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# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FATALISTIC BELIEFS IN THE PROPHETIC CUSTOMS OF ANCIENT SOCIETIES AND THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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## Abstract

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the most common forms of future prediction used by the ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Macedonians and Romans. Astrology, for example, examined celestial configurations to foretell the destiny of individuals. Ancient societies also predicted the future through the symbolic interpretation of dreams (*oniromania*), by inspecting the internal organs of sacrificed animals (*hieroskopia*), by examining the behaviour and flight patterns of birds (*oionomanteia*), through inductive or artificial divination (*eutehnón, tehnikón*) and through observing various natural phenomena that were interpreted as 'good' or 'bad' omens. This paper has two principal aims. First, is to use the comparative analysis to illustrate the similarities and differences in how ancient societies used divination systems to predict and interpret the future and destiny of mankind. The second one is to examine the impact of those systems in modern societies. Although rudiments of the ancient systems have been modified in modern times, they remain almost unchanged in some rural areas and are evident in Macedonian folk beliefs, and contribute to fatalistic attitudes.

*Keywords:* prophecy, antiquity, fatalism, customs

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## 1. Introduction

The method known as *diviniatio*, based on everything *divinus*, was an attempt to tap in to the future and thus become aware of the fatal predestination of humans. Greek prophets, in a state of ecstasy (*éksatasis*) or 'divine inspiration', proclaimed divine will and observed the natural and celestial phenomena in order to discover how their changes would affect human life. These prophets went by various names, including *epodoi* or *epaoidoi* (sing. *epodos*), *goetes* (sing. *goes*), *magoi* (sing. *magos*) and *pharmakeis* (sing. *pharmakeus*), and in Latin: *magi* (sing. *magus*) or *venefici* (sing. *veneficus*) [1].

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People in distress sought to protect themselves from the vicissitudes of life by directly pleading to the deities that use their infinite power for salvation. While they prayed to the gods and offered sacrifices, people resorted to prophecies when they felt dissatisfaction with their earthly destiny and to overcome the insecurity of not knowing what events were forthcoming. They formalized this practice by creating deities for the present and the future. In the quest to understand the future, people resorted to irrational explanations, which resulted in the emergence of various customs based on superstitions. While they are generally regarded as absurd in modern society, these beliefs turned into dogma and endured for centuries. Their persistence is primarily due to the creation of religion to codify knowledge and the belief in divine powers to understand the physical laws of nature.

## 2. Outcomes and discussion

While ancient societies had many different forms of predicting the future, astrology is the most widely known form. This practice began in Mesopotamia, and according to M. Jastrow, “Babylon is the mother of astronomy and astrology” [2]. Astrology was firstly observed among the Chaldeans, who were a caste of priests from the Chaldea area of south-eastern Babylonia [3]. Astrologers predicted the fate and character of certain individuals based on their symbolic interpretations of celestial configurations in the Chaldeic Cosmos. According to the Chaldeans, the positioning of celestial bodies corresponded to one’s country and was interpreted as the interaction of the gods of Heaven and Earth. The idea that observed changes in the heavens are related to parallel changes on Earth underpins astrology [2].

Predictions in the form of astrological texts were made on clay plates called ‘*nonmath*’ texts. They were a kind of diary used to log the movement of celestial bodies. This information was then used to answer life’s ‘who, what, when, where, why, and how’ questions. They even created ‘mathematical’ texts called *ephemeris* (pl. ephemerides) to observe how the daily travel distances of the Sun, Moon and five planets could predict some answers to these questions [4]. Over time, the Chaldeans established the personalized and individualized horoscope [5], which used one’s birthday to make specific predictions about his or her personal future [6].

After the individualized horoscope appeared in Babylon as a combination of scientific theories, ancient mysteries and beliefs, it quickly spread throughout the East during the sixth century BC, especially to Syria and Egypt. During this time manufacturers produced horoscopes, *horologoi*, *horoskopoi* to be used by Babylon priests [2, p. 75]. Horoscopes even transformed ancient paganism in western Greece and later in Rome, where it was regarded as the ‘queen of science’.

