

## Questioning divination: the young Augustine and friends

Divination is not an art one ordinarily associates with Augustine of Hippo. His preaching, like that of any other late antique bishop, decisively rejected all forms of magic, and he offered detailed critiques of astrology across many works (e.g., *City of God* 5). However, Augustine is also an author who gives exceptional—if incomplete—insight into times in his life where he thought differently (see esp. O’Loughlin 1992). In his *Confessions* and the early dialogue *Against the Academics*, Augustine paints a series of portraits, of himself but also of lofty and learned associates, who questioned the practical limits of divinatory power.

The aim of this paper is to trace out the social context of Augustine’s early and growing skepticism towards divination. The first of the learned men, and the most studied, is the learned Vindicianus, proconsul and sometime court-physician for Valentinian I (Fiorucci 2008). Augustine, who had rejected the help of a *haruspex* in a poetry contest, did take up astrology. After crowning him the victor, Vindicianus tried to dissuade him, pointing to his own experiences as a young man who had once prepared to become a professional astrologer (*Confessions* 4.2.3-3.5). Of his reasoning, we hear comparatively little, though Augustine elsewhere lauds him for his medical expertise, whose methods he was able rationally to explain to those who had assumed them sorcerous (*Ep.* 138.3).

The next example is more richly documented. In *Contra Academicos* 1.6.17-8.23, Augustine’s student Licentius describes a series of divinatory feats performed by Albicerius, a *hariolus* from Carthage. Augustine had engaged him to find a lost spoon; he had spontaneously identified a slave-boy as a thief when Licentius and others had gone to consult him on another matter; he had correctly told a disbelieving student of Augustine what line of Vergil he was

thinking about; and he had managed to tell the very learned senator Flaccianus the “absurd” (Punic?) name of an estate he was buying. We thus have an array of attitudes toward Albicerius’ art, and Flaccianus’ own seems to have been dismissive: whatever bits of insight Albicerius gained from his familiars, he could not teach any of the liberal arts. His unsystematic “science” was not true knowledge. It is in much the same light, perhaps, that we should understand Augustine’s consultation, which has puzzled his readers (Klingshirn 2001). Augustine was, toward the end of his time in Carthage, turning from Manichaean conviction toward Academic uncertainty. Bringing in Albicerius might have been a way of testing whether a diviner could, in fact, find hidden truths. For Flaccianus, at any rate, it seems to have been part of a wider interest in prophecy: he is likely the learned proconsul Flaccianus who introduced Augustine to a Sibylline acrostic on Christ (*City of God* 18.23).

The third example was recounted to Augustine in an episode he describes in *Conf.* 7.6.8-10. His friend Nebridius, who had added his doubts to Vindicianus’ (*Conf.* 4.3.6), had worn away Augustine’s trust in astrology. Now, another man of learning, Firminus, asked Augustine to cast a horoscope for him. Augustine did, with the caveat that he thought it all so much nonsense now. To that, Firminus replied with an experimental version of the famous twin-test. His father had been obsessed with the science, as had been a friend of his. Together, the two men had taken horoscopes even for the animals born in their households. Finally, Firminus’ mother had gone into labor at the exact same time as a slave-woman belonging to the friend. The children were born at the same time, yet had—naturally—gone on to very different lives. Whether the argument had swayed Firminus’ father, we are not told, and the son, at least, seems to have retained some faith in astrology. It, however, confirmed Augustine in his rejection of an art to which he had long clung.

The data are too diffuse to allow one to trace out a general vogue for empiricism, still less for philosophical Skepticism, in early 380s Carthage and Milan. They do serve as a reminder that late antique people were capable of testing arcane arts experimentally as well as theologically or philosophically, and are an early mark not just of Augustine's growing disdain for divination, but also of the natural-philosophical interest that runs, however subordinated to theological concerns, through his works.

### Bibliography

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