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b)
Literature of Knowledge

c)
To play by the book

d)
20 minutes

e)
Divination was one of the most prominent ways in which ancient man could gain knowledge concerning the will of the gods and consequently about the world around him. This knowledge was gathered, preserved, and passed on both by means of an oral tradition and by literary texts – what we can call ‘diviners’ manuals’. Yet, it is hard to determine to which degree this literature of knowledge was crucial in the actual practice of Greek divination.

These diviners’ manuals are lists of scenarios and outcomes, such as the extensive divinatory omen texts in Mesopotamian sources. Their Greek counterparts are for example the writings ascribed to Melampus. These texts could lead us to imagine divination as literally ‘reading the signs’ by the perusal of a manual. But sources where Greek divination-in-action is described instead of prescribed usually give the impression of an oral practice without (immediate) reference to written texts. Interpretation of signs could be influenced by a number of factors; rules were not as rigidly set as we would expect if a manual had been habitually used. So might the manuals then have had a different function, perhaps to serve as a work of reference when conflict arose and to relieve serious doubts about the meaning of certain signs? Another possibility is that the texts served educational purposes. Professional seers’ (*manteis*) knowledge regarding interpretation of divine signs seems to have been passed on from one to another by means of apprenticeships. The apprentice observed and emulated the master at work. Still, it is possible that manuals did play an actual role in this transfer of knowledge. An explicit comparison of Greek and Mesopotamian materials proves thought provoking here.

A tension between practical and theoretical functions of Greek divinatory literature of knowledge appears: to divine-it-yourself or to play by the book?