

# Questioning Divination: The Young Augustine and Friends

CAMWS 2021 – Mattias Gassman, mattias.gassman@classics.ox.ac.uk

## 1. Divination in late antiquity

Augustine the bishop's critique of divination: e.g., *Tractatus in Iohannem* 6.17, "Don't pagans go to idols—or used to go—publicly? Now Christians secretly seek out diviners by lot and consult astrologers" (*nonne pagani ad idola eunt, uel ibant publice? nunc occulte Christiani sortilegos quaerunt, mathematicos consulunt.*)

The theory of magical operations: *De doctrina christiana* 20.20.30, *De diuersis quaestionibus LXXXIII* 79, with Robert A. Markus, "Augustine on Magic: A Neglected Semiotic Theory," *Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristiques* 40 (1994): 375–88.

Trial of the notary Theodorus: Ammianus Marcellinus, 29.1.1–11, 29–32.

## 2. Example 1: Vindicianus

*Conf.* 4.1–3, with retrospective (and name) in 7.6.8. Cf. anecdote in *Ep.* 138.3.

*Esp.* 4.3.5, *erat eo tempore uir sagax, medicinae artis peritissimus atque in ea nobilissimus, qui proconsul manu sua coronam illam agonisticam imposuerat non sano capiti meo ... quia enim factus ei eram familiarior et eius sermonibus ... adsiduus et fixus inhaerebam, ubi cognouit ex conloquio meo libris genethliacorum esse me deditum, benigne ac paterne monuit ut eos abicerem ... dicens ita se illa didicisse ut eius professionem primis annis aetatis suae deferre uoluisset qua uitam degeret et, si Hippocraten intellexisset, et illas utique litteras potuisset intellegere; et tamen non ob aliam causam se postea illis relictis medicinam adsecutum, nisi quod eas falsissimas comperisset et nollet uir grauis decipiendis hominibus uictum quaerere....*

There was at that time a shrewd man, most learned in the medical art and exceptionally distinguished through it, who as proconsul had put the crown for the [poetry] competition on my head, then unwell, with his own hand ... Because I had become better acquainted with him and what he said ... I was sticking close to him, diligently and constantly; when he learned from speaking with me that I had devoted myself to the books of natal horoscopes, he warned me in good-willed and fatherly fashion to throw them away ... saying that he had learned them so well that he had wanted, in his earlier years, to gain his livelihood from their profession and, if he had understood Hippocrates, he could (at any rate) understand those books, too; and nevertheless he had afterward left them behind to pursue medicine, for no reason other than that he had discovered them to be utterly false and was unwilling, as a man of sober character, to seek his support by deceiving people....

On Vindicianus, *comes archiater* to Valentinian I, see Francesco Fiorucci, "Elvio Vindiciano: aspetti storici," *Klio* 94 (2012): 482–97.

## 3. Example 2: Albicerius (*Contra academicos* 1.6.17–9.24)

Introduction: 1.6.17, *Albicerium dico illum, qui apud Carthaginem multos annos consulentibus mira quaedam et certa respondit. Innumerabilia commemorare possem, nisi et apud eos*

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*loquerer, qui experti sunt ... Nonne cochlearium – mihi autem dicebat – cum domi non inueniretur, tuo iussu percontatus, non solum quid quaeretur, uerum etiam nominatim cuius res esset et ubi lateret, citissime uerissimeque respondit?*

I mean Albicerius, who for many years gave wonderful and sure answers to those who consulted him. I could recount innumerable instances, were I not speaking among people who know the matter from experience ... When a spoon was not found at home, did he not (as he himself told me), after being summoned at your order, not only answer most quickly and accurately, not just what people were looking for, but also to whom it belonged and where it was hiding?

On Albicerius: William E. Klingshirn, “The Figure of Albicerius the Diviner in Augustine’s *Contra Academicos*,” *Studia Patristica* 38 (2001): 219–23.

