DIVINATION (div′-ə-nə′shən), the practice of predicting the future and revealing hidden knowledge by magical or supernatural means. Divination is based in part on the belief that supernatural forces affect the destinies of humans. The practice has been reported in all parts of the world and in many different forms, for example: haruspication (forecasting future events by inspecting the entrails of sacrificed animals), used by the ancient Etruscans; the pronouncements of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi in Greece; Babylonian astrology and dream interpretation; seacullancy (prediction from the cracks on charred shoulder blades of animals), practiced by the North American Indians; gypsy readings of cards and tea leaves; rhabdomancy (using rods or wands to reveal water or metals underground). These various techniques may be divided into two classes. First, there are methods involving inspirational priests, seers, mediums, or shamans, who are believed to get information from gods or spirits. Other techniques make predictions from natural objects or chance events. Augury, for example, involves the flight of birds; palmistry interprets lines in the hand; ouija boards employ chance movements; and comets and eclipses have often been interpreted as omens. Some peoples, such as the Azande of the Sudan, regulate all aspects of their lives by oracles or omens; others resort to divination only when a major crisis of life is approaching. Techniques of foretelling the future often constitute a part of religion.

Divination appears to be related to basic insecurities of human life—the need for assistance in making decisions and the hope of finding explanations for mysterious events. The power of these needs and hopes is shown by the fact that astrologers, palm-readers, and fortunetellers of other kinds still do a large business in the United States, even though some of their activities are illegal. There appear to be relationships between methods of divination and games of chance, both in the methods used and in their psychological aspects. Gamblers often believe in luck or fate, and test their luck by the fall of dice or cards.


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See also Oracles.