

The Significance of the *Sortes* in Augustine

Naoki KAMIMURA, Tokyo Gakugei University

INTRODUCTION

Throughout late antiquity, Christian writers provided evidence of the popularity of what they took to be pagan and superstitious cults in their congregations in which members asked the popular advocates to apply their skills to daily cases. Among those inherited from classical antiquity, there was a set of techniques that would be designated as divination, that is the predictions made by lot, by the stars and constellations, by dreams and ecstasies, and also divine communication with human beings. Although Christian thinkers were questioned by people who saw, in at least some circumstances, diviners' apparent success in their making predictions, they had a hostile attitude to popular divinations.

It is noteworthy that, at about the same time as the composition of his anti-Manichaean disputation, *Contra Adimantum*, Augustine also preached several discourses against them, of which the second of these not only discussed Adimantus' attack on the possibility of divine communication with the devil in Job 1:6, but enabled his readers to review the catalogue of divinations:

There are many ways in which God speaks to us. Sometimes he speaks to us through some instrument, like a volume of the divine scriptures. Or he speaks through some elements of the world, as he spoke to the wise men through a star. ... He speaks through lots, as he spoke about ordaining Matthias to take the place of Judas. He speaks through a human soul, like through a prophet. He speaks through an angel, as we gather he spoke to some of the patriarchs and prophets and apostles. He speaks through some created sound effect, as we read and believe about voices coming from heaven, through no one could be seen with the eyes. Finally, God speaks directly to a man, not outwardly through his ears or eyes but inwardly in the mind, and that in more than one way, either in dreams, ... or by snatching a man's spirit away, which the Greeks call *ekstasis*, ... or in the mind itself, when someone understands God's majesty or will, ...¹

¹ Aug., *Serm.* 12.4: 'Multi autem modi sunt, quibus nobiscum loquitur deus. Loquitur aliquando per aliquod instrumentum, sicut per codicem divinarum scripturarum. Loquitur per aliquod elementum mundi, sicut per stellam magis locutus est. ... Loquitur per sortem, sicut de Matthia in locum Iudae ordinando, locutus est. Loquitur per animam humanam sicut per prophetam. Loquitur per angelum, sicut patriarcharum et prophetarum et apostolorum quibusdam locutum esse accipimus. Loquitur per aliquam vocalem sonantemque creaturam sicut de caelo voces factas, cum oculis nullus videretur, legimus et tenemus. Ipsi denique homini, non extrinsecus

Such is the way Augustine shows his deep concern with various manners of divination immediately before his ordination. In this sermon, he does not include other types of divination such as the haruspicy² and the consultation of demons in the list, despite the fact that those appears both in his writings before and after this sermon. For he might confirm that several kinds in this list are reasonable means to channel divine knowledge to humankind.

In fact, in the *Confessions*, after telling about the internal struggle with his physical desires, Augustine relates famous 'tolle lege' incident in a garden in Milan where Augustine happens to open a codex of Paul's epistle and reads the first heading he finds on himself.³ It might be admitted that, with regard to the act of consulting the scriptures, Augustine follows a venerable tradition in classical antiquity. Earlier in the *Confessions*,⁴ he also recorded the conversation with a knowledgeable physician, Vindicianus who pointed out the prediction drawn from the consultation of a book of poetry. In the paper which follows I have confined myself to lot oracle drawn from inspired books, as Augustine was concerned not only in the *Confessions*, but in some other works. How did he follow the custom in late antiquity? Why did he explain the specific mode of divine communication? For the sake of argument, I shall first focus on his positive attitude towards this oratorical process. Then I shall turn to his references from the opposite viewpoint. Finally, I shall venture an explanation for the significance of this kind of divination in the thought of Augustine.

