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# Roman Divination— A Discourse On The Treatise Of Cicero, The Statesman

Gill Oluwatosin ADEKANNBI, Ph.D

Department of Classics  
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.  
tsn\_ade@yahoo.com

## Abstract

This article addresses a philosophical trend in the ancient Greco-Roman world: making efforts to rid men's minds of fears that were outgrowth of ignorance concerning natural laws that govern the material universe and the perception of the supernatural realm. While such attempt may not necessarily be seen as discrediting the divine agency, the philosopher, Cicero, recognises the need to root out the thought of arbitrary celestial involvement in human affairs: groundless terrors, unfounded and hasty judgments that subject people to questionable practices. The essay is a discussion of a statesman's critical appraisal of an invaluable aspect of Roman religion— divination, vis-à-vis man's need to rationally bear more responsibility for his actions. The work highlights the arguments of Cicero in his treatise, *De Divinatione*, that identify the practice of divination among the Romans with superstition and provide an index to the subject of superstition, even in a modern African society with a similar propensity.

## Introduction

Divination<sup>1</sup> dominated the ancient Roman society. The inalienable dependence on it was evidenced by the practice of *haruspicina*<sup>2</sup> (haruspicy). This method of divination that was popular among the ancient Etruscans and later adopted by the Romans<sup>3</sup> resulted in haruspices (diviners) being prominent features of private and public life throughout the history of the Roman Empire. Divination was held in high esteem even by the Roman Senate. The influence of the diviners who may pronounce

adverse words accounted for postponement of most important business of the government, so much that no wars would be undertaken without divination. Even at critical moments, a sneeze or a cough may delay actions. However, with increase in the knowledge of physical laws<sup>4</sup> the dread and respect for haruspices declined so much that their authority suffered greatly to the point of ridicule. *Cicero's De Divinatione* may not be a strong refutation or derision of divination in its various forms; it is, however, still sufficiently a statesman's criticism of beliefs and practices of his time that were queried. This article is a deliberation on the treatise of the philosopher as well as a reference work on the subject of superstition.

### The Nature of Divination

The philosopher's discussion on divination is a censure of beliefs stemming from what ordinarily are perceived as religion. His choice of subject for consideration, perhaps, resulted from the widespread and popularity of the tradition:

Now I am aware of no people, however, refined and learned or however savage and ignorant which does not think that signs are given of future events, and that certain persons can recognize those sign and foretell events before they occur (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.1.2).

Observing the universality of divination, Cicero portrays the practice as an institution that permeated all facets of public life in Rome. It also had the Assyrians making their contributions by providing an explanation for how human destiny is controlled by the movements of heavenly bodies. Similarly, the Cilicians, Pisidians and the Pamphylans believed the 'songs and flights of birds' could help in foretelling the future with accuracy (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 1. 2-3).

Cicero proffers the basis for Roman's religious disposition. He recalls that Romulus, the father of Rome, did not only found the

city on obedience to auspices, but he was himself a skilful augur. In the same vein, other Roman kings employed augurs, and after the expulsion of the kings, no public business was ever transacted at home or abroad without first taking the auspices (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 2. 3). The 'fathers' believed prodigies were phenomenal and should not be ignored but rather properly understood and propitiated. Dreams were not viewed as mere products of irrational or unconscious minds; the founders 'decreed' that ten men<sup>5</sup> should be appointed by the State to use the sibylline verses<sup>6</sup> to interpret dreams. Hence, with this religious environment, a dream related by a private citizen was enough to prompt the senate, at the instance of Lucius Julius, a consul, to vote that the temple of Juno be rebuilt (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 1.14).

Cicero, however, sees all of these as borne out of political expediency and not just acts of devotion to the gods or 'reason'<sup>7</sup> (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 3. 5). He is cautious of condemning these arts of divination, out of fear of unwittingly incurring the anger of the gods. Yet, he is at least sceptical about the relevance of the practice and sees in his own belief system the danger of leading a life that is ruled by anxiety over divination. To him, this may simply amount to promoting triviality in form of 'old women's superstition' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 4. 7).

