

# Divination

Scholarly bias against divination

Varieties of divination

Shamanic divination

Case studies

Chinggis Khan and the Mongolian Empire

The Oracle at Delphi

Viking Age seiðr

## HOROSCOPES

March 01, 2010 [yesterday](#) | [tomorrow](#)



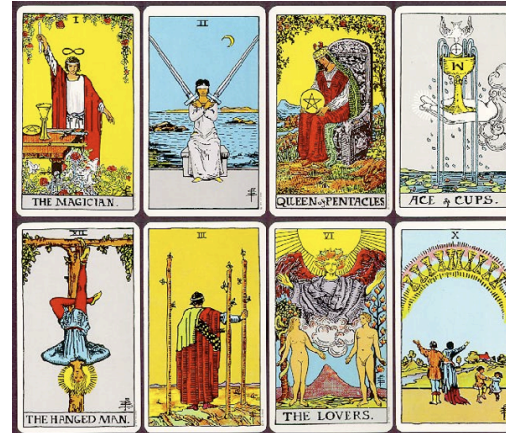
**Scorpio**

October 23 - November 21

## Scorpio: Today's Free Daily Horoscope

[see another sign](#)


Someone needs advice from you, though they almost certainly aren't just going to walk up and ask you. Use your brainy energy to figure out who needs you and how best to get them what they need.



There are lots of varieties of divination widely in practice in Western societies today.

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Divination is a real industry, with real economics



Divination is an interest of people at all levels of income, education, and social standing...

Here an image of Nancy Reagan, a long-time believer in astrology



Yet despite its importance, divination is often the butt of jokes in the press and among scholars.

## Google searches

Divination 3,760,000 hits

Pseudoscience 5,320,000 hits

Psychic 16,800,000 hits

There are lots of sites offering divination (see the number of hits for “psychic” lots of sites trying to debunk divination (see the hits for “pseudoscience”) but many fewer looking at divination as an ethnographic topic (see “Divination” despite its importance



*Problem:* Divination is *at least* as common a duty of the Shaman as is healing. Yet it is seldom accorded that weight in ethnographic and scholarly literature. Why?

Can we rethink shamanism in such a way that divination would be seen as the *norm*, rather than the extra, or exception?

Or, in a more delimited fashion, can we point to specific Shamanic traditions where divination seems fundamental?

## Divination

Scholarly bias against divination

*What's wrong with divination?*

Frequently female

Often handled by cultural outsiders

Often seen as more passive; receiving, not *getting*

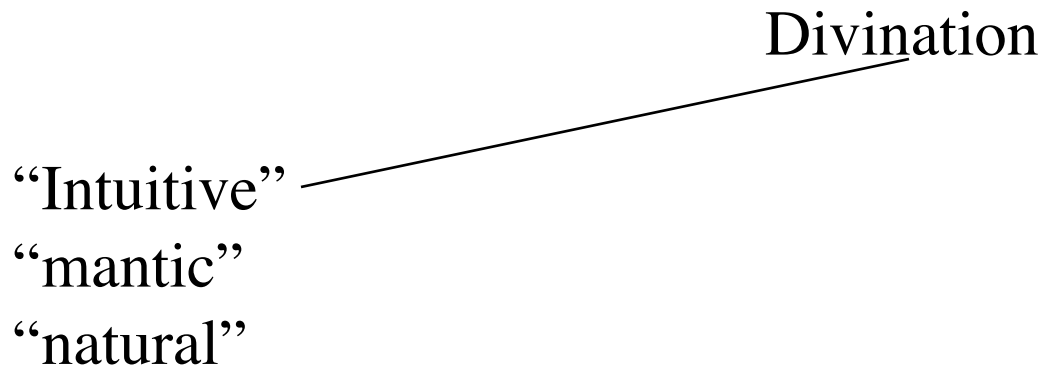
Rituals are often less heroic-seeming, less extreme

Divination can be seen as cheating, on gods or fate

*...these can lead to bias against divination, both  
within cultures and within scholarship.*

Barbara Tedlock argues that even the term “divination” applies a one-shoe-fits-all definition to something which is incredibly varied cross-culturally. She offers instead a typology for understanding the different strategies the underlie different forms of divination in various cultures....

