



## DIVINATION

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**DIVINATION** (Per. *morvā*, *morġvā*, *šogūn zadan*, *fāl*, *fāl gereftan/zadan*, *tafaʾol*), the art or technique of gaining knowledge of future events or distant states by means of observing and interpreting signs. Various objects or events may serve as media of divination. Here we discuss only those interpretive acts which have the general structure of “A is a sign of B” (e.g., seeing a black cat is a bad omen).

Classical and early Muslim sources refer to the practice of divination among Persians (Rapp, pp. 76-94). Herodotus (7.37) reports that the Magi interpreted the eclipse of the sun as the waning of the fortune of the Greeks, against whom the Persian king was marching. Agathias (2.25) refers to the Zoroastrian priests who told the future events by looking into flames. Ebn al-Nadīm (ed. Flügel, p. 314) refers to a number of Persian works on divination, which seem to have been translated into Arabic. Balʿamī (ed. Bahār, pp. 1130-31) reports that Persians had a book of divination (*ketāb-e fāl*) in which they had listed all that they had used for divining during their dominion. A story reported by Ebn Qotayba (I, p. 149) of a Persian warlord seems to suggest that Persians wrote names or words on the shafts of their arrows. The inscribed word was interpreted as an omen when an arrow was pulled out to shoot at the enemy. The same warlord interpreted the actions of his enemy, who changed his mounts from elephant to horse, mule, and donkey, as evidence of his waning fortune (Balʿamī, ed. Bahār, II, p. 1032; Ebšihī, II, pp. 91-94). References about divination are scattered throughout the *Šāh-nāma* (e.g., ed. Khaleghi, I, pp. 71, 77, 269; II, p. 300; Moscow, VI, pp. 229-30, VII, pp. 164, 354, VIII, pp. 161-62,



347). In the story of Alexander the sages divine the demise of the king from the birth of a monstrous child (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VII, pp. 102-03; cf. Ṭūsī, p. 421). Kōsrow II Parvēz divined his own death and the demise of the Sasanian dynasty from the accidental fall of a quince from the top of his throne (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, IX, pp. 259-60; Ṭa'ālebī, *Ġorar*, p. 720). A sage forecasts that Persia will fall into chaos during the rule of Šērōya, because he sees the prince hitting a dried wolf claw against an animal horn (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, IX, p. 218; Ṭa'ālebī, *Ġorar*, pp. 712-13). The sage **Bozorgmehr** divines that the three objects concealed in a box are three pearls, one bored, one half-bored, and one intact. He reaches this insight from his chance meeting on the road with three women, one married and with child, one married and childless, and a virgin (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VIII, pp. 262-63; Ṭa'ālebī, *Ġorar*, p. 635). Meeting with unattractive or deformed individuals was considered a bad omen and such individuals were avoided or even attacked (Marzbān, p. 221; Ebšihī, II, p. 96; cf. pseudo-Ḳayyām, pp. 82-88). The aversion to unattractive individuals seems to have been motivated by the belief that outward unattractiveness indicates inward or moral defect, itself a form of divination. Quite often evil deeds, such as destruction of a Persian city or slaying of a monarch, were attributed to unattractive men who were usually red-headed, green or blue-eyed, hairy, and cross-eyed. These men often had large teeth and noses (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, IX, pp. 191, 281; Ṭa'ālebī, *Ġorar*, pp. 726-27; cf. 'Āmelī, II, p. 403). Conversely, a beautiful face was valued as a good omen. The Arscasid king Ardavān reportedly had his concubine Golnār awaken him every morning so that her beautiful face would be the first sight he laid eyes on (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VII, p. 127; cf. pseudo-Ḳayyām, pp. 82, 85-88). According to pseudo-Ḳayyām (pp. 40-43), Persians considered certain plants such as barley as auspicious, and old women used barley in divination. Secondary sources report divination by interpreting the twitching of different parts of the body to be common among Persians. Ebn al-Nadīm (ed. Flügel, p. 314) lists a book on *Ektelej a'zā'* among the oeuvres of the Persians. In the story of *Ḳosrow o Šīrīn*, the princess interprets the twitching of her *del* (abdomen, chest?) as a sign of impending misfortune, while she expects the twitching of her eyelid to be the sign of some important unknown event (Nezāmī, p. 134).