### **A Defence for Divination**

The philosopher would maintain a balance by giving attention to a diverse perspective of his friend, Quintus. Rather than being an empty superstition, Quintus sees divination as real and effective, and before returning to Cicero, his stoic defence which is in opposition to the Epicureans' view deserves some consideration.<sup>8</sup> According to him, there are two types of divination; the first are the predictions made by trained or skilled interpreters of omens, and the second are predictions from natural states of mind, such as dreams and prophetic trances. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 5.12). Messages from astrologers and oracles fall under 'art',

while warnings from dreams or 'frenzy' are known as natural. Quintus premises not discarding these as mere superstition on the results credited to the practice or experiences, which he understands as 'justified by long-continued observation' (*ibid.*). He reasons:

I see their power and that is enough; why they have it I do not know. Thus, as to the cause of those premonitory signs of wind and rains... I am not quite clear, but their force and effect I recognise, understand and vouch for... As to the cleft or thread in entrails, I accept their meaning. I do not know their cause. (*ibid.*).

He goes on to prop up the seemingly weak argument with a number of ancient instances of both Greek and Roman backgrounds. First is what is termed the 'prophetic value of lightening'

The statue of Summanus which stood on the top of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus... made of clay was struck by a thunderbolt and its head could not be found anywhere, the soothsayers declared that it had been hurled into the Tiber; and it was discovered in the very spot which they had pointed to. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.10.16).

When the thunderbolt struck the statue of the Roman deity whom was ascribed with nocturnal lighting, the incident was interpreted as ominous, and the service of soothsayers was employed to discover the head of the statue that got missing. Next is the story of how at 'Chian quarries, a stone was split open' and the figure believed to have been 'the head of the infant god pan' emerged. This is no figment of imagination to Quintus who vouches for the account by saying: 'the resemblance was not such that you could ascribe to the work of Scopas'. He believed the work was too perfect to be a product of chance or natural occurrence (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 17.23).

Quintus again illustrates the importance attached to auspices with the story of king Deiotarus who would always take auspices before embarking on a journey or a business. Despite thoughtful plans the king had made before setting out, he abandoned a journey and returned home 'because of the warning given him by flight of an eagle' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.15.27). The interpretation given to the eagle's flight was reckoned genuine when the house in which the king would have stayed if he had continued with the journey collapsed the very next night. Consequently, on several occasions, the ruler terminated his journeys even after embarking on them for several days (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.15.27).

King Deiotarus' case was not unique in ancient times when hardly any extraordinary matter was undertaken without first consulting the auspices<sup>10</sup> (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.16.29). Trying to show the danger in ignoring auspices, Quintus cites, among others, the example of Marcus Crassus, the Triumvir with Caesar and Pompey who 'ignored the announcement of unfavourable omens'. This, he claimed, resulted in the 'awful disaster which befell the Roman people' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.16.29).

Quintus advances his argument in favour of divination by relating instances of supposedly trustworthy dreams. One of them is that of the mother of the Syracusan tyrant, Dionysus, who dreamt 'she had been delivered of an infant satyr' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.10.39). When she related the dream to interpreters of omens, she was told 'that she would bring forth a son who would be very eminent in Greece and would enjoy long and prosperous careers' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.20.39). Appealing to the authority of a philosopher to strengthen his position that dreams are reliable, Quintus refers to how Socrates, while in prison, was told by a very beautiful woman who appeared to him in a dream: '*Gladly on Pithia's shore the third day's dawn shall behold thee*' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.25.52). Since the prediction could be claimed to be a historical fact, Quintus records a testimony from a philosopher



to advocate the dependability of professional interpretations of dreams. Similar to Socrates' experience was the dream attributed to Gaius Gracchus whose brother, Tiberius, reportedly came to him in a dream saying: 'however, much you may try to defer your fate; nevertheless, you must die the same death that I did' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 43.95). Quintus would furnish a historical evidence of the 'fulfilment' of this dream. He further presents another factor that accounts for the practice of divination being deeply entrenched:

But who fails to observe that auspices and all other kinds of divination flourish best in the best regulated states? And what king or people has there ever been who did not employ divination? (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 43.95).