## Varieties of divination



*Diviner undergoes spiritual experience, out of which knowledge arises.*

At one end of a continuum lie “intuitive” forms of divination— i.e., ones in which the sought after knowledge simply enters the seer’s mind from unseen sources. In ancient Greece, this form was called “mantic;” some scholars call this “natural”

## Varieties of divination

### Divination

“Intuitive”

“mantic”

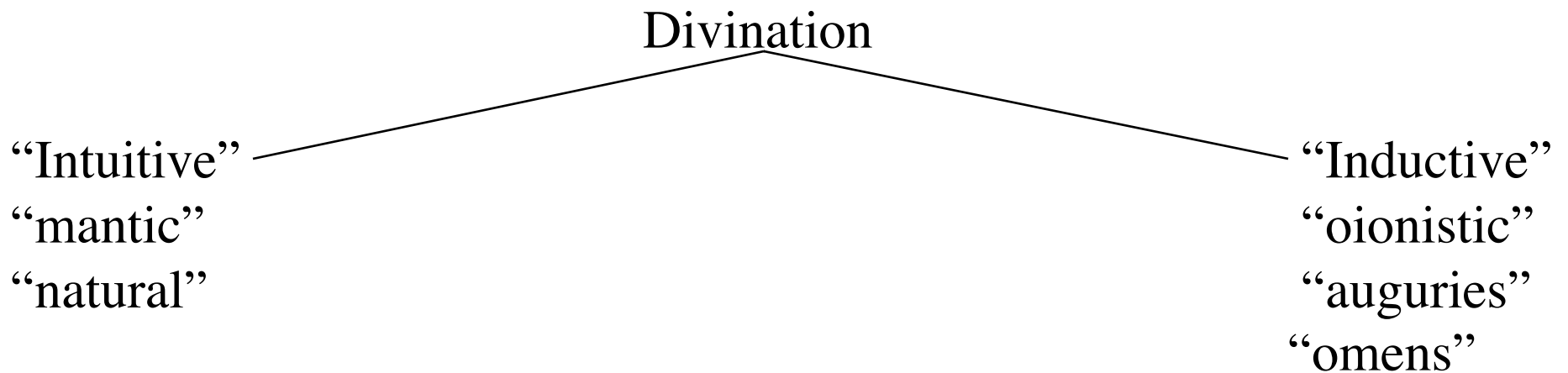
“natural”

*Diviner undergoes spiritual experience, out  
arises.*

Examples: Navajo hand-trembling ceremony  
Oracle of Delphi



## Varieties of divination



*At the other extreme lie forms of divination called “inductive”:*

*Diviner observes certain natural phenomena which are culturally defined as predictors of the future:*

*e.g., number and/or flight of birds, sight of certain animals.*

*These judgments are rational within the culture*

Some Examples: Chickening out in Roman custom. If the chicken eats before battle, it means the battle will be successful. If the chicken does not eat, the battle will not be successful. Hence the term “chickening out” — a wise leader would retreat in that case.

Number of birds seen flying taken as indicative of future: 1 is bad luck. 2 is good luck, 3 is health, 4 is wealth 5 is sickness, 6 is death.

