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Mapping the Entrails: The Art of Greek Hepatomancy

This paper outlines the evidence for Greek extispicy in the classical and later periods, with special focus on hepatomancy, or as it was technically known, hepatoscopy (*hêpatoskopia*). Among Mesopotamian cultures, such as the Babylonians, the liver (e.g. of sheep) could indicate the presence or absence of divinity (Gladigow 1995:351 and Meyer 1985). For the Greeks, who inherited the Mesopotamian tradition, the liver had long been recognized as the seat of the emotions (e.g. Archil. 234 West, Plato, *Tim.* 71b-c). Before and during military campaigns especially, hepatoscopy involving sacrificial oxen or goats was used to determine the divine will because the liver was thought to be the organ in closest contact with divinity. The two most significant emotions that were considered to govern the liver in divination were anger and fear, which signaled distress in the animal and boded ill for human action. When there was distress, it manifested in irregular or dull coloring, lack of smoothness (Aes. *Prom.* 493-95), or the shrinkage or even absence of the liver's lobe, i.e. the *caput iecoris* (e.g. Eur. *Elec.* 827-29, Xen. *Hell.* 3.4.15 and 4.7.7). Entrails, including the liver, that appeared favorable in shape and color (*kala*, *khrestâ*) signified that there was no divine objection to the action under consideration (e.g. Herod. 6.112, with Vernant 1974:17).

I will argue that, like many systems of divination, Greek hepatoscopy and entrail reading generally were binary systems. In addition, hepatoscopy indicated only whether there was divine objection to a proposed action, which was different from ratifying that proposed action. In a departure from previous approaches to hepatoscopy (esp. Pritchett 1979 III and Lawrence 1979), my approach incorporates recent anthropological research that stresses the semiotics of entrail-reading (Abbink 1993). This approach has shown that entrail-reading involves both fixed points of reference, with "objective" meaning, and tacit, contextual, and social clues that help to establish the overall meaning of a given message in the entrails, as it emerges in the dialogue or communicative event of the reading itself. I argue that parallels for such fixed points of reference are also found in Greek hepatoscopy. They involve the absence of the liver's head as inauspicious, as well as the favorable value given to smoothness (*leiotês*) over roughness, and sweetness (*glukus*) over bitterness (*pikrotês*) as reflected in the coloring and texture of the liver's surface. On the other hand, even though our evidence for how details of the liver were interpreted in practice is limited (e.g. Plato, *Timaeus* 71b-c; Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2.14-15; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 8.7.15), we can, with the use of comparative material, suggest how a balance was struck between the "objective" and contingent meanings derived from the liver's features. The most important difference between the ancient and contemporary anthropological evidence, however, is that ancient *manteis* and *haruspices* alone, through their *tekhnê*, arrived at given prophecies. Greek hepatoscopy in this respect was not collaborative, and it gave ancient seers a greater freedom to offer interpretations that were at odds with the wishes of their military commanders.