AUGUSTINE'S POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS LOT ORACLE THROUGH SACRED BOOKS

The first evidence to be considered is the *Confessions*, in which Augustine refers to predictions made by lots drawn from inspired books: first, as Vindicianus indicates in his critique of predictions made by astrologers, and then, as Augustine himself experiences at the event in a garden in Milan. In the former episode, the learned physician responds to the young rhetorician's question 'how ... it often happened that the predictions of the astrologers came true'⁵ and clearly defines the chance as 'the result of a capacity for sortilege which permeates the whole universe'.⁶ Then, from observation that one often arrived at answers to the deepest questions when consulting

per aures eius aut oculos, sed intus in animo non uno modo deus loquitur, sed aut in somnis, ... aut spiritu hominis assumpto, quam graeci ecstasin vocant, ... aut in ipsa mente, cum quisque maiestatem vel voluntatem intellegit.' Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA III/1 (1990).

² See Aug., *Conf.* 4.2.3.

³ See Aug., *Conf.* 8.12.19: 'legerem quod primum caput invenissem'. Eng. trans. in P. Burton, *Confessions* (London 2001).

⁴ See Aug., *Conf.* 4.3.5-6.

⁵ Aug., *Conf.* 4.3.5: 'quae causa ergo faceret, ut multa inde vera pronuntiarentur'.

⁶ Aug., *Conf.* 4.3.5: 'vim sortis hoc facere in rerum natura usquequaque diffusam'.

a passage from the work of a poet selected at random, Vindicianus concludes that remedies available to the enquirer ‘miraculously’ emerges from the soul’s inward, ‘not as the result of any skill on his part, but of sortilege’.⁷

In the latter episode, Augustine offers a clear picture of himself as keeping with the tradition of this kind of divination. The repeated crying ‘*tolle lege, tolle lege*’ which he interprets as ‘a God-sent command’⁸ to take up the scriptures would introduce a procedure of oracle. Such words as ‘*tollere*’ and ‘*legere*’ have occurred as the specific term in divination: the former is taken to express the act of drawing a lot, while the latter is defined as the practice of reading the response of an oracle written on the lot. A further evidence for his sustained concern is given by a passage, in which, after hearing a child’s voice, another case of Anthony is referred to as the ‘*oraculum*’.⁹ However it must be borne in mind that, although he is depicted as one following the course of divination, this divinatory incident does not seem to share a feature in common with the explanation by Vindicianus: the chant as an unfamiliar stimulus for the consultation. The focal point is to realise the crucial impact accompanied by external source. Thus, he places as much more emphasis than one might expect on the gap between the voice and the consultation of a codex. Augustine reports the unusual and seemingly ineffective incentive for divination, thereby pointing to the unconscious power of mediation.

It is interesting to note that, at the final separation from his engagement in astrology, he reminds of a conversation with Vindicianus and transforms a definition of a lot into a definition of divine grace:

O Lord, most righteous Moderator of the universe, out of the depth of your judgement, bring it about that by some hidden instinct, without the knowledge either of consultor or consulted, every consultor hears what it is right that he should hear, according to his souls’ hidden deservings.¹⁰

This is said to be able to mediate between ‘every consultor’ and God’s ‘hidden instinct’. God works the secret inspiration in light of the ‘hidden deservings’ of the enquirer’s soul. Dependent on the ‘depth’ of divine wisdom is the reason for the limitation of this inspiration upon some souls. Although people should never dissent from divine justice, it allows them to appreciate the central event in the *Confessions*, as a form not of divination by skill, but of divination by the ‘whole universe’.

⁷ Aug., *Conf.* 4.3.5: ‘mirabiliter ... in se fieret, non arte, sed sorte’.

⁸ Aug., *Conf.* 8.12.29: ‘interpretans divinitus’.

⁹ See Aug., *Conf.* 8.12.29.

¹⁰ Aug., *Conf.* 7.6.10: ‘Tu enim, domine, iustissime moderator universitatis, consulentibus consultisque nescientibus occulto instinctu agis, ut, dum quisque consulit, hoc audiat, quod eum oportet audire occultis meritis animarum ex abyso iusti iudicii tui.’