Divination is here acknowledged as a state's weapon for maintaining stability or control. The Romans, both in war and in peace, would first examine entrails and take auspices before any action; the Athenian Greeks would always have diviners present on every public assembly. As for the Spartans, an augur would be assigned to their kings as an adviser on legal matters, while another augur, it was decreed, should be present in the Council of Elders' meetings. As if these were not enough, he adds:

Spartan rulers, not content with their deliberations when awake, used to sleep in a shrine of Pasiphae situated in a field near the city, in order to dream there, because they believed that oracles received in repose were true. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 43. 96)

Still presenting divination as a popular tool in the administration of the state, Quintus draws attention to the practice in the senate:

How many times the senate has ordered the decemvirs to consult the Sybilline books. How often in matters of grave concern it has obeyed the responses of the soothsayers! Take the following examples when at one time, two suns and, at another, three moons were seen; when meteors appeared; when the sun shone at

night... when sky seemed to divide, showing balls of fire enclosed within. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 43. 97)

Attention is also drawn to the significance of what is said when engaging in divination. The Roman ancestors, before setting out for any business, would say 'may the issue be prosperous, propitious, lucky and successful' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 45.102). This was not just a prayerful expression<sup>11</sup>; it was borne out of the belief that what was said would affect outcomes of matters. Hence, at public celebration of religious rites, it was common to hear the warning: 'guard your tongues'. Names of men leading the victims also count since good names mean good omen, which is crucial to getting the desired results (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 45.102).

Quintus strongly feels that none of the results of these divination occurrences was accidental, and without fear of being contradicted, he argues that nothing that bears every mark of truth can be labelled as a product of chance (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.13.23). Quintus now relates three 'vital principles of divination': god, fate and nature (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.45.125). Of these three inter-related features, god or gods, by virtue of their foresight, are credited with absolute control over the universe and the affairs of men. Linking Fate and nature together, he says: All things happen by fate.... Nothing has happened which was not bound to happen and... nothing is going to happen which will not find in nature efficient cause of its happening (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1. 51.117).

The belief here is that the 'eternal cause of everything' is unchangeable and bounded by fate. This irreversible path, however, Quintus believes, could be known by skilfully studying the nature of things. He cites the example of the people of Ceos, who according to Heraclides of Pontus, observed 'the rising of the Dog-star' to determine 'whether the ensuing year will be healthy or pestilential' (Cicero *De Div.* 1. 52.130). In addition to human seeking to know their fate by studying the star, observing the

nature of animals was also considered helpful:

The ancient acted wisely in providing inspection of entrails of sacrifices; because the colour and general condition of the entrails are prophetic sometimes of sickness and sometimes also of whether the fields will be barren or productive.

(Cicero, De Divinatione 1. 52. 131)

Even when he would not recognise them, Quintus admits that there were those who took advantage of this spiritual ambience engendered by divination to prophesy for money: 'necromancers or medicine' men. These to him lacked true 'knowledge or skill' of divination. Using his words, they were rather:

Superstitious bards, soothsaying quacks averse to work, or mad, or railed by want, directing others how to go and yet what road to take they do not know themselves, from these to him they promise wealth, they beg a coin (Cicero, De Divinatione 1. 52.132).

Quintus has made effort to defend divination by citing many instances of supposed accuracy of divination and rejecting sceptics' claim that these can explainably be by mere chance. He believes that disasters had resulted in the past from ignoring augural signs. Yet, he would not ignore the prevalence, on the one hand, of those who were preoccupied with seeking interpretation of signs or some other forms of divination, and on the other hand, those who were eager to exploit them, the condition that would suffice for superstition to thrive.

### **Cicero Counteracts the Defence for Divination**

The ample alleged incidents from ancient sources that are cited by Quintus to vindicate the practice of divination and separate it from superstition are far from being overwhelming to Cicero. The latter begins his counter-argument by observing that, if the scope of divination covers things that we can discern with the five senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching, then the

mystery of divination is unlocked and could as well be discarded. He reasons:

Nor is there any need of divination even in matters within the domain of science and of art... When people are sick, we as a general rule, do not summon a prophet or a seer, but we call a physician. Again, persons who want to learn to play on the harp or on the flute take lessons, not from a soothsayer but from a musician. The same rule applies... in other department of learning (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 3. 9-10).