By incorporating various beliefs and superstitions into its doctrines, astrology was regarded as a religion in the ancient world, although it was initially perceived as an occult science based on complex mathematical rules and

interpretations. Numerous false predictions took their toll and over time astrology became a laughingstock in both intellectual circles and among ordinary people. Astrologers even became the object of rage when they would falsely predict the demise of someone seeking their services, causing the person to live in fear of impending death. Likewise, astrologers would draw the ire of the public when a person died shortly after they were told they would have a long and happy life.

The original Stoic name for fate was *heimarmene*, which understood human destiny as something that plays out at the cosmic level [7], and largely corresponds with the beliefs of the Chaldeans. Thus, the concept of fate was accepted as a law, according to which all things that were supposed to happen would happen. Stoics believed that everything that happens in the present and that will happen in the future is already written in the stars, which move according to an eternal law. According to the ethical principles of the Stoics, human fate was inevitable. Those who go to astrologers for predictions, therefore, tacitly legitimize the practice. Those seeking the guidance of astrologers contribute to the perception that they have the ability to conjure supernatural powers that can stop the influence of the stars and thereby prevent adverse events [3, p. 379-380].

The Church in the early Christian period, under the auspices of the Roman emperor, was largely critical as regard the astrological determinism, and labelled all those who sought the services of astrologers as heretics. Their efforts resulted in the implementation of the Law on Pagan Divination, formalized in 358 AD, which stated that prophecy and magic were among the top five crimes in the Roman Empire and therefore punishable by death. A year earlier, Roman Emperor Constantius clearly and publicly expressed his own negative attitude towards astrology.

The fight against heretical, pagan and astrological teachings gathered strength in early sixth century, especially during the rule of Emperor Justinian. Due to the intervention of the Church, the practice of astrology completely disappeared in the West and was relegated to limited local practices in the East [8]. During the Middle Ages, however, astrology underwent a revival, as evidenced by numerous recorded uses of horoscopes and zodiac signs. Astrological iconography appeared on various monuments and works of art in the West. Despite the presence of manuscripts bearing astrological references in Orthodox countries, Zodiac signs are found only on a few Byzantine artefacts, such as four copies of Christian Topography by Cosmas Indikoplov, dating from the ninth to the eleventh centuries.

Zodiac signs can also be found on Byzantine copies of Ptolemy's astronomical plates, created between period 813 and 820 AD, on the 'Svjatoslavlev Izbornik' of 1073 and on the 'Oktoih' of the eleventh century. On the territory of the modern Republic of Macedonia, the only surviving image of horoscopes and Zodiac signs are on a Byzantine monumental painting, located in the narthex of Saint Archangel Michael Church in Lesnovo, erected in 1341, enlarged in 1348-49 AD, and painted in 1349 [8].

Ancient societies considered the prophetic interpretation of dreams (*oniromania*) as the most significant form of predicting the future because the unconscious state achieved during sleep was thought to be suitable for contact with deities. Dreaming was regarded as a man's way to directly communicate with the gods and receiving divine prophecies. Numerous ancient sources refer to the predictive and prophetic power of dreams. The Sumerians produced the oldest such text, which described the dream of King Gudea (2122 to 2102 BC). The dream depicted a woman tearing down a building. She was amid the rubble and studying clay plates on which the constellations were inscribed. King Gudea then went to the shrine of the goddess Nanshe, where priests interpreted his dream and told him that the woman was the goddess Nisaba. Since she was holding clay plates on which the stars were inscribed, priests told the King that dream meant he had to build a sanctuary in accordance with stars on the plate [8].

Predictions of this sort can also be found in the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament [3, p. 373]. The book is a description of his Daniel's life story and a depiction of the adventures of his youth. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonians took Daniel into captivity, during which time he served King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (604-561 BC) as a prophet, an interpreter of dreams and a chief sage. The book provides a description of his dreams, visions, prophecies, and interpretations of those by the angels.

