

Topic Page: [divination](#)

Definition: **divination** from *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*

Practice of discerning the hidden significance of events and foretelling the future. Divination is found in all societies, ancient and modern, though methods vary. In the West, psychics claim innate ability to predict the future, and horoscopes, palm reading, and tarot cards are popular methods of divination. Other methods involve or have involved interpreting dreams, discovering omens in natural events, reading the entrails of animals, casting lots, and consulting oracles. Divination has long been viewed as the province of specially gifted persons, such as prophets, shamans, and magicians. See *also* astrology.

Event: divination

Keywords: divination

Summary Article: **Divination**

From *Encyclopedia of Time: Science, Philosophy, Theology, & Culture*

Divination is an attempt to connect to a supernatural power in order to retrieve information. It is intended to allow participants to learn about the future or secret, hidden matters. Thus, divination is a process of gaining information through rituals with a specific intended outcome. The word can be traced back to *divinity*, which indicates a relationship to the gods. Anthropologists have debated whether the rituals surrounding divination should be classified as religious ceremonies or magical invocations; however, it is recognized that participants of divination do not make this distinction. In fact, it is an important component of both religion and magic. In the absence of scientific knowledge, early humans used divination to attempt to understand and manipulate their environment. Vital information concerning weather patterns, such as rainfall or drought, and animal migrations were “read” from their surroundings in “signs” that would indicate the future. Some of these included the flight of birds, the position of pebbles in a stream, or reading the entrails of small animals. Another notable use of divination was its prevalence in healing ceremonies. Historically, diviners were diagnosticians who were concerned with maladies put in a sociocultural context. They used psychosomatic and physical symptoms, everyday encounters, and supernatural influences to determine the source and therefore the treatment of illnesses. Divination also provided people with a map along their spiritual journey. People then, as now, wanted to know about paths to love, money, careers, and power. It is human nature to want to make the “right” choices and divination was, and is, regarded as a tool to see into the unknown.

Divination in History

Some of the best-known forms of divination include astrology, numerology, palmistry, runes, and tarot. Astrology is the oldest method of fortune telling; it developed as people followed the cycles of the stars. Though the Greeks and Romans were credited with the stories attached to the zodiac, by 3000 BCE the Babylonians and the Chaldeans were recording movements of constellations. In the Americas, indigenous astrologers used the stars to predict individual destinies. Today people still use birth charts and the movements of stars in everyday life; avid believers in these signs check their horoscopes to daily. Numerology uses numerical systems to discover the pathways that connect all things. This practice is almost universally evident and is concerned with understanding present circumstances.

Pythagoras, a Greek of the 6th century BCE, believed that everything encompassed in the human experiences was related to the first nine numbers. His theory of harmonics is astoundingly similar to 20th-century wave theory.

Forms of Divination

Palmistry, also known as chiromancy, is the discovery of how a person's character, “read” through the unique lines on the palm, will influence his or her destiny. Modern palmists can trace their roots back to the Roma (gypsies) and Indian mystics, but again, the names and stories are derived from Greek mythology.

Another common form of divination is reading ancient German and Scandinavian runes. These hearty northern tribal groups left behind symbols that were carved into pieces of wood and stone that were cast to settle disputes, to ask for the gods' assistance, and to see into the future. Today, people still cast the runes as a form of divination. Booklets for interpreting meaning along with pouches of runic tiles are sold. The runes resemble letters but are not an alphabet; each figure has a meaning unto itself. Each represents a literal meaning such as “cattle,” “gift,” or “joy” and a prophetic deeper meaning like “wealth,” “rewards,” or “harmony.” The most commonly used runes today are from the Germanic *futharks*, which contain 24 runes. Reversed (upside down) runes indicate a blockage or frustration. Runes are read in 3 or 5 spread and in a Celtic cross pattern much like the tarot. The tarot deck was used in Europe to play card games as early as the 14th century and later became a deck for divination. Arthur Edward Waite is attributed with developing the most commonly used tarot deck, the Rider-Waite deck. Tarot meanings are variable and can be interpreted in a number of ways depending on the card reader. There are many less-familiar varieties of divination. Alectromancy is divination by a rooster and involves a cock “spelling” a message by pecking at grains of wheat placed on different letters. Cleidomancy is the interpretation of movements of a key suspended by a thread from the nail of the third finger of a young virgin while a Psalm is recited. Omphalomancy is the analysis of the belly button.

Function of Divination

During the 19th century a divide existed between what were considered “primitive” and “modern” religions for those who analyzed the existence of religion. This approach was mostly rejected by social scientists in the 20th century. Social scientists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim were more concerned with studying how religious beliefs and practices are a part of a particular social, political, and economic force and what purpose they serve. They found that there were patterns of cultural universals among diverse groups. A spirit world existed, sometimes in the form of ghosts, spirits, or deities. Magic could be used to influence and manipulate the spirit world. Also, divination made it possible to connect with the supernatural as a means of discovering knowledge. This was believed to help people feel that they have some control over aspects of their lives over which, in fact, they have no control.

Today, there are many popular forms of what is referred to as “spontaneous divination.” This includes the art of placement or Feng Shui, reading the energy field (“aura”) that surrounds a person, or opening the Bible to a random page to receive a relevant, divine message. Some people also use “fairy” or “angel” cards to receive guidance and reassurance.

See also

Marx, Karl, Mythology, Pythagoras of Samos, Religions and Time, Weber, Max, Zodiac

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