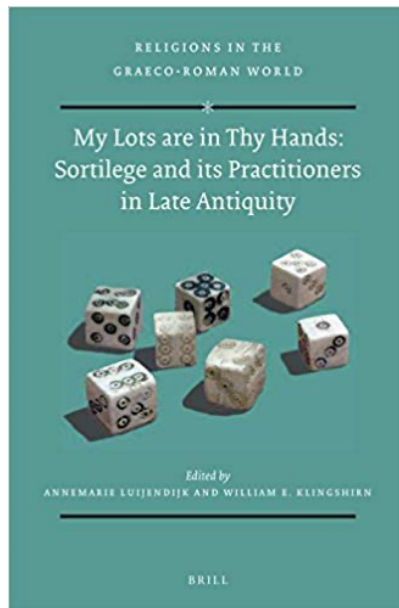


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AnneMarie Luijendijk and William E. Klingshirn, eds.

My Lots are in Thy Hands: Sortilege and Its Practitioners in Late Antiquity

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This volume offers a necessary and helpful roadmap for the study of sortilege in late antiquity. Within a series of chapters diverse in both quality and subject matter, some of the leading contemporary experts on this topic establish the state of the field. The volume focuses on the material, embodied aspects of lot divination as evidenced by various texts. Overall, it allows the reader to acquire in one volume a working knowledge of how lot divination worked in the late ancient world, particularly in Egypt.

The introduction (1–18) begins with a sweeping statement: “Divination by lot, also known as cleromancy and sortilege ... was arguably the simplest, cheapest, and most widespread form of divination in antiquity, and remains so to this day” (1). Thus begins an examination of the intriguing ancient phenomena whereby people sought answers, “truth,” in dice, knucklebones, pebbles, and so on. The key to these mechanisms was their perceived capacity to produce one of numerous results with equal likelihood. The editors make a key interpretive insight in saying that such a capacity was not understood as guaranteeing randomness—just the opposite: such devices were vehicles “for producing a definite outcome against every appearance of randomness” (2), tapping into the divine sphere and sampling the true/hidden/divine reality present within an otherwise random world. The introduction further contextualizes ancient lot divination within “an imperial koine of cleromantic practice” in late antiquity (3), where divinatory practice was ubiquitous, if not uncontroversial. The power of sortilege was precisely its ability to provide

definite answers to virtually any question. It was also compatible across the religious spectrum. For all this, understanding this ancient practice is not easy, given the arcane nature of the ancient texts testifying to it. Thus the present volume.

Chapter 1, “The Literature of Lot Divination” (19–59), also by the editors, authoritatively articulates the state of the art. It briefly overviews how lots functioned in antiquity and how the genre of lot-divinatory texts operates (a genre characterized by addressing the inquirer directly, in the present tense, usually in prose). Sortes (lot texts) distinguish sharply between good and bad outcomes, inclining slightly toward the former. The chapter outlines various sortilege techniques and lists known lot texts of antiquity within four groups: (1) books of fate, which include the Sortes Astrampsychi (a first-century CE oracle consisting of a list of questions with ten possible answers each), Sortes Barberinianae (a simpler version of the Sortes Astrampsychi), Sortes Sangallenses (a lot text based on the Sortes Astrampsychi), and Sortes Duodecim Patriarcharum (a text falling outside the present work’s scope but noted for its similarities to the Sortes Sangallenses); (2) sortes with general answers, including the Sortes Alearum (second/third-century inscriptions providing oracles based on multiple throws of astragoloi, dice), ostraca from the shrine of the Praesidium at Dios (pieces of ostraca and stone from ca. 200 CE inscribed with deity names and oracles), Kellis Oracle Book (a page from a papyrus codex from Kellis containing an obscure number oracle), Italian lot oracles (a heterogeneous group of oracular responses inscriptions), Sortes Sanctorum (a dice-based oracle extant in Greek and Latin), Sortes Monacenses (a manual with of two systems of sortes based on dice throws), the Vatican Coptic Lot Book (a professionally written lot book based on some form of dice throwing, Rhiktologia (a fourth/fifth-century Greek papyrus fragment preserving four answers preceded by chi-rho signs), and the Gospel of the Lots of Mary (a “lightly Christianized” text containing thirty-seven responses attributed to Mary’s interaction with the archangel Gabriel); (3) lot texts based on sacred books, inclusive of Homeromanteion (an oracle providing 216 different answers made up of verses from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* based on three dice throws), sortes *Vergilianae* (literary evidence pointing to a practice of deriving oracular response from Vergil’s *Aeneid*), bibliomancy (literary evidence of the practice of opening a manuscript at random and taking the emergent passage as an answer), sortes *Ioannenses* (a series of short, divinatory phrases in manuscript margins, most common with the Gospel of John), Lachmētērion “of the holy apostles” (a text preserved in a medieval manuscript); and (4) individualized lots, namely ticket oracles (a form of sortilege where two tickets containing positive and negative queries were submitted sealed to some mysterious selection process, which returned only one ticket: the response). Each text introduced is followed by a list of editions, translations, and studies. This chapter’s overall effect is to survey the lay of the land for studying sortilege in late antiquity. The chapter’s authors, moreover, are manifestly the authorities to proffer such an overview, each being foremost authorities on these texts as testified by their recent bibliographies. One thing that would have improved this chapter is a few illustrations.

earlier shrine-based oracles with their authorized personnel and later, text-based oracles that could be used easily by even the semiliterate.