In Greek mythology, the personification of a dream is Hypnos, a demon from the underworld. Hypnos is personified as a winged boy who dips a branch in the river of forgetfulness and touches the temples of exhausted people to put them to sleep [9]. Apart from Hypnos, Greeks believed in the symbolism of dreams, but in a distinct way from other ancient societies. For the Ancient Greeks, each dream had its own meaning. Dreams could either look towards the past or be realized in the future. For Homer, the dreamer sees figures, items, and the recently deceased. If the figure of the deceased appears in the dream, it means that the person must still exist, having outlived his or her own death, but only as an airborne reflection, like *psyche*, which is the oldest means in the ancient Greek tradition to explain the following phenomena: unconsciousness, sleep, and ecstatic visions, in whose dark activities exists a special force who possesses the body and the self [10]. Following the example of the hero of Er of Armenia described in Plato's *Republic*, "the goal of the soul is the full release from the cycle of metempsychosis and crossing into a completely different way of existence in the heavenly places" [11].

Ancient Greek philosophers interpreted sleep and death in terms of awakening, an act that they believed had soteriological significance. For example, Socrates woke his followers up from their sleep against their will, aware that his mission of waking people up was his divine right "Like the tired people who you awake – you will sleep your whole life" [12]. Plato opposed the human irrationality that resulted from the influence of prophets and their prophetic powers [13]. He believed that prophetic power belonged to the gods, while the right of prophecy was given to those who were legally designated to

interpret prophecies inspired by God. Only those who had the ability to sleep without judging what they saw were reasonably able to interpret whether an apparition portended good or evil significance for the past, present or future: "Some call them prophets not knowing that they only interpret mirages while they themselves are not prophets, so it would be most proper to be appointed as interpreters of prophecy" [13, p. 72b]. Thus, Plato asserted that prophets do not exist; prophecies are placed in the sphere of the divine and all that divine prophesy the transfer of certain people in a state of sleep, illness or divine inspiration and only those people who have a mind, being able to communicate the prophecy of God, and in his opinion they are the interpreters of prophecy.

In ancient Macedonia, prophecy through dreams was the most typical form of divination. Plutarch gave numerous testimonies regarding the impact of dreams, maintaining that interpretation as a form of future divination should be the responsibility of a restricted set of people, including fortune tellers, prophets, pagan priests, sorcerers and astrologers. At the time of Philip and Alexander, the most highly regarded astrologer was Aristandros from Telmes, a town in Lycia: "There, with a white robe and a golden crown on his head, rode the psychic Aristandros" [14]. The cult of dreams was one of the most respected in ancient Macedonia. The cult was formed from the fatalistic belief in prophecy through the interpretation of dreams. According to folk beliefs, the unconscious state achieved while dreaming was considered suitable for contact with deities and divine powers. Dreams were regarded as a sort of temporary death, symbolically represented by the poppy because of its ability to cause drowsiness and drunkenness [15].

In ancient times it was believed that every dream in itself combines animation and images filled with meaning, which over time came to be interpreted through symbols. Although symbolic interpretation began sometime in antiquity, there continues to be a whole system of beliefs that interpret dreams as a bad omen in certain parts of the Republic of Macedonia. For example, in the Mariovo territory of the Republic of Macedonia dreaming about a house may have different meanings. For example, building a house signifies a grave, while constructing the chimney signifies illness or death. If the whole house is destroyed in the dream, the owner of the house will die, but if only smoke is visible from the burning house, death will strike any one of its inhabitants. Dreams involving sweeping with a broom or drowning in water are also signs of death, although the latter dream may also be interpreted as a sign of impending bad news [16].

Greek beliefs and the folk beliefs of the Republic of Macedonia share many similarities in the interpretation of dreams. Dreams permit communication with the 'afterlife', as they provide a connection between the living and the dead, and offer a way to find out about the condition of the nearby world of the dead. There is a widespread fear of such dreams in the modern Republic of Macedonia because of the belief that the soul communicates with the deceased since it can pass through all three cosmic levels. The basis of that fear is that the soul can exit the body and get lost, or forget which body it belongs to and enter another

body instead. If the soul exits the body and returns again during sleep, the body it has abandoned will die. According to the folk beliefs in the Republic of Macedonia, especially in rural areas, there is a belief that dreams dreamt on a Wednesday and a Saturday will come true, in which the sacred motive will be performed at a certain time [17].

