hesitate to trade on any credulity of local populaces and to charge money to “tell the future.” Over the centuries they did go on to develop true gifts for divination in many different forms. Even today Gypsies are viewed as specialists in this field.

The reason divination, or fortune-telling, has survived for so long is that it gives results. If it did not, it would have died out long ago. Obviously, individual results vary. This is also a field that is wide open to fraud. Yet despite the charlatans, there are innumerable instances of people learning of

coming events and finding that what was prophesied actually came to pass. Many believe that certain people are truly gifted with the ability to see the future and desire to make use of their gifts. Documentation exists with a variety of professional societies, such as the (British) Society for Psychical Research, the American Society for Psychical Research, and the Parapsychology Foundation of New York, as well as at a large number of colleges and universities including the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory in North Carolina, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Leningrad, and the A. S. Popov Scientific Technical Society in Moscow. Records of Spiritualist churches and societies, of small home circles, and the evidence of tens of thousands of professional psychics and readers all lend credence to the fact that divination, fortune-telling, prophecy, or whatever label is applied, actually works.

Having said that, it must be emphasized that human life is not fatalistic. What is seen in “future readings,” from astrological horoscopes to tarot-card spreads, is not written in stone. It is all no more than an indication of what is *likely* to happen, with the current forces at work around you, if nothing changes. But, of course, things do change, and it is within the power of the person whose fortune is being told to make change. If, from a reading, indications are that something negative is going to happen, then it behooves that individual to focus his or her attention on the turning events and ensure that the negative does *not* happen. Would this then show that the divination was incorrect, since it foretold one thing but now that has not come to pass? Not at all, for it foretold what was going to happen if things had continued as they were at the time of the reading. A later reading, taken during rapidly changing times, would have shown a different outcome.

Christianity has had a confused, and confusing, attitude toward divination. As mentioned, the Bible is replete with examples of its use by the likes of Joseph, Jacob, Saul, Samuel, the Apostles, the Magi, and Pilate’s wife. Jesus foresaw his own death and resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 some verses promote divination and prophecy (for example, chapter 14, verse 31: “For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted,” and in verse 39: “Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.”) Yet despite this, many Christians condemn any form of divination.

Over the centuries the different forms of divination have acquired technical names. For example: divining by numbers is arithmancy, by using arrows is belomancy, from the entrails of animals is haruspicy, from the movements of mice is myomancy, and by the movements of straws placed on red-hot iron is sideromancy. The problem with most books and articles on divination is that they do little more than acquaint the technical name with the object used. From the above examples, most writings define myomancy as

“divination from the movements of mice” and haruspicy as “divination from the entrails of animals.” They fail to tell any more than this. *How* are the arrows of belomancy used? *What* is done with a finger ring in dactyliomancy? *How* does one “draw lots” in sortilege? In this encyclopedia, I have endeavored to give full explanations of all the various forms.

Along with those explanations, I have, where possible, cited references to that particular form of divination from a variety of sources. One problem that I found was the distinguishing of similar forms. For example: divination using or connected with water could cover dowsing, rhabdomancy, lecanomancy, hydromancy, hydatoscopy, and pegomancy. Water could be used for scrying—much like using a crystal ball—but even that could be broken down into whether the water used was rain water or water from a well or a fountain. Similarly, scrying (gazing into a reflective surface and seeing visions) could be crystallomancy, hydromancy (and from there to hydatoscopy and pegomancy, as mentioned), or spheromancy. The studying of entrails, which seemed popular in many cultures, covered the entrails from humans (anthropomancy), from animals (haruspication), and from fish (ichthyomancy)—all of these coming under the general heading of extispicy. Then they could be supplemented by the observation of sacrificed things (hieromancy) and the observation of the actions of the victim leading up to the sacrifice (hieroscopy).

There are more than four hundred separate articles in this book. After going through it carefully, the reader may be excused for thinking that virtually *anything* can be used as a tool for divination. And indeed it can. Basically, the item used—be it a mouse, a feather, a bird, or the track made by a wheel—is no more than a focal point for the diviner. There is a lot of psychism in divination, sometimes some extrasensory perception, but always a large dose of divine inspiration. Fortune-telling has been with humankind for millennia; it is unlikely to go away. Perhaps, with the aid of this book, you can study an aspect of it and enjoy it.