Diviners, according to Cicero, are very limited in their knowledge of the physical universe and are certainly not the authority to consult on subjects relating to this. Since it is the jurisdiction of science, there is no point thinking of unlocking a mystery by turning to divination when natural laws can state the outcome of a matter in clear terms (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 3. 9-10). It is similar with moral issues. Cicero, in a manner that seems to caution against superstitious tendency, wonders why someone would consult a soothsayer to know how he should humble himself towards his parents or his brothers or his friends. If there are any doubts over this, the proper help, he recommends, should come from philosophers or sages who could help him think matters out (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2, 4.11). Likewise, he argues that diviners are certainly not needed to determine the best form of government, what customs are beneficial and what are harmful. He asserts: 'if there is no place for divination in things perceived by the senses or in those included among the arts or in those discussed by philosophers. I see absolutely no need of its need anywhere' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 5. 12).

Seeing divination as a clever conjecture, the philosopher takes the stand comparable to the one expressed in a Greek verse: 'the best diviner I maintain to be the man who guesses or conjectures best'<sup>12</sup>. Rather than using uncertainty to predict certainty, Cicero argues that a pilot can tell better than a prophet whether a storm is in sight. Similarly, a General can carry out a war with more skill

than a foreteller of events can (*ibid.*). Referring to Quintus' definition of divination as 'fore knowledge and foretelling of things which happen by chance' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2.5.14). Cicero counters:

You think whatever can be foreknown by means of science, reasons, experiences or conjecture is to be referred to, not to, diviners, but to experts' it follows, therefore, that divination of 'things that happen by chance' is possible only of things which cannot be foreseen by means of skill or wisdom. (*ibid.*)

Cicero here reasons that accurate calculation may suffice for a farmer to foretell how bountiful his harvest would be. However, even when his conclusion has basis in sound reasoning, mistake is still possible. Cicero argues that 'the conjectures of men, who foretell the future by means of entrails, birds, portents oracles, or dreams' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 7. 18) are all the more prone to mistakes and very subjective. His point is: there is no need for divination to speculate what will happen when naturally laws are there to give a more reliable knowledge of the future. Cicero finds fault, not only with the definition of divination as seeking to know 'what will happen by chance', but also reiterates that such search for supernatural knowledge is of no use:

... it seems to me that it is not in the power even of God Himself to know what event is going to happen by chance for if he knows, then the event is certain to happen; but if it is certain to happen, chance does not exist. And yet, chance does exist therefore there is no foreknowledge of things that happen by chance. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 7.18).

Opting for fate as the master over everything is neither acceptable to Cicero. Claiming that 'Fate is full of superstition and old women's credibility', the philosopher launches a potent attack against divination, arguing that if everything is confined to fate, the service of a diviner is most irrelevant; after all, it alters nothing. Citing the case of king Deiotarus mentioned earlier, he

explains that the recall by an eagle would be inconsequential if he had been destined to die in the house he was meant to lodge. Fate would make the calamity inescapable. Cicero pointedly asks what good is served by divination as he illustrates the point with the event of Lake Trasimene.<sup>13</sup> Flaminus could not have avoided the tragic loss of the Romans 'if he had obeyed the signs and the auspices that forbade his joining the battle... [because] decrees by fate are unchangeable!' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 8.21). On the subject of fate, Cicero concludes:

For if all things happen by Fate, it does us no good to be warned to be on guard since that which is to happen will happen. Regardless of what we do but if that which is to be can be turned aside, there is no such thing as Fate; so too there is no such thing as divination. Since divination deals with things that are going to happen. But nothing is certain to happen which there is some means of dealing with so as to prevent its happening. (Ibid).

Cicero next considers why it is disadvantageous for man to be anxious over personal knowledge of the future. He suggests that Priam's (the king of Troy) fore-knowledge of the 'dire events of his old age' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 9. 22) would have done him no good in his youth, since the concept of Fate would make this inescapable. Similarly, it would have done General Marcus Crassus no good if he had known that he would 'perish beyond the Euphrates in shame and dishonour' (ibid.) at the peak of his glory. No matter how brave they wish to be, they would constantly live with paralysing dread of the doom's day. 'Of a surety, then, ignorance of future ills is more profitable than the knowledge of them... for how could men have been happy in reflecting what their ends would be?' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2: 10.25). Concerning the notion that foreseeing dangers through divination makes it possible to appease the gods, Cicero suggests that this is unnecessary when he asks the question: 'does it make the evil lighter...if nothing happens except in accordance with fate? He adds what to expect when Fate rules: 'no evil can be lighter by means of religious rites'. Even Jupiter complains that he could not

rescue Sarpedon, his son<sup>14</sup> from death he was destined to suffer (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 16.433).