During the second millennium BC, the dominant method of predicting the future was to observe the internal organs of a sacrificed animal (*hieroskopia*), particularly the liver [18]. This method is seen in the ancient Babylonian text, 'Worship the Gods of the Night', dated around 1800 BC. The text mentions predicting the future through the observation of lamb intestines. Part of this article was excerpted in T. Barton, as a quote from Dossin (1935) 'Prayer to the Gods of the Night', in the *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientate* 32, 279: "May the great gods of the night, Shining Fire-star, heroic Irra, Bow-star, Yoke-star, Sitaddaru, Mushussu-star, Wagon, Goatstar, Goatfish-star, Serpent-star, stand by and put a propitious sign on the entrails of the lamb I am blessing now" [6, p. 11].

A text that was discovered from the time of Hammurabi (around 1780 BC) shows the merger of the two types of future prediction: prophecy through the examination of lamb intestines and through divination of celestial phenomena. The text contains a report of the lunar eclipse in the area of Mari, located in the middle reaches of the Euphrates River. The eclipse was interpreted as a bad sign, whose astral divination was confirmed by priests using lamb intestines to make prophecies [6, p. 11].

Predicting the future by observing the internal organs of sacrificed animals, especially the liver, was primarily an ancient Greek tradition. According to Plato, this was the only means available for humans to gain prophetic abilities, and it was not considered in the sphere of the divine [18]. However, Plato also believed that there were limits to this kind of prophecy, stating that "while the man is alive, such special authority manifests itself by such signs, and when deprived of his life he became blind, and prophetic signs too vague to be clearly interpreted" [13, p. 72b]. Although Plato opposed and condemned all those who illegally declared themselves prophets, it shows the strong influence of ancient methods of divination and of the methods that have been designed to solve puzzles to discover the future.

Ancient Macedonians also have records of fatalistic belief in future divination by observing the internal organs of sacrificed animals. Evidence of this belief can be found in Plutarch: "Then he stated that Apollodorus, the governor of Babylon, offered up a sacrifice to learn the fate of the king. Alexander immediately called the pagan priest Pythagoras, and because the man denied nothing, asked what was to become of the victim. The pagan priest replied that he had a liver slice (which according to ancient beliefs was the worst sign), and Alexander muttered: 'Oh, what an ominous sign!'" [14, p. 178]

Even though this method of divination has changed in modern times, rudiments of it are preserved in some rural areas of the Republic of Macedonia. For example, in the village of Porece, there is the belief that death can be

predicted by examining the wishbone of a chicken. Once the meat is removed, the stains left from the meat are observed on the bone. If they are white, nothing bad will happen. If they are red, however, it is feared that someone in the family will die [19].

Observing the behaviour of birds is yet another way that ancient societies used to predict the future. In Greece, predictions based on the flight direction of birds (*oionomanteia*) can be found in Homer. For example, if the eagle flew left it was a sign that something bad would happen, while flying to the right was a positive sign. This belief can be seen in the Iliad when Priam, before going to search for the dead body of his son Hector, offered up a sacrifice to Zeus to ask for some kind of sign. When he saw the eagle fly to the right over the city, he knew that the flight direction meant his quest would be successful [20]. Plutarch refers to 'birds of omen', which is the oldest and best-known skill used to predict the future. According to Plutarch, because of their wisdom, infallibility and speed of flight in the service of the deities, birds had the power to both encourage and deter people's actions.

The ancient Macedonians also observed this method of future prediction, as one ancient source stated: "Next to him, in a white robe and with a golden crown on his head, rode Aristandros the psychic, who showed the fighters the eagle that constantly circled over Alexander's head and guided the path to enemies. The sight filled the fighters with great courage, and they began to cheer loudly among themselves." [14]

This method still exists in a modified form in rural areas of the modern Republic of Macedonia. The clucking of the chicken is considered an omen of death in folk beliefs. It is custom in Mariovo, for example, to verify future predictions: housewives would pluck feathers from the head of a chicken, put them in water, and then wait to see what colour feathers will sprout. If black feathers emerge on the head of the chicken, ill fate will befall the person who plucked it. If white feathers emerge, nothing bad will happen or ill fate will return to the chicken. Another example is the measurement of the hen that is clucking. If the chicken gained weight it was a 'good' sign, but if it lost weight it signified that something bad happen at the house [16, p. 46-47].