Pieter W. van der Horst, in “Sortes Biblicae Judaicae” (154–72), wanders through a diversity of evidence for Jewish sortilege before concluding that the practice is only firmly evidenced beginning with third-century CE rabbinic texts. These testify to a distinctive clodomantic approach whereby biblical verses heard at random from children become prophetic. In conclusion, Van der Horst expands this finding to Greek and Christian practice by musing that all sortilege seems to originate between 200 and 600 CE, though earlier practices of like divination cannot be denied.

Randall Stewart’s “The Sortes Barberiniae within the Tradition of Oracular Texts” (173–95) approaches the Sortes Barberiniae, a text derivative of the Sortes Astrampsychi and mutilated by scribal “fixes” and transmission. This chapter reconstructs this usually ignored text and calls for its further investigation.

In “Oxyrhynchus and Oracles in Late Antiquity” (196–210), Alexander Kocar argues that the shrine of Philoxenus at Oxyrhynchus processed not only lot oracles, which was already known, but also oracular codices operated by ritual experts. He supports this with text and translation of two previously unpublished Coptic miniature codices, though his contextualization of their usage appears largely guesswork, albeit guesses educated by similar divinatory practices/objects.

“Sortes, Scribality, and Syncretism: Ritual Experts and the Great Tradition in Byzantine Egypt” (211–31), by David Frankfurter, situates sortes texts from late antique Egypt within the institutionalized (Christian-monotheistic) milieu of scribal experts (not “freelance figures,” for which “there is no good documentation” [214]). He explores the economics of knowledge implicated in this process of church-affiliated experts drawing upon diverse traditions and highlights the mechanics of textuality as generative: “The production of Sortes books was ... a natural extension of Christian book culture, scriptural culture, and ritual culture” (231).

In “Sortilege between Divine Ordeals and ‘Secular’ Justice: Aspects of Jurisdiction in (Ritual) Texts from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt” (232–47), Franziska Naether jumps thousands of years between the New Kingdom (1550 BCE) and the Arab period (641 CE) to survey religion vis-à-vis law in ancient Egypt. This supports a brief, general discussion of sortilege that guesses how sortilegi fit in the Egyptian legal system. This essay’s contribution is diffuse and limited to reminding the reader that sortilege likely figured in ritual-legal matters within ancient Egypt.

David Ratzan’s “Freakonomika: Oracle as Economic Indicator in Roman Egypt” (248–89) explores sortilege through the lens of economic decision making. He argues that Roman-period lot oracles reflect an economy of mitigated uncertainty and thus ask more specific questions emerging from

better-informed, more confident parties. Such specificity limits lots' efficiency for decision making but reflects Roman times, which were, Ratzan says, "pretty good" (289).

In "I Do Not Wish to Be Rich': The 'Barbarian' Christian Tatian Responds to Sortes" (290–308), Laura Nasrallah uses sortes to situate Tatian within the cultural discourse on fate, will, and uncertainty that E. R. Dodds famously used, citing sortilege, to describe the Second Sophistic as an "age of anxiety." Tatian becomes intelligible within the late antique intellectual landscape as one who engages, and rejects, sortes as epistemologically worthless within a discourse on gods, demons, and the relative freedom of human action.

AnneMarie Luijendijk's "'Only Do Not Be of Two Minds': Doubt in Christian Lot Divination" (309–29) ends the book by showing how the Gospel of the Lots of Mary frames itself as related to and a continuation of prayer, lending sortilege ritual religious/theological legitimacy. The text does this by highlighting doubt as the converse of faith and playing on the idea of doublemindedness (ΖΗΤΙΣΜΟΣ = διψυχία) found in the Epistle of James (1:5–8). This points to a larger phenomenon wherein ancient divination sought to address anxiety/insecurity/doubt, mitigating the agony of decision making and prompting the practitioner not to doubt the oracular answer so divined.

On the whole, this volume is extremely useful. It compiles ancient lot texts and bibliography and addresses the subfield's *status quaestionis* from various angles. Some essays provide little more than general surveys, whereas others present the most up-to-date studies on little-known texts or condense some of the best contemporary research on major issues. Many of the chapters contain general surveys, facilitating Brill's ability to market chapters individually but manufacturing redundancy for a cover-to-cover reader (for which the volume is not designed). Alongside a look at the texts themselves, this book constitutes the necessary scholarly tool for research into lot divination in late antiquity.