Divination by means of animals involves not only interpreting their behavior but also any fluctuation in their numbers (Dīnavarī, p. 74; Ebšihī, II, p. 97). Ebn Qotayba reports a number of animal divinations from the Arabic translation of a lost Middle Persian text called *Ketāb al-ā'īn* (Ebn Qotayba, I, pp. 151-53; cf. Bal'amī, ed. Bahār, pp. 115, 118; pseudo-Ḳayyām, p. 67). Mostawfī relates that



the hero Rostam divined that Kay-Ḳosrow would not be harmed by Afrāsīāb, when the hero untypically missed a shot taken at a game (apud Mīnovī, p. 21).

*The Islamic period.* Permissibility of taking good omens from people's names or chance events has support not only in literary sources (Dīnavarī, p. 282; Sūzanī, p. 446) but also in some compendia of prophetic traditions ('Abd al-Bāqī, III, p. 71; Qomī, II, p.102; Kolaynī, II, p. 246; Balāgī, p. 307). There exist, however, other traditions according to which taking bad omens from random events is prohibited (e.g., 'Āmelī, II, pp. 193-94). The author of *Ketāb al-wāfi* writes that whereas seeking guidance (*esteḳāra*) from God by means of the Qur'ān is permissible, divination (*tafa'ol*) is not permissible because through it the diviner seeks to gain knowledge of future events, which is an ability reserved for God (apud Balāgī, p. 307; cf. Ḥakamī, pp. 161-62; Ḳarā'eṭī, pp. 270, 274-75). Shi'ite scholars generally look down upon divination, considering it an irrational if not impious act ('Āmelī, II, p. 193; Balāgī, pp. 306-07; Kolaynī, I, p. 370 tradition 235; Fahd, pp. 195-204). Moḥammad b. Monnawar (pp. 26-27, 175) describes the manner of divination by the Qur'ān. It seems that divination was carried over into Islam from a pre-Islamic tradition (Bayhaqī, II, pp. 10, 212).

One of the meanings of the word *fāl* is reported to have been divination by randomly heard names or words (e.g., Ebn Qotayba, I, p. 146; Ebšihī, II, pp. 94-5; cf. *Baḳtīār-nāma* p. 126). The positive form of this kind of divination, which had prophetic and religious approval (Ḳarā'eṭī, p. 276), reportedly was practiced by many of the early companions of the prophets and especially by Muslim generals engaged in early conquests (e.g., Balāḍorī, *Fotūhā*, p. 257; Ta'ālebī, *Ġorar*, p. 739; Dīnavarī, pp. 167, 282; Mostawfī, p. 177). Diviners were popular among the general populace of Persia and could charge their customers for their services (e.g., *Čahār maqāla*, ed. Qazvīnī, text, pp. 93-94, 102-04; cf. Fozūnī, p. 338).

Many varieties of divination are attested in Persian literature and folk practice. They include interpretation of objects which appear haphazardly, interpretation of involuntary bodily actions (sneezing, twitching, itches, etc.), observing animal behavior, divining by playing cards (*fāl-e waraq*) or chick-peas (*fāl-e noḳod*), bibliomancy (e.g., *fāl-e Ḥāfeẓ*), divination by means of mirrors and lenses (*ā'ina-bīnī*), observation of the liver of a slain animal (*jegar-bīnī*), divination by means of the flame of a lamp, etc. (Baskin, pp. 178-79; Balāgī, pp. 333-34). Some involve special props or should be practiced at special places. Fozūnī (p. 492; Ṭūsī, p. 442) reports of a village near Ġūr, in



which there was a tree similar to the willow. At the vernal equinox every spring a villager brought a crystal bowl under that tree, hit the rim of the bowl, and forecast the events of the coming year. It was believed that had he practiced his art under some other tree he would have caused bad luck for the village. Bibliomancy using the *dīvān* of Ḥāfeẓ is the most popular for this kind of divination, but by no means the only kind. The Qur'ān, as well as the *Maṭnawī* of Rūmī may also be used. *Fāl-eḤāfeẓá* may be used for one or more persons. In group bibliomancy, the *dīvān* will be opened at random, and beginning with the ode of the page that one chances upon, each ode will be read in the name of one of the individuals in the group. The ode is the individual's *fāl*. Assigning of the odes to individuals depends on the order in which the individuals are seated and is never random. One or three verses from the ode following each person's *fāl* is called the *šāhed*, which is read after the recitation of the *fāl*. According to another tradition the *šāhed* is the first or the seventh verse from the ode following the *fāl* (Zarrīnkūb, p. 557). An ode which had already been used for one individual in the group is disqualified from serving as the *fāl* for a second time (Balāgī, p. 309).