Owls are also considered an omen. If an owl lands on the roof of a house or if a flock of owls flies through a village it is believed that their presence not only foretells death of a family member but also brings ruin to the whole family or the whole village [16, p. 49-50]. It is also believed that when a cuckoo lives in an abandoned house, landing in a house where people live foretells misfortune and poverty [21]. Likewise, it is believed hearing a raven crowing in the morning will bring bad luck to the person who heard to their family [17, p. 52], or if it stops at person's house, a member of that family will die [22]. Since the song of these birds signifies something negative, it is considered one of the least favourite birds for Macedonians. Although events in the world happens suddenly and unpredictably, folk traditions have developed skills for reading ominous signs by observing bird songs so that they can warn people about the events that will soon follow.

These signs carry information from one world to the next and their messages have unique meaning, as they are intended for a certain time and a certain place. If these signs occur in normal everyday conditions and they mean absolutely nothing, nor do they mean anything to the community. In terms of that which is sacred, predictions are interpreted through the actions of animals or birds that show up at the house, they convey important information that comes from another world.

Inductive or artificial divination (*eutehnón, tehnikón*) was highly prevalent method for understanding the future of ancient peoples, used by the prophets to understand God's will by observing various phenomena that were considered to be sure signs. In Greece they appeared in various forms, including as atmospheric phenomena, which were interpreted as either good or bad, regardless of the person's will. When superstitious people saw a homeless person in the streets who was adorned with garlic and stealing food to leave as an offering to the goddess Hecate, they would immediately go home and clean themselves from head to toe and call upon priests to purify them with a sea onion [23].

According to W. Burkert, the Greeks have yet to find an explanation for the use of onions as a means of ritual purification (*skilla*). This type of purification ritual has been observed in the Hittite tradition, in which an onion is peeled layer by layer until nothing is left. The symbolism of this ritual practice draws from the popular belief that in peeling. Demonstrating the ritual symbolism of this ritual practice relied on the popular belief that peeling an onion was an elegant and dignified way to get rid of everything that caused anxiety [24]. The ancient Macedonians placed great faith in fortune tellers, who observed various phenomena and interpreted them as either 'bad' or 'good' omens. There are numerous examples in ancient records of Alexander the Great consulting the prophets to interpret certain atmospheric phenomena: "There was evidence that at that moment the Earth shook and thunder and lightning erupted in the sky" [25]. Those signs were noticed by historians who wanted to explain his life achievements.

Belief in various phenomena, like certain omens or marks indicating a 'good' or 'bad' future, are rudiments from the past that have carried over in Macedonian tradition. There are many such beliefs rooted in the past, and they contribute to fatalistic outlooks. Although in modern society these beliefs are regarded as superstition, some of them persist in, like the superstition that it is bad luck if a black cat crosses one's path. For that reason the person whose path was crossed goes back a different way or waits for someone else to pass. In addition, there is the belief that a star lights up for the birth of each person and fades with their death. Even if many of these beliefs appear to be a relic of a bygone time, they are engrained in society and still held by some.



### **3. Conclusions**

Despite the substantial amount of time that has passed, ancient systems of future divination and ways of interpreting destiny share great similarities with those in modern society. Field research in the territory of the Republic of Macedonia finds a number of so-called ‘prescient’ people who can foretell the future. The means by which they carry out their actions are different. Some use icons or a silver cross. Others have a procedure using a corkscrew and mud, instead of water, sugar and coffee. Still others use tarot cards, palm reading, crystal balls or astrological maps. Although many ancient forms of divination are largely missing in modern society of the Republic of Macedonia, there are numerous other rudiments still exist in a modified state. The purposes of predicting the future is the same today as it was in ancient times: to overcome the discontent of one’s earthly fate and feelings of self-doubt, and to request relief from an illness or poverty. In an article entitled ‘Instead of going to a doctor and psychiatrist, Macedonians go to fortune tellers and witch doctors’, it states that, “going to a psychiatrist or psychologist is still not considered normal, while going to psychics is more acceptable to Macedonians” [H. Mickovska, *Bezpardon.mk*, accessed 30 May 2012, <http://www.daily.mk/cluster/9b90224000b434a6f927720c419a15e8>]. These beliefs, however, do not contain any truth nor have any reliable basis on which to link family affairs, children’s health, or the eventual death of a family member. They are merely vestiges of past superstitions that have been transmitted from paganism to Christianity and persist in the belief system of the modern Republic of Macedonia.

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