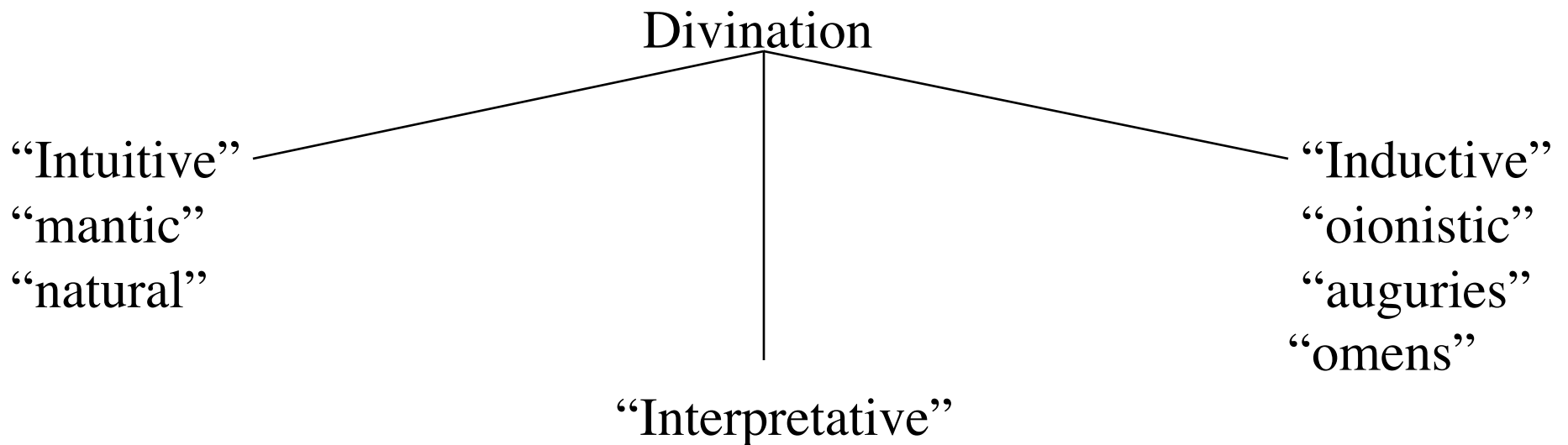
“Streetlight auguries” A person sets him/herself a goal: e.g., “if I can get through this intersection before the light turns, I will get this other thing I’m hoping for” (e.g., a date, a raise, an A, etc.) People take the result as Indicative of whether their hope will be fulfilled.

Everyone can see this indications, and their meaning is controlled by collective tradition. There is nothing “intuitive” about them.



Water witching, pictured in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century images on the previous slide, is a augury for determining where to locate a well. By loosely holding the branch and noting where it turns downward, the water witch can purportedly determine the place where there is plentiful water close to the surface. The stick is said to be attracted by the water. Many rural Wisconsinites, like counterparts in other parts of the country, will not drill a well without having a water witch determine the spot.

## Varieties of divination



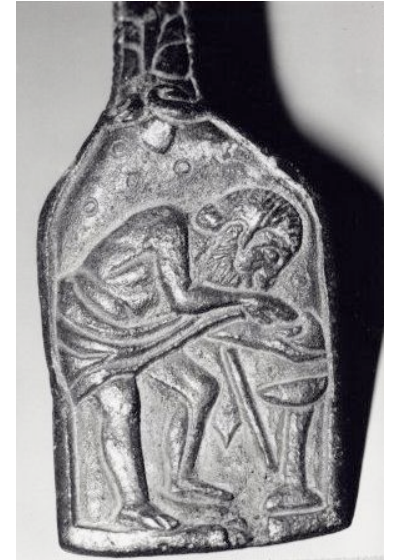
*Diviner uses inductive evidence, but combines it with insights gained intuitively.*

*Between these extremes lies a medial variety, which Tedlock calls “interpretative.” Here, the seer observes external signs, but interprets through some process of intuition. Some examples....*