*Kat-bīnī* is another form of divination in which the shoulder bone of a sacrificial sheep is "read." The sheep should be slaughtered at a moon-lit night in the name of the person for whom divination is being performed. Both the slaughterer and the seeker's clothing and persons should be ritually clean. The animal should be slaughtered close to running water and its right shoulder bone taken. The bone should be carefully cleared of flesh without getting scratched or damaged by the knife. When reading the bone (presumably the next day), the diviner should sit with his back to the sun, paying attention to every detail (Balāgī, pp. 335-36; Zarrīnkūb, p. 551; Ṭūsī, p. 598). A number of other types of divination are reported in the classical sources, e.g., divination by reading of the palm and by looking at the manner in which mice have gnawed something (Ṭūsī, p. 598; for a list see Zarrīnkūb, pp. 550-59).

*Divination in folk tradition.* Certain things, colors (e.g., Behrūzī, p. 52), or events are considered auspicious or inauspicious in Persian folk tradition. Shooting stars may be good or bad omens, but they usually presage someone's death (Wadī'ī, p. 17; cf. Hedāyat, p. 80). The number thirteen and certain days of the week (Hedāyat, p. 101; Wilson, pp. 222-23), howling of dogs, braying of a sitting donkey, and untimely crowing of cocks are signs of misfortune or death (Šakūrẓāda, pp. 309, 316, 321; A'ẓamī-e Sangesarī, 1349a, p. 55; idem, 1349b, p. 53; Tawakkolī, p. 71; Ṭāhbāz, p. 7 1; Dānešvar, II, p. 230). A widespread belief



considers a single sneeze to be a sign that one must stop whatever one is doing. This is called *ṣabr āmad* (patience is in order). Apparently in order to ward off evil during the short period of waiting after sneezing, some believe that one should recite the formula of praising the prophet and his family three to seven times. A double sneeze, called (*jaḳt/d*, i.e., *jaḳd*, effort), is a sign that one should speed up whatever one is doing (A'zamī-e Sangesarī, 1349a, p. 51; Hedāyat, p.75; cf. Onians, pp. 103-5, 138-40, 197).

One of the most common folk practices concerns divination by a twitching of ones eyelids which may be auspicious or inauspicious depending on whether it occurs in the left or the right eye and in the upper or the lower eyelid (Hedāyat, p. 75-7; A'zamī Sangesarī, 1349a, p. 52; Šakūrzāda, pp. 315-16). The folk practice uses virtually everything in the environment, from animals, to the behavior of children, weather, insects, and even the chance movements of smoke rising from a fire, as a means of divination (Šakūrzāda, pp. 319-20, 322-43, 307; A'zamī Sangesarī, 1349a, pp. 49-55; idem, 1349b, p. 54; Tawakkolī, p. 71; Sā'edī, 1342, p. 169; idem, 1344, pp. 202-04; Ṭāhbāz, p. 72; Mūsawī, p. 31). There is an ethnic Persian group called Marāgīān, who are also called also *kalla-bozī* (lit. goat-head) by their detractors because of their skill in divination by studying the severed heads of goats (Pūr-e Dāwūd, p. 244).

Persians believe that certain days are especially good for divination. During the last Wednesday of the year, called *Čahāršanba-sūrī*, divination, especially by listening to the conversations of the passers by and interpreting that which is heard (*fālgūš*) as a sign is quite common (Šakūrzāda, pp. 79, 87). Fortunetellers, (*fālgīr*), who are mostly gypsies, are still active in some parts of Persia. Šakūrzāda has published specimens of their discourse (pp. 281-91, 292-98).

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