AUGUSTINE'S DESCRIPTIONS OF THE CONSULTATION FROM THE OPPOSITE VIEWPOINT

But apart from such reflexive consideration in the *Confessions*, what evidence is there for the fact that Augustine's references to divination of this kind includes the contradictory assessment of its characteristics? It may help us to appreciate his approach to the problem of divination in question.

In the question 45 of *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, which is entitled 'Against mathematicians', Augustine begins by pointing out the inability of those trained in the sciences of numbers, quoting the passage from Wisdom 13.¹¹ Then, he provides another indication that some difficulties have arisen from their loose constellations despite the fact that 'they have predicted many true things'.¹² His dissatisfaction of 'their utterances' is clear from the last part of this question, in which he criticises the act of divination by 'the dead skins of manuscripts',¹³ not because those books frequently produce verses foretelling the future, but because 'some prediction of future events ... emerges, not by skill but by chance'.¹⁴ The phrase 'not by skill but by chance' is expressed by him without further discussion, but the following reasoning seems to lie below the surface of this question.

...clinging to it [sc. unchangeable truth], as it is written, *My soul has clung to you* (Ps 63:8), it is made blessed, and it also finds within itself the creator and lord of all things visible.¹⁵

In approximately 401, just after the composition of the *Confessions*, Augustine replied to the questions from Januarius, and then wrote *Letter 55*, after receiving another reply from him. In the final part of this letter, He discusses some Church habits that should be abolished, and provides practical advice to the layman concerning those 'who read their fortunes in the pages of the gospels'.¹⁶ He is well aware that he himself followed this custom at the decisive moment in the garden, thereby not only refusing demonic divination but distinguishing the consultation with 'the words of God that speak of the next life'¹⁷ from the employment of this practice for worldly matters. Since the latter should be censured, Augustine's answer implies a positive evaluation of his

¹¹ Aug., *diu. qu.* 83 q. 45.1: 'Iterum nec his debet ignosci. Si enim tantum potuerunt scire, ut possent aestimare saeculum, quomodo huius dominum non facilius invenerunt?' Eng. trans. in B. Ramsey, WSA I/12 (2008).

¹² Aug., *diu. qu.* 83 q. 45.2: 'multa vera eos praedixisse.'

¹³ Aug., *diu. qu.* 83 q. 45.2: 'mortuas membranas scriptas quaslibet.'

¹⁴ Aug., *diu. qu.* 83 q. 45.2: 'non arte sed sorte exit aliqua praedictio futurorum.'

¹⁵ Aug., *diu. qu.* 83 q. 45.1: 'adhaerens post ipsam, sicut dictum est: adhaesit anima mea post te, beata efficitur, intrinsecus inveniens etiam omnium visibilium creatorem atque dominum,...'

¹⁶ Aug., *ep.* 55.20.37: 'qui de paginis evangelicis sortes legunt'. Eng. trans. in R. Teske, WSA II/1 (2001).

¹⁷ Aug., *ep.* 55.20.37: 'propter aliam vitam loquentia oracula divina.'

own commitment at the divinatory event. However, further evidence whether all the sacred things may be admitted is not provided.

Augustine's references to the diviners, as well as critical assessment of several kinds of divination, are found in some of his homiletic treatises. Although much of these cannot be dated with certainty, after writing the *Confessions* his continued attack on such figures is evident there. While in *Sermon 12*, as have been mentioned, leaving out diviners from the catalogue, in other homiletic treatises, in turn, Augustine does not explain in detail various types of divination. Thus, for instance, when he explores the problem of baptism against the Donatists, people in the Church, who 'seek out fortune-tellers and consult astrologers secretly',¹⁸ are compared to the crows among whom the dove is groaning. No analysis is given there, but at his mention of the '*sortilegus*', he often puts the '*mathematicus*' together,¹⁹ just as he dealt with these diviners in the treatise entitled 'Against mathematicians'. This is the case, too, with people either care for seriously ill child,²⁰ or suffer from headaches.²¹ Augustine preaches to his congregations the popularity of this custom:

We see today, brothers and sisters, how many earthbound people ... are driven by their fears to consult soothsayers and astrologers.²²