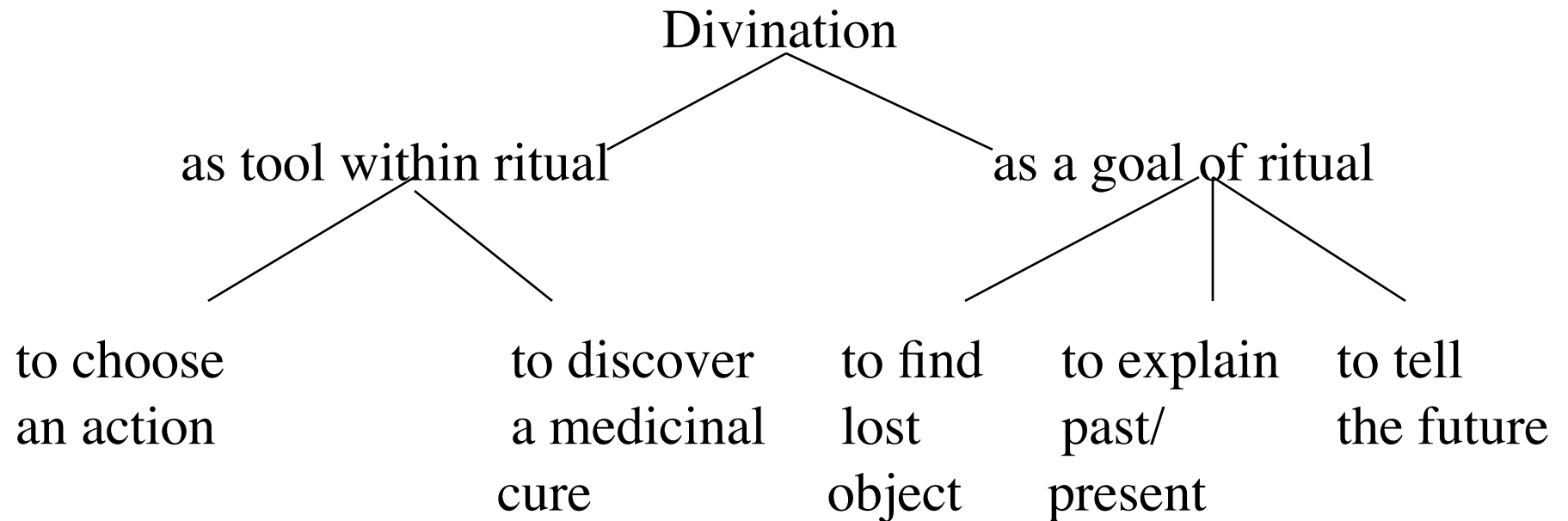
Example: Roman Haruspex: examined sacrificial animal's liver to determine answers to questions

Example: Shona dice throwers look at array of dice as they land and intuitively arrive at answer

Example: Sámi shamans watched path of a metal ring as it vibrated across a drum head being beaten arrive at answers to questions



# Shamanic divination



There are varying roles that divination plays in shamanic rituals. Sometimes it was a component of some other activity, such as healing; sometimes it was an end in itself. Of all these activities, telling the future is often the least embraced: telling the future can *cause* the future and bring harm or blame on the shaman. So it is often avoided.