Quintus' relying on stories of strange occurrences to justify practice of divination is viewed as a matter of a philosopher becoming merely sensational, and for this Cicero chides him. Perhaps, the concern of Cicero here is Quintus' not being wary of getting swayed by faulty reasoning. 'It is unbecoming in a philosopher' he says, 'to introduce testimony which may be either true by accident or false and fabricated through malice'. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2.11.27). Cicero, however, agrees with Quintus that, divination, at the very best, serves political or state interest and is a weapon in the hand of rulers to continue to hold sway over or manipulate the people. However, the system is criticised as inconsistent and never in conformity with the well-known natural laws:

We see some nations interpreting entrails in one way and some in another; hence there is no uniformity of practice... And what natural quantity is there in entrails which enables them to indicate the future? (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 1.28).

Cicero raises a question that illustrates the possible influence of man on the interpretation of entrails: 'how is it that the man in search of favourable signs will find a sacrifice suited to his purpose' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 15.35). Or, perhaps we should ask: how is he able to easily alter ill omen indicated by the entrails of a sacrifice? It is manipulation in what would be a game of chance or a throwing of dice. Cicero sees the process as dubious:

For when the entrails of the first victim have been without head, which is the most fatal of all signs, it often happens that the sacrifice of the next victim is altogether favourable. Pray what became of the warnings of the first set of entrails? And how was the favour of the gods so completely and so suddenly gained? (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 15.36.)

Still in the context of omens being easily altered or influenced, the next line of argument seems to cast aspersions on the gods. The question is: "is it not strange fickleness in the gods to threaten disaster in the first set of entrails and to promise blessing in the next? (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 17.38). Since people would in their desperate situations turn from one god who has given unfavourable omen to another, seeking and finding favourable one, it only means that the gods are at conflict, Cicero concludes. With this and other similar reasoning, the philosopher tries to portray the prevailing reliance on soothsaying as superstitious (Cicero, *De Divinatione*. 2. 18. 42).

Divination by means of lightening and portents then receives Cicero's attention. He readily traces this to a superstitious origin: 'it is perfectly evident that out of the wonder and fear excited in primitive man by lighting and thunderbolts, sprang his belief that those phenomena were caused by omnipotent Jove'<sup>15</sup> (*ibid*). Again, Cicero notes that the interpretation of these phenomena also well suited the interest of the leading state men for it was considered 'impious to hold an election' when it thundered. Moral considerations may not be the basis; 'this was ordained, possibly from reasons of political expediency' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 22.47). It is on record that Roman 'ancestors wished to have some excuse for not holding elections sometimes' (*ibid*). The phenomena were accordingly interpreted to suit this purpose.

The philosopher accounting for some occurrences as sheer coincidences or products of chance argues that the setting up of Jupiter's statue at the time of a conspiracy was not mysterious. Rather than attributing the delay of the contractor in completing his work to 'his hand [being] stayed till the appointed hour by the immortal gods', he opines that this could have resulted from lack of energy or from lack of funds' (*ibid*).

While 'a male bearing a colt' could be a strange occurrence, Cicero believes that excitement over this is borne out of ignorance of the 'new occurrence' since things that occur



frequently do not produce the same effect. (Cicero, *De Divinatione*. 2. 22. 49). To Cicero, this and other human strange experiences should not promote reliance on predictions of soothsayers as the basis for human actions. He draws attention to the question that Hannibal asked King Prusias whom he advised to go to war but declined because the interpretation of entrails indicated otherwise: 'And do you put more reliance in pieces of ox-meat than you do in a veteran commander?' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 24. 52-53). To illustrate the argument that individuals should make responsible, practical decisions, Cicero cites the instance of Caesar's ignoring the warning of a renowned soothsayer that the General should not cross over to Africa. This action, rather than resulting in any dire consequences, saved Caesars' forces; hence, the conclusion:

I could give instances... countless ones where properties of soothsayers either were without result or the issue was directly the reverse of the prophecy... Pompey... placed great reliance on divination by means of entrails and portents... still you are aware that the result was nearly always contrary to prophecy. (Ibid.)

