

# Prophets and Augurs

## 1 Definitions

- Platon's *Phaedrus* (Φαῖδρος, circa 370 BC): ἡ οἰωνιστικὴ (*hē oiōnistikē*) 'interpretation of signs' vs. ἡ μαντικὴ (*hē mantikē*) 'inspired divination', erroneously derived from μανιακός (*maniakós*) 'mad'
- 'Augur': someone who interprets signs to gain insight into past, present, or future events; from Latin *augur*
- 'Prophet': someone who gains insight into the occult through direct contact with the divine sphere; from Greek πρό + φημί (*prō + phēmí*) 'before + (I) tell', cf. προφητεία (*prophēteía*) 'prophecy'

## 2 Latin and Greek Sources

### 2.1 Prophets

- Tacitus' *Germania*:

*Memoriae proditur quasdam acies inclinatam iam et labantes a feminis restitutas constantia precum et obiectu pectorum et monstrata comminus captivitate, quam longe impatientius feminarum suarum nomine timent, adeo, ut efficacius obligentur animi civitatum, quibus inter obsides puellae quoque nobiles imperantur. inesse quin etiam sanctum aliquid et providum putant, nec aut consilia earum aspernantur aut responsa neglegunt. vidimus sub divo Vespasiano Veledam diu apud plerosque numinis loco habitam; sed et olim [Auriniam] et complures alias venerati sunt, non adulatione nec tamquam facerent deas. (Germ. 8)*

'They [the Germanic people] even suppose somewhat of sanctity and prescience to be inherent in the female sex; and therefore neither despise their counsels, nor disregard their responses. We have beheld, in the reign of Vespasian, Veleda, long revered by many as a deity. Aurinia, moreover, and several others, were formerly held in equal veneration, but not with a servile flattery, nor as though they made them goddesses.' (adapted from Brooks, 1897)

- Ostrakon from the island of Elephantine (near Aswan): Βαλουβοργ Σή[μ]νονι σίβυλλα (*Balouborg Sé[m]noni síbullāi*) 'Valuborg, Semnonic seeress'
- Tacitus' *Historiae*:

*Munius Lupercus legatus legionis inter dona missus Veledae. ea virgo nationis Bructerae late imperitabat, vetere apud Germanos more, quo plerasque feminarum fatidicas et augescente superstitione arbitrantur deas. tuncque Veledae auctoritas adolevit; nam prosperas Germanis res et excidium legionum praedixerat. (Hist. IV,61)*

'Munius Lupercus, one of the Roman commanding-officers, was sent among other presents to Veleda, a virgin of the Bructeran tribe who wielded a widespread authority. It is an ancient custom in Germany to credit a number of women with prophetic powers, and with the growth of superstition these develop into goddesses. At this moment Veleda's influence was at its height, for she had prophesied the success of the Germans and the destruction of the Roman army'. (Fyfe, 1912)

### 2.2 Augurs

- Mythification limited to augurs (Cassius Dio, Suetonius)
- Mostly men, don't practice professionally
- Cleromancy, ornithomancy, hippomancy

### 3 Norse Sources

- Björketorp runestone:

B: **uþarabasba** (DR 360)  
óþorf spá

'I predict destruction'

- *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*:

Þú vart völvá í Varinseyio,  
scollvís kona, bartu scröç saman;  
qvaztu engi mann eiga vilia,  
segg bryníaðan, nema Sinfiotla. (HH, 37)

'A witch in Varin's isle thou wast,  
A woman false, and lies didst fashion;  
Of the mail-clad heroes thou wouldst have  
No other, thou saidst, save Sinfiotli only.'  
(Bellows, 1923)

- *Víga-Glúms saga*:

Kona sú fór þar um herað, er Oddbjörg hét, gleðimaðr,  
fróð ok framsýn. Þótti mikít undir, at húsfrejur fagnaði  
henni vel um heraðit; sagði nokkut vilhallt, sem henni  
var beini veittr. (Glúm, p. 41)

'A woman went about in that part of the country,  
named Oddbjörg, cheerful, knowledgeable and  
foresighted. To the women it was important to receive  
her well; she spoke somewhat arbitrarily, depending  
on how she was entertained.'

- *Eyrbyggja saga*:

Þórólfr Mostrarskegg fekk at blóti miklu ok gekk til  
fréttar við Þór, ástvin sinn, hvárt hann skyldi sættask  
við konung eða fara af landi brott ok leita sér annarra  
forlaga, en fréttin vísaði Þórólfi til Íslands. (Eb, p. 7)

'Þórólfr Mostrarskegg prepared a great sacrifice to ask  
of Þórr, his dear friend, whether he should make peace  
with the king or leave the country and find other  
fortunes, but the oracle showed Þórólfr to Iceland.'

### 4 Christian Prophets in the Middle Ages

- 'Typology': events, persons, or statements from the Old Testament are interpreted as pre-figurations (or sometimes antitypes) of events or aspects of Christ or his revelation.
- Iconography of the Apostles' Creed: 15<sup>th</sup> chalk paintings of the so-called *Risingemästar* in Östergötland, e.g. Risinge gamla kyrka, Örberga kyrka)

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