# Divination

Scholarly bias against divination

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Shamanic divination

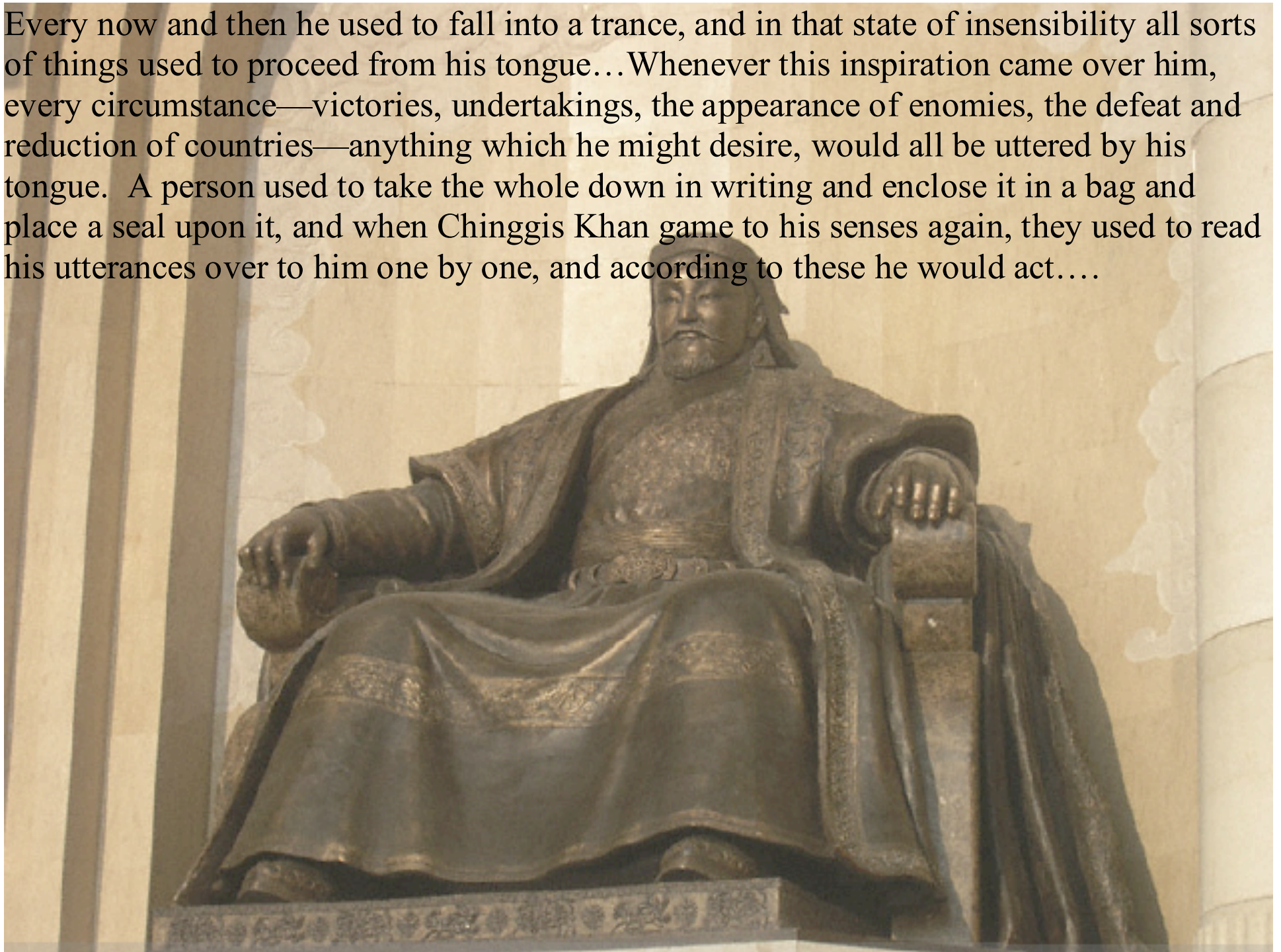
Case studies    Now some examples:

Chinggis Khan and the Mongolian Empire

The Oracle at Delphi

Viking Age seiðr

Every now and then he used to fall into a trance, and in that state of insensibility all sorts of things used to proceed from his tongue... Whenever this inspiration came over him, every circumstance—victories, undertakings, the appearance of enemies, the defeat and reduction of countries—anything which he might desire, would all be uttered by his tongue. A person used to take the whole down in writing and enclose it in a bag and place a seal upon it, and when Chinggis Khan came to his senses again, they used to read his utterances over to him one by one, and according to these he would act....

