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Conceptualising Divination: Roman Attitudes and Approaches in the Second Century BC

The purpose of this paper is to construct the beginnings of the historiography of divinatory thought at Rome, through contemporary Roman literary sources, from the late third through the second century BC. The paper employs passages from Ennius, Plautus, and the Elder Cato to demonstrate the acquaintance of these writers and their audience with forms of divination that are not substantiated by the later historiographical sources. This body of literature reveals evidence for debates on the efficacy of divination, its expedience, and accessibility. Ennius shows that the Romans were already aware of the Greek philosophical debates on the existence of the gods and, if they did exist, whether or not they demonstrated their divine will through prodigies and other forms of divination. The *fabulae praetextae* of Plautus do not simply reflect a Greek tradition but reveal diviners in Roman or Italian dress: *haruspices*, *harioli*, *praecantores*, *conectores*. Already apparent in Cato is the sentiment that traditional Roman divination was in decline, perhaps to be regarded as a concomitant of the influx of eastern cults and divinatory practices. Like later authors, his works are testimony to the contradictory stances available to the Romans. While appearing to uphold the traditional practices of the Roman state and to deride the practices of foreign nations, Cato accepts that divination of all kinds was very much a feature of the Roman way of life.

I argue that the Romans were already exploring notions of the efficacy of divination and prophecy in the early second century BC; that their concept of what constituted *divinatio* was not, in contrast to the historical sources (Livy in particular), limited to a style lacking in specifically prophetic utterance, identifiable prophets and anonymous diviners. The evidence suggests that at an early date the Romans were contrasting an idealised concept of traditional divinatory practice, as epitomised by the rites of the state religion, with the unofficial, the Italian, the foreign and the superstitious.

In conclusion, I consider the extent to which other literature offers a fuller picture of the variety of divinatory activity available at Rome, how these sources conceptualised divination, and what they reveal about divinatory customs in the second century BC. These incidental references add to the weight of evidence pointing to a competitive, mercenary atmosphere of divination in the city of Rome from the third to second centuries BC.