

DIVINATION FROM A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

FRIGERIO (G.) *A Cognitive Analysis of the Main Apolline Divinatory Practices. Decoding Divination*. Pp. xii+198, ills. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. Cased, £120, US\$160. ISBN: 978-1-032-41152-1.

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Cognitive approaches to the ancient world, and in particular to ancient religion, that is the application of theories and methods from experimental psychology and neuroscience as well as from certain areas of anthropology and evolutionary biology, have become increasingly dominant in the field. At their best these approaches can offer important new insights into the significance of ancient ritual practices and beliefs. However, too often the nature of the ancient evidence makes it difficult to do more than hint at what a cognitive approach might reveal to us, if only we could be confident that we knew what these ancient rituals involved.

Divination has been examined from a cognitive perspective before (see e.g. some of the contributions to L.G. Driediger-Murphy and E. Eidinow [edd.], *Ancient Divination and Experience* [2019]), but this is the first monograph focused on Apolline divination from a cognitive perspective. While it has high ambitions, it is rather let down by its variability of scholarship. After a short introduction, Chapter 1 explains briefly the various cognitive terms that F. uses in the book: ‘The brain as a prediction engine and Bayesian inferences’, ‘The extended mind’, ‘Hyperactive agency detection device (HADD)’, ‘Theory of Mind (ToM)’, ‘Ritualised actions’, ‘Counterintuitive concepts’, ‘Intuitive and reflective beliefs’, ‘Whitehouse’s modes of religiosity’ and ‘Material agency’. This is something of a ragbag, and some of these terms receive rather longer discussion than others, but, overall, they are clearly explained. The bulk of the book is made up of three sections, focused on ‘Landscape’, ‘Architecture’ and ‘Material Culture and the Prophets of Apollo’. Each of these sections has two chapters, the first devoted to Delphi, and the second to Claros and Didyma. The sequence is intended to lead readers, like pilgrims, towards the sanctuary, through it to the temple building and finally to the ritual of consultation itself. The book ends with a substantial conclusion, which summarises the arguments presented in the earlier chapters.

The chapters that look at Claros and Didyma (3, 5 and 7) are generally more convincing than those that examine Delphi. This is probably because far less has been published about these sites, and more of what has been published is recent. The sites also have a shorter relevant history (little remains at Didyma from the archaic period, and the oracle at Claros only began to function in the Hellenistic period). The two sanctuaries exist in a largely artificial environment, and although the architecture of their temples is complex, its shape is relatively clear. Thus, attempts to understand the sensory effects of the sites, the way in which the buildings shape the experience of the visitor, have a reasonably good chance of being accurate. It is rather more difficult to reconstruct the rituals at these sites than it is for Delphi, but F. plausibly suggests that at Didyma at least these are likely to have been modelled on contemporary practice at Delphi. That said, the concluding discussion of Apolline divination in Asia Minor is marred by some outdated and confusing generalisations: ‘In the Hellenistic age, the concept of Olympian gods became inadequate, while the model of chance and fortune started to arise, with a consequent growing scepticism towards mythology registered’ (p. 151).

The chapters on Delphi (2, 4 and 6) are less satisfactory. The wealth of evidence and the long history of competing theories about what happened there prove too much for F. to make good sense of. Particularly disappointing is the discussion of the temple building itself. Missing from the bibliography is the official publication of the excavations of the temple (P. Amandry and E. Hansen, *Fouilles de Delphes II. Topographie et architecture 14. Le temple d'Apollon du IV^e siècle*. 3 vols [2010]). Instead, F. puts much weight on the description of the building in an article by J.H. Middleton, which according to endnotes and bibliography was published in 1988. Unfortunately, this is actually an article from *Journal of Hellenic Studies* published in 1888, before the French archaeological excavations at the site had begun. Middleton relied on Pausanias for his understanding of the sequence of temples, and so F., following him, pays too much attention to the mythical 'early temples' and shows no awareness that the current remains are of the fourth-century building, not the late sixth-century one. This is not the only problem. Although F. is aware that there is scholarly debate about what exactly happened during a consultation, the different views are not seriously discussed. Nor is there any attempt to provide a reconstruction of the sequence of events of a consultation. This makes it difficult to understand how the buildings and the objects within the temple would have impacted on the experience of the enquirer or the Pythia. At the end of Chapter 6, after discussing the various objects in the *adyton* of the temple, namely the *omphalos*, the tripod, the laurel, Dionysus' tomb and Apollo's statue, F. suddenly returns to theory, introducing 'Event segmentation theory' and 'the absorption hypothesis and the metaplasticity of the brain'. The final discussion is more about justifying the claim that objects have agency than about what these objects did. Leaving aside the unsatisfactory discussion of the temple building, it is not obvious that F. has a clear vision of what actually happened at a consultation of the oracle at Delphi, and, as a result, readers are left in the dark.

At the end of the conclusions, which round off the volume, F. claims, 'Independently from the case studies, the methodology applied here represents an innovation and renovation in the field of Classical Archaeology and forms a further contribution to the still-developing field of cognitive archaeology' (p. 168). This is not without some truth, and perhaps this volume will inspire someone to write a more convincing cognitive account of Delphic divination.

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