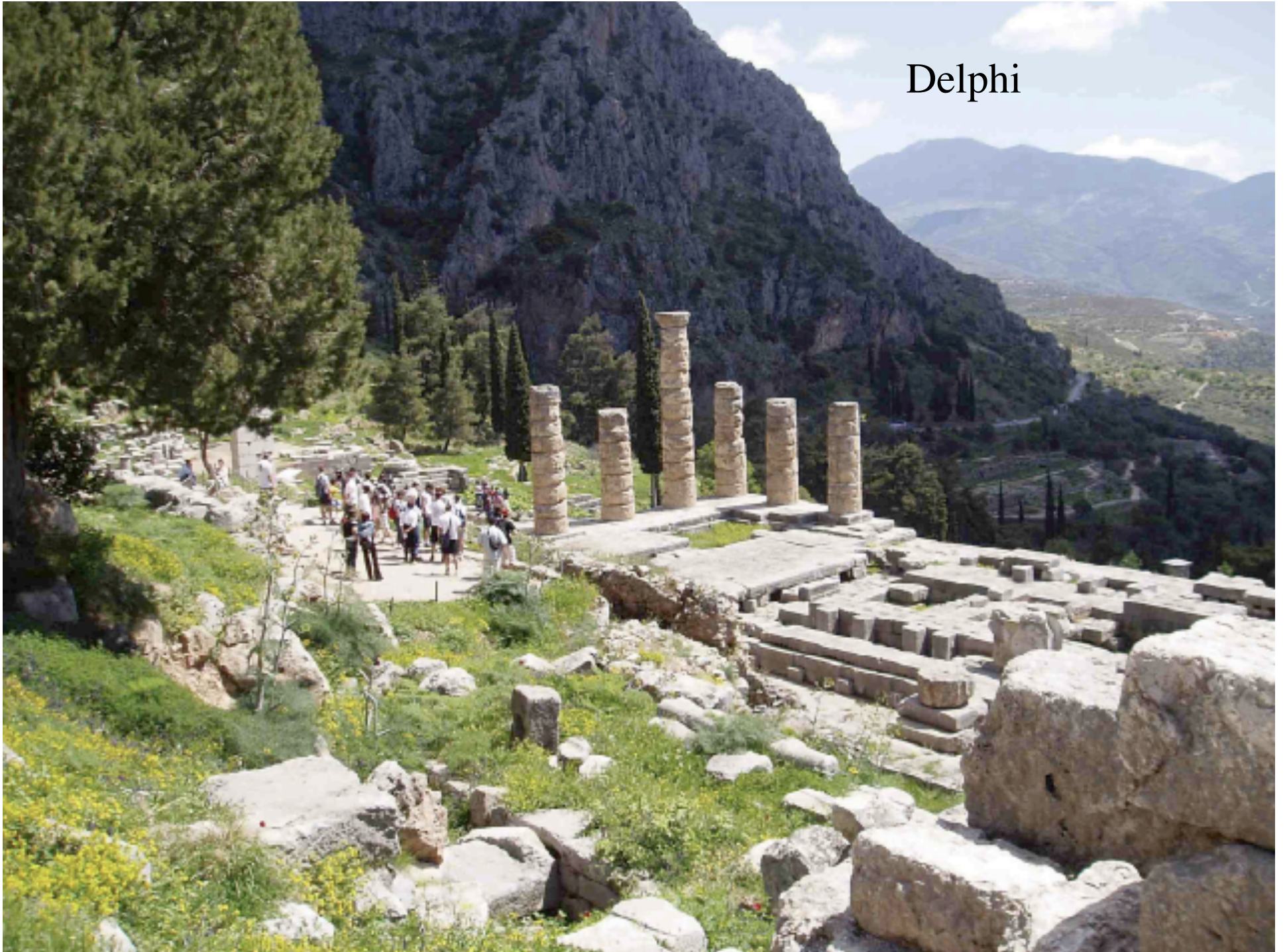


The great emperor Chinggis khan (Genghis khan) went into trance to see the future. His visions were recorded and then interpreted. This intuitive divination was central to the decision making of his huge empire.



1276

# Delphi



750 BC

Connection with  
Apollo

Omphalos



Serious matters  
of state





Sacred fissure that causes mantic trance in goat, shepherds, and oracles

## Case Study: Viking Age seiðr

Germanic female divination

Tacitus, AD. 98, *Germania*

*“They believe that there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy; and so they do not scorn to ask their advice, or lightly disregard their replies. In the reign of the emperor Vespasian we saw Veleda long honored by many Germans as a divinity; and even earlier they showed a similar reverence for Aurinia and a number of others—a reverence untainted by servile flattery or any pretence of turning women into goddesses.” ch. 8*

Example: Oracle of Delphi.

For centuries, various people came to the island of Delphi to consult the priestesses there who were known to possess intuitive divinatory skills. A priestess would listen to the question then retire into a small room in a particular temple. There she would breathe heavily and then emerge with an answer (often cryptic). Modern scholars have shown that the room in question was located over a volcanic vent that released methane into the room. So breathing in the air of the room led to an altered state of consciousness in which the intuitions occurred.