Flaccianus (on whom, see also *De ciuitate dei* 18.23): 1.6.18, *Quid, quod doctissimum et clarissimum uirum Flaccianum mirari solitum esse abs te accepimus, qui, cum de fundo emendo esset locutus, ad illum diuinum rem ita detulit, ut quid egisset, si potis esset, ediceret? Atque ille statim non modo negotii genus sed etiam, in quo ille uehementer clamabat admirans, ipsum fundi nomen pronuntiauit, cum ita esset absurdum, ut uix eius Flaccianus ipse meminisset. Iam illud sine stupore animi non queo dicere, quod amico nostro, discipulo tuo, sese uolenti exagitare flagitantique insolenter, ut diceret, quid secum ipse tacitus uolueret, Vergilii uersum eum cogitare respondit.*

What about the matter at which, as we learned from you, the most learned and distinguished Flaccianus was accustomed to marvel? When he had spoken about buying an estate, he brought the matter to that divine man, so that he could proclaim what Flaccianus ought to do, if he could. And Albicerius at once pronounced not just what kind of business was concerned, but also—a feat at which Flaccianus used to shout aloud in admiration—the very name of the estate, though it was so absurd [i.e., non-Roman?] that Flaccianus himself could hardly remember it. Now I cannot tell without amazement, that, when our friend, your pupil, who wanted to irritate him and so asked him, by way of insolence, what he was silently thinking about within himself, he answered that he was thinking about a line of Vergil. [Albicerius, despite a total lack of schooling, proceeded to recite the line.]

Augustine’s reply (1.7.21): Flaccianus attributed Albicerius’ learning to an *abiectionissima animula*; *Quaerebat enim uir ille doctissimus ab his, qui talia mirarentur, num grammaticam uel musicam uel geometricam posset Albicerius docere.*

For Augustine, too, divination not a real branch of learning: see further William E. Klingshirn, “Augustine’s Disciplines: *Silent Diutius Musae Varronis?*” In *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions*, edited by Karla Pollmann and Mark Vessey, 113–141. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

General commentary: Karin Schlapbach, *Augustine, Contra academicos (uel De academicis)*. Patristische Texte und Studien 58. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003.

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### 4. Example 3: Firminus (*Conf.* 7.6.8–10)

*is ergo uir nomine Firminus, liberaliter institutus et excultus eloquio, cum me tamquam carissimum de quibusdam suis rebus, in quas saecularis spes eius intumuerat, consuleret, quid mihi secundum suas quas constellationes appellant uideretur, ego autem, qui iam de hac re in Nebridii sententiam flecti coeperam, non quidem abnuerem conicere ... sed tamen subicerem prope iam esse mihi persuasum ridicula illa esse et inania, tum ille mihi narrauit patrem suum fuisse librorum talium curiosissimum et habuisse amicum aequae illa simulque sectantem. qui ... flatabant in eas nugas ignem cordis sui, ita ut mutorum quoque animalium, si quae domi parerent, obseruarent momenta nascentium atque ad ea caeli positionem notarent, unde illius quasi artis experimenta conligerent.*

That man, therefore, by name Firminus, liberally educated and cultivated of speech consulted me as a dear friend on certain matters for which his worldly hopes were rising, asking what, in my view, his so-called constellations portended. But I, who had now begun on this matter to bend toward the opinion of Nebridius [an intimate friend and critic of astrology], did not indeed refuse to make the conjecture ... but nonetheless added that I was now just about persuaded that these things were ridiculous and empty. He then told me that his father had been most inquisitive about such books and had a friend equally and at the same time their aficionado. These men inflamed the fire of each other's hearts for these trifles ... so that, if any even of the mute animals of their households were giving birth, they observed the circumstances of those that were born and marked down the position of the heaven attendant to them, from which they collected empirical tests of that quasi-art. [The same practice extended to Firminus and a slave in the friend's household, born simultaneously.]