The statesman claims that men often rely on conjectures which time and again involve 'mistaking appearance for reality' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 26.55). Therefore, it would be foolish 'to hold the gods as the direct agents and not to inquire into the causes of such things' (ibid.). Interestingly, the philosopher notes why men are prone to believe the interpretation of strange occurrences:

Such occurrences which in time of war appear to the timid to be most frequent and most real are scarcely noticed in times of peace... in periods of danger stories of portents are not only more readily believed, but they are invented with great impunity. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 26. 59).

A state of confusion or timidity, in contrast with a calm mind, tends to make people willing or eager to believe every weird story. Referring to a report of mice gnawing shields at Lanuvium,

which was pronounced 'a very direful portent before the Marsian War', Cicero asks, most likely indignantly; 'but are we simple and thoughtless enough to think it a portent for mice to gnaw something, when gnawing is their one business in life?' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 27.59). Strange stories of portents of any sort need not be frightening. Instead of giving way to fear in the face baffling occurrences or events that are 'contrary to experience', Cicero strongly admonishes exploring the cause of events. For instance, the 'portent-stories' relating to Flaminius in Livy<sup>10</sup> could be understood differently. It is suggested that the standard-bearer's inability to pull up the standard could possibly be because he had 'planted it stoutly and pulled it timidly' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 31.67).

Cicero next provides an explanation for founding Rome on 'superstition' and the strong attachment to it. It all started with the erroneous views on many subjects, and latter, despite better experience and education, 'the respect for the opinion of the masses, and because of the great service to the state, those practices were maintained'. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 33. 70). However, sticking to these traditions did not consistently guarantee success. Although it was claimed that Flaminius perished with his army because he disobeyed auspices, it was a known fact that Paulus obeyed auspices only to lose his life in the battle of Cannae (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 33. 71).

Further attributing the survival of practice of divination to what was thought to be politically expedient, the statesman says:

Our ancestor would not undertake any military enterprise without consulting the auspices, but now for many years, our wars have been conducted by pro-consuls and without first taking auspices... what then, has become of divining by means of birds? (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 36. 76-77)

Cicero's, point is clear, taking of auspices persisted in Rome not just as a religious tool but also as a political determinant. The

philosopher would want to see divination practices among other nations as mere superstition but as an art to the Romans, whom he thinks know better than to take such practices as really dependable (*ibid.*). He believes that human manipulation is evident in the use of auspices; hence, superstition is seen in the action or inaction of men who wait for the interpretation of the song or flight of birds. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 38.80). Even when the employing of auspices was popular with Kings and people of the nations, Cicero would not accept this as giving credence to it, after all, 'want of sense is absolutely common'(Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 39. 81), and no reasonable person would use the opinion of 'the mob' in making decision. Superstitious practices associated with divination are therefore declared products of 'weak minds' that are 'unable to discern the truth' (*ibid.*).

Regarding omens, the philosopher suggests that being preoccupied with these would not make it possible to be 'so free and calm of mind that you would have reason and not superstition to guide your course'. In other words, there would be no chance utterances or occurrences again; stumbling, breaking a shoestring, sneezing- are all what would be considered ominous (Cicero, *De Divinatione*. 2. 40. 85).

Astrology also receives attention as a form of superstition that suggests that 'minds, manners, dispositions, physical condition, career in life and destinies are determined by the position of stars. Cicero sees this as utterly devoid of reason, as well as an expression of ludicrous folly (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 42. 89-90). Even modern medical science agrees with the philosopher that 'appearance and habits ... carriage and gestures of children are derived from their parents' owing to the natural power of heredity' and not by the heavenly bodies (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 45. 94-95). Cicero also notes that a natural defect is alterable through intelligent exertion, which would have been otherwise if truly they had been engendered and implanted by a star (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 46. 96). 'It is evident', he concludes that one's

birth is more influenced by local environment than the condition of the moon (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 46. 97).

