

An Explanation of Divination Through the Apostles | Sortes apostolite ad explanandum

Text Information

Author | Anonymous

Language | Latin

Period | 13th Century

Genre | Handbooks and manuals

Source | Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Ham. 390 f.26v

Collection | Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/divination_through_apostles/

Translation and introduction by Danny Smith.

Introduction to the Text

This brief and anonymous text, known as a “mantic alphabet,” was part of a popular divinatory tradition around the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages known as bibliomancy—telling a fortune from books. Mantic alphabets survive in Arabic, Greek and Latin. To use such a text, a reader opened a second book—in this case the introduction prescribes a Psalter be used—at random. The reader would ponder the first letter that they saw, which would then correspond to the future as described in the alphabet. For example, if the reader opened to Psalm 1, which begins “Beatus vir qui...” they would turn back to the dreambook’s entry for letter B and learn that B predicts that they will have “power over people.”

As a personal oracle that relies on an explicitly religious text as part of its divinatory process, mantic alphabets like this one combine two seemingly incongruous traditions. Priests, theologians and other religious figures often explicitly condemned soothsayers, oracles and fortune-tellers, but some nevertheless supported it including Gregory of Tours (d.594), who described the practice of bibliomancy in particular. By insisting that divination occurred only after a prayer was said and only when a Psalter was used as the source of a random letter, this mantic alphabet attests to how popular practices of personal fortune-telling were able to carefully align themselves to fit within the bounds of religious doctrine. The practice of bibliomancy was particularly popular in the late Middle Ages and similar mantic alphabets exist drawing not only from Christian sources but similarly using Byzantine, Islamic and Jewish texts to tell a reader’s fortune.

Introduction to the Source

This is one of many mantic alphabets in Latin, French, English, German, and Welsh that are preserved in manuscripts across Western Europe. This Latin example was written in Northern Italy, likely Venice or the Veneto region, in the 13th century. It is preserved in Berlin in Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Ham. 390 f.26v, a manuscript that combines several oracular and mantic texts—including a mantic dream alphabet also translated on the GMS. This text is one of eighty-eight surviving bibliomantic alphabet texts in Western manuscripts, with some surviving from as early as the twelfth century but most surviving from the fifteenth. However, these texts were likely far more popular than the surviving manuscript record attests. Their brevity made them easily duplicatable and the close similarities between the kinds of fortunes predicted by the texts indicate that they were likely copied directly from each other.

Further Reading

Chardonnens, László Sándor. “Mantic Alphabets in Medieval Western Manuscripts and Early Printed Books.” *Modern Philology* 110, no. 3 (2013): 340–66.

- Chardonnens’s article includes the most up-to-date list of surviving manuscript and early printed editions of mantic alphabets.

Elukin, Jonathan M. “The Ordeal of Scripture: Functionalism and the *Sortes Biblicae* in the Middle Ages.” *Exemplaria* 5, no. 1 (1993): 135–60.

- On the relationship between mantic texts and the religious texts they often invoke.

Förster, Max. “Zwei kymrische Orakelalphabete.” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 20, no. 1 (1936): 228–43.

- An important early study and survey of bibliomantic manuscripts that introduced examples (two in Welsh) outside of Latin and German.

Tobler, Adolf. *Die altvenezianische Übersetzung der Sprüche des Dionysius Cato*. Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin aus dem Jahre 1883, philosophisch-historische Classe 1 (Berlin, 1883), particularly 86.

- Contains an edition of this manuscript.



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Si de aliqua re sire volueris hoc modo sire poteris.
In primis cantent¹ unum psalmum² cum³ oratione dominica⁴. deuota mente. Ut dominus⁵ manifestet ei quod querit. Postea aperiat psalterium. et prima litera que tibi aparuerit⁶ cognosce eam. et videbis quod queris:

- ¶ .A. significat uitam siue potestatem:
- ¶ .B. significat potestatem in populo:
- ¶ .C. significat mortem uiri:
- ¶ .D. significat conturbacionem vel mortem:
- ¶ .E. significat letitiam:
- ¶ .F. significat nobilitatem:
- ¶ .G significat unius hominis occisionis:
- ¶ .H. significat femine occisionis:
- ¶ .I. significat bonam⁷ uitam:
- ¶ .K. significat iamnem⁸ literarum:
- ¶ .L. significat gaudium:
- ¶ .M. significat medio:
- ¶ .N. significat reuisitacionem:
- ¶ .O. significat dure potestatem:
- ¶ .P. significat omnem salutem:
- ¶ .Q. significat uitam uel cautelam⁹:
- ¶ .R. significat restitutum uel uulneratum:
- ¶ .S. significat anum¹⁰ sanitatem:
- ¶ .T. significat iracundiam uel munitionem:
- ¶ .V. significat mortem¹¹:
- ¶ .X. significat parentes obliuionem:

Quicquid tibi volueris ut eunte pecunie augmentum.

If you would like to know of any thing, you will be able to in this way. First a psalm is to be sung as a prayer to the Lord. The mind having thus been dedicated, the Lord reveals what you ask. Afterward, open a psalter and consider the first letter that will appear to you and you will see what you seek:

- ¶ .A. signifies alternatively life or power:
- ¶ .B. signifies power over people:
- ¶ .C. signifies a man's death:
- ¶ .D. signifies sickness or death:
- ¶ .E. signifies joy:
- ¶ .F. signifies renown:
- ¶ .G. signifies the murder of a man¹:
- ¶ .H. signifies a murdered woman:
- ¶ .I. signifies good life:
- ¶ .K. signifies vain² scholarship:
- ¶ .L. signifies delight:
- ¶ .M. signifies division³:
- ¶ .N. signifies a reappearance:
- ¶ .O. signifies harsh power:
- ¶ .P. signifies complete health:
- ¶ .Q. signifies life or caution.
- ¶ .R. signifies recovery or injury:
- ¶ .S. signifies a healthy year⁴:
- ¶ .T. signifies temper or defensiveness:
- ¶ .V. signifies death:
- ¶ .X. signifies forgiving parents:

Thus whatever you would want, like having more money, has come about.



Critical Notes

Transcription

- 1 *Cantent* is rendered as *cantēt*.
- 2 *Psalmum* is rendered as *psalmū*.
- 3 *Cum* is rendered as *cū*.
- 4 *Dominica* is rendered as *dnīca*.
- 5 Dominus here is engendered as "ds" with a macron. In a printed edition of this text, Adolf Tobler transcribes this as "deus," but given that elsewhere in the MS a macron represents a missing "m," "dominus" seems more likely. See Adolf Tobler, *Die altvenezianische Übersetzung der Sprüche des Dionysius Cato*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin aus dem Jahre 1883 (Philosophisch-historische Classe 1, Berlin, 1883), 86.
- 6 This is an abbreviated form of *aperueīt*, but it is also likely a misspelling of *apparuerit*.
- 7 *Bonam* is rendered as *bonā*.
- 8 *Iamnem* is likely a misspelling of *inanem*.
- 9 *Cautelam* is rendered as *cautelā*.
- 10 *Anum* is likely a misspelling of *annum*.
- 11 Here readers have scratched away the word "*mortem*".

Translation

- 1 Literally it means one man.
- 2 Literally this means empty.
- 3 In other mantic alphabets M often signifies something "mediocre" or moderate.
- 4 Presumably this is a healthy year, as written it reads literally ".S. signifies a healthy anus:".