## Case Study: Viking Age seiðr

Germanic female divination

Sámi shamanism (*noaidevuohtá*)

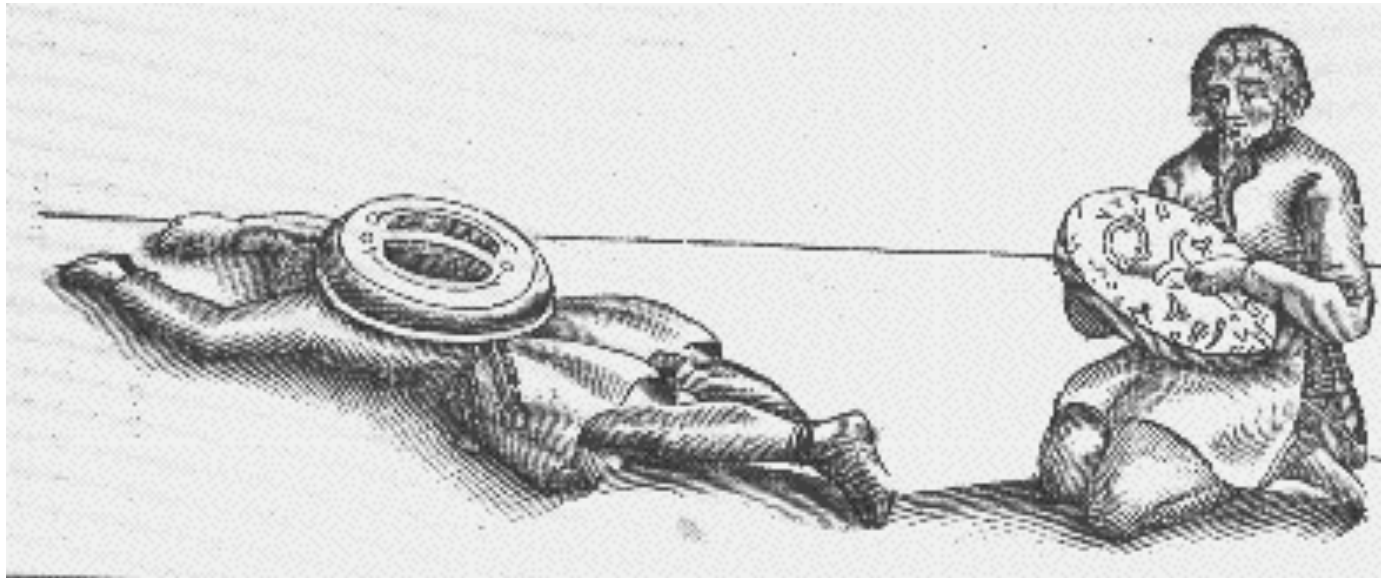


Illustration from 1700s;

## Case Study: Viking Age seiðr

Germanic female divination

Sámi shamanism (*noaidevuohtá*)