Cicero's treatise on divination provides a good glimpse of the root of what he describes as superstition in the Roman society. He portrays the stoic's view of divination as flavoured by too much of superstition (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 48. 100). He suggests that steps should be taken in banishing, rather than encouraging, superstitious ideas (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 54.112). The philosopher discourages giving credence to fictitious incidents or appealing to them as authority. He advocates being wary of prophecies, since, according to him, some were obviously false, and others are 'mere senseless chatter'. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2 55. 113) He similarly cautions that, dreams, the experience of all men, should not be despised because of the negative effect of superstition (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 67.137). It is believed that 'the dream-interpreter's art [could be] a means of using one's wits to deceive' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 70.145). Therefore, relying on dreams for day-to-day guidance would amount to being superstitious (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 71.147).

## Conclusion

Cicero has argued that divination, as practised in his day, produces superstition, and especially so when people rely on it for guidance rather than on the five human senses that are often needed. Conjectures about the future that are based on entrails, birds, portents oracles or dreams are noted as prone to mistakes and unnecessary when natural laws are available to give a more reliable knowledge of the future. He has also reasoned that if decrees by fate are unalterable, it may serve no good purpose to be forewarned to be on guard against a danger, since whatever will happen is bound to happen.

Instead of attributing their misfortune to the gods or giving way to fear in the face of baffling occurrences and strange events, the statesman would want his people to make more enquiries into causes of things. He would encourage them not to allow respect

for popular opinions, tradition or service to the state move them to sustain faulty reasoning. In general, the statesman declares superstitious practices that are associated with divination as products of feeble minds that are not capable of determining the truth. He recommends that, as an alternative to being preoccupied with seeking omens, men should seek a free and calm mind that would enable them to have reason, and not superstition as their guide.

The foremost politician is conscious of the widespread superstition of his time. This he views as so universal that it 'has taken advantage of human weakness to cast its spell over the mind of almost every man' (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2. 72.148). Without any fear of being seen as waging war against religion, Cicero believes that he has a personal responsibility in ridding his society of a grievous malady. His treatise exemplifies a social issue that may be of serious concern, not only to a government, but also to citizens who desire freedom from the enchantment of superstition.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Divination here refers to the belief that the gods reveal their will to people through signs, omens, and dreams. These messages were made known through interpretation or intuition by individual who were considered divinely inspired and exceptionally gifted.

<sup>2</sup> *Haruspicing* is the activity of an *haruspex*, a soothsayer or diviner who foretells future from the inspection of entrails of victims

<sup>3</sup> The Greeks call this *μαντική*, from *μανία* (Latin, *furor*: inspired frenzy of prophets).

<sup>4</sup> Lucretius 5. 1196

<sup>5</sup> The college of priests whose duty was the preservation of the Sibylline books was known as *Decemviri*. The number of its members was increased from ten to sixty in the time of the emperors.

<sup>6</sup> These are verses from the prophetess, Sibyl, whose predictions were deposited at the Capitol and were consulted by the college of priests in the time of danger.

<sup>7</sup> Cicero would tolerate the practice of divination for reasons of political expediency and not because of any prophetic value.

<sup>8</sup> While the Epicureans believed that the gods were indifferent about human affairs, the Stoics, with their belief in fate, claimed that what god had preordained about man was unchangeable

<sup>9</sup> the famous Grecian sculptor

<sup>10</sup> The Latin word *auspicium* is from *auspex*, a contraction of *avis-pex* from *avis-spicio* (inspect a bird) An *auspex* observes the flight and other behaviours of a bird, upon which he bases his foretelling of future events.

<sup>11</sup> See *Poems of Tibullus* 2. 2. 1-4

<sup>12</sup> *Porphry, defectu oraculorum* 43 *qtd. in Cicero, De Divinatione, ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Livy, Book 22. 3. 11-13

<sup>14</sup> According to the Greek mythology, Sarpedon, the commander of the Lycian contingent of Priam's allies, was mourned by the almighty Zeus when he was struck dead by Patroclus

<sup>15</sup> Jove refers to Jupiter

<sup>16</sup> *Livy, xxii iii 11-13*

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