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Augustine's continued engagement with the problem of human access to the 'hidden instinct' in divination is found likewise in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, when he interprets a passage in Wisdom:

And perhaps the reason he said, I obtained a good soul by lot ... is that things given by lot are usually given from on high by God. ... So when the Word eventually became that flesh and dwelt among us, this idea of its being a lottery presented itself, to dispel any suspicion of preceding merits.²³

Again in the third exposition of Psalm 30, he explicitly refers to this problem as follows:

¹⁸ Aug., *Ioh. ev. tract.* 6.17 (written in 406-407): 'occulte ... sortilegos quaerunt, mathematicos consulunt'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA III/12 (2009).

¹⁹ See Aug., *serm.* 388.2 (written in 420).

²⁰ See Aug., *en. Ps.* 133.2 (written in 407).

²¹ See Aug., *serm.* 4.36 (written in 410-419). Cf. Aug., *Ioh. ev. tract.* 7.7 (written in 406-407).

²² Aug., *en. Ps.* 59.11 (written in 412-413): 'Hodie videmus, fratres, quam multi terreni ... propter timores, sortilegos, mathematicos consulunt.' Eng. trans. in M. Boulding, WSA III/17 (2001).

²³ Aug., *Gen. litt.* 10.18.33: 'Et fortasse ideo ait: Sortitus sum animam bonam ... quia solent quae sorte dantur, divinitus dari: ... ut cum ea verbum caro fieret, et habitaret in nobis, ad auferendam suspicionem praecedentium meritorum sortis nomen accessit.' Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA I/13 (2002).

The fate allotted to me is in your hands. Not in other people's hands, but in yours. Now what is this talk about being allotted? Why lots? When lots are mentioned we must not think of soothsayers. The casting of lots is not a bad thing in itself; it is the means by which God's will is indicated when human beings are in doubt. ... When God, though, found no merits on our part, he saved us by the "lot" of his will, saved us because he willed it, not because we were worthy. That is our lot.²⁴

This view of the relation between the preceding merits, lot, and divine will lies in fact at the heart of his view of divination. The vague prescription derived from his observations of this practice, that people should not consult the diviner for their earthly fears seems to be given a strikingly new direction in these writings. In fact, Augustine reforms the problem of divination, for he himself confirms that 'By grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing ... We are his own handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works'.²⁵ However, this was first directed through his own consultation of a codex of Paul's epistle.

Indeed, Augustine's thinking about the problem of divination is closely taken with the role of Christ as mediator from the message in his biblical consultation. Already in the middle of 390's when he considered the act of divination in *De diuersis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, his idea on the radical break between God and human beings that requires divination appeared, even if implicitly, in his interpretation of Ps. 63, 'My soul has clung to you'. But, it is as a result of his sporadic interest in the consultation with inspired books after the *Confessions* that it looks as if he might avoid taking a more comprehensive approach to the problem of divination in question. Thus, as we can view in retrospect, his narrative of the divination at the garden shows us the privileged feature of the event in which he was portrayed as one who was presumed to be conscious of the estrangement between God and human beings. All the same, such figure believed that it could be bridged by the mediator. It allowed him to appreciate the central event in the *Confessions*, thereby understanding the significance of the consultation.

²⁴ Aug., *en. Ps. 30, s. 3.13*: 'In manibus tuis sortes meae: non in manibus hominum, sed in manibus tuis. Quae sunt istae sortes? quare sortes? Audito nomine sortium, non debemus sortilegos quaerere. Sors enim non aliquid mali est: sed res est in dubitatione humana divinam indicans voluntatem. ... quando autem Deus nulla merita nostra invenit, sorte voluntatis suae nos salvos fecit, quia voluit, non quia digni fuimus. Haec est sors.' Eng. trans. in M. Boulding, WSA III/15 (2000).

²⁵ Aug., *en. Ps. 30, s. 3.13*: 'Gratia salvi facti estis per fidem, et hoc non ex vobis ... Ipsius enim sumus figmentum, creati in Christo Iesu in operibus bonis.'