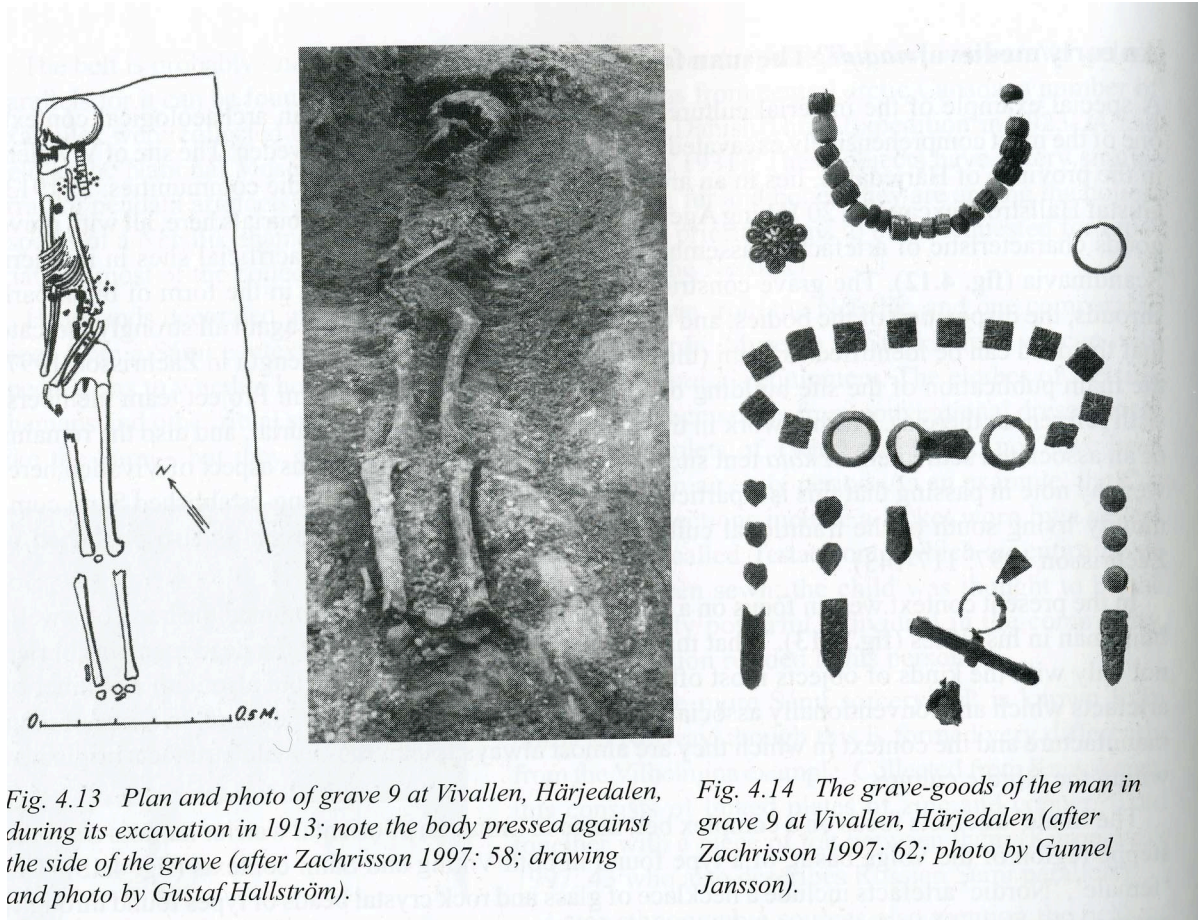


Fig. 4.13 Plan and photo of grave 9 at Vivallen, Härrjedalen, during its excavation in 1913; note the body pressed against the side of the grave (after Zachrisson 1997: 58; drawing and photo by Gustaf Hallström).

Fig. 4.14 The grave-goods of the man in grave 9 at Vivallen, Härrjedalen (after Zachrisson 1997: 62; photo by Gunnel Jansson).

## Case Study: Viking Age seiðr

Germanic female divination

Sámi shamanism (*noaidevuohtá*)

British Isles “Celtic mystique”

## Case Study: Viking Age seiðr



Viking sagas contain accounts of female seers who practice a form of divination called seiðr. This tradition involved trance state consultation with spirits. It may represent a fusion of age-old Germanic traditions of female divination (discussed already by Tacitus in first century AD, Celtic female divination, and Sámi (male) trance divination). The example demonstrates how divinatory practices can cross cultural boundaries and even prove more alluring because of their foreignness.



Single draft of about  
between north  
end of hour.

10:00 AM 10:00 AM

# Solitary Crow On Fence Post Portending Doom, Analysts Warn

GREELEY, NE—Experts confirmed Monday that a single black crow perched ominously on a fence post in rural Nebraska is almost certainly a harbinger of great doom and despair for all Americans.

The crow came eerily to rest on the rickety wooden post at 10:26

a.m. Monday, according to farm hands working in a nearby field at the time. Citing a vague but certain feeling that "something just wasn't right," one of the laborers contacted law enforcement officials, and within hours federal authorities had

see CROW, page 8

Divination is culturally specific;  
Divination CAN cross cultural boundaries  
Divination will follow culturally set rules



The winged harbinger of our own condemnation.