Agora

Issue 13
Autumn 2025

CLASSICS TO SHARE AND ENJOY

Welcome back to *Agora* as we celebrate an excellent start to our 2025-26 season at the LSA CA, kicked off by a webinar on Greece after Alexander brought to us by Dr Alex McAuley in September, followed by an in-person talk on Roman attitudes to immigration by Dr Christopher Burden-Strevens in October. We are excited for the remaining talks this season, so if you are not a member but would like to hear some excellent speakers on a range of classical topics, please visit this page on our website to explore membership options.

In addition to our Book Club meetings, we have also recently launched a new Classics Club to encourage the discussion of various topics and sharing of ideas – read more about this on page 13. Both clubs are held on Zoom and are free to join, so please email us at lsaclassics@gmail.com if you're interested.

For anyone keen on learning ancient languages, our @learnancientgreek page on Instagram is back up and running, so head over there to cover the basics (and learn about the meanings of dinosaur names!). Plus look out for further updates and more content on our main Instagram handle.

We are thrilled to announce that the Grand Final of our 2026 Ancient Worlds Competition will be judged by Charlie Covell, creator of the hit Netflix series *Kaos*. We're inviting anyone between the ages of 11 and 18 to deliver a short presentation in answer to the question 'If you could resurrect any ancient figure today, who would it be and why?' Find out more on page 9 or head over to our Competition webpage for further details.

It's always a delight to bring you a new issue of *Agora*, and this time is no different as we explore the themes of religion and mythology from a range of perspectives. Sophie Bassano analyses a Cavafy poem about the horses of Achilles (page 2); Anna Hunter examines ancient Greek fertility cults (page 10); Isabelle Knops treats us to a creative piece about Castor and Pollux (page 10); and Poppy Williams turns to Rome to look at augury and haruspicy (page 14). Plus, don't forget to have a stab at our Classical Crossword for a chance to win a copy of *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome* by Chris Scarre! The deadline is **Saturday 13 December**.

As ever, our writers have put in a great deal of hard work and passion for the ancient world, and I hope you enjoy reading this as much as we have enjoyed bringing it together.

Declan Boyd, Editor 🏺

The horses of Patroclus

SOPHIE BASSANO

***Akhilleus' Horses*, by Constantine P. Cavafy (transl. Evan Jones)**

The horses saw that Patroklus
was dead, the powerful, courageous
youth, and they began to snort;
these immortal creatures grew furious
in full sight of Death's work.
They tossed their heads, shook their hooves, mourning
Patroklus, seeing him lifeless, collapsed,
his earthy form disgraced, spirit gone,
returned to the great Nothing,
defenceless and breathless.

Zeus turned to see the tears
of the undying horses, heart bursting.
'At Peleus' wedding,' he said, 'it was rash,
you were presented too eagerly, poor
horses. Why are you wandering
among the arrogant humans – prey to fate?
No death, no aging await you,
only torture by the short-lived, the mistaken.
Humans draw you into suffering.' This did nothing.
The two noble beasts continued to grieve
for the endless tragedy that is death.

'Although he was mortal, he went with immortal horses.' – Homer, *Iliad* 16.154

The death of Patroclus (Patroklus) is a decisive moment in the *Iliad*. Most simply, it serves to spur on the wrath – the *menis* – of Achilles (Akhilleus), which will necessitate his return to battle and his killing of Hector, whose funeral concludes the epic. On another level, his death provides a fertile moment of reflection on the tensions that arise between immortal and mortal existences.

The epic explores this through a contrast between the undying (*athanatoi*) gods and the mortals whose deaths are numerous. Homer also provides an introspective glimpse of what it is for a human to contemplate their mortality. Achilles knows that he will either live a long life without eternal glory (*kleos*) or a short one that ensures his name lives on forever after him.

In *Akhilleus' Horses*, twentieth-century Greek poet Cavafy gives a version of a scene from Book 17 of the *Iliad* in which Achilles' immortal horses Xanthus and Balius are immobilised as they witness the death of Patroclus. Their incapacitation is so great that they require Zeus to renew their strength so that they may return to the ships, carrying Achilles'

Henri Regnault, *Automedon with the Horses of Achilles* (1868)

charioteer Automedon back to safety. I believe that, though the Iliadic scene is itself not lengthy, Cavafy condenses it to its fundamental message.

Dinos (wine-cup) depicting the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, painted by Sophilos *c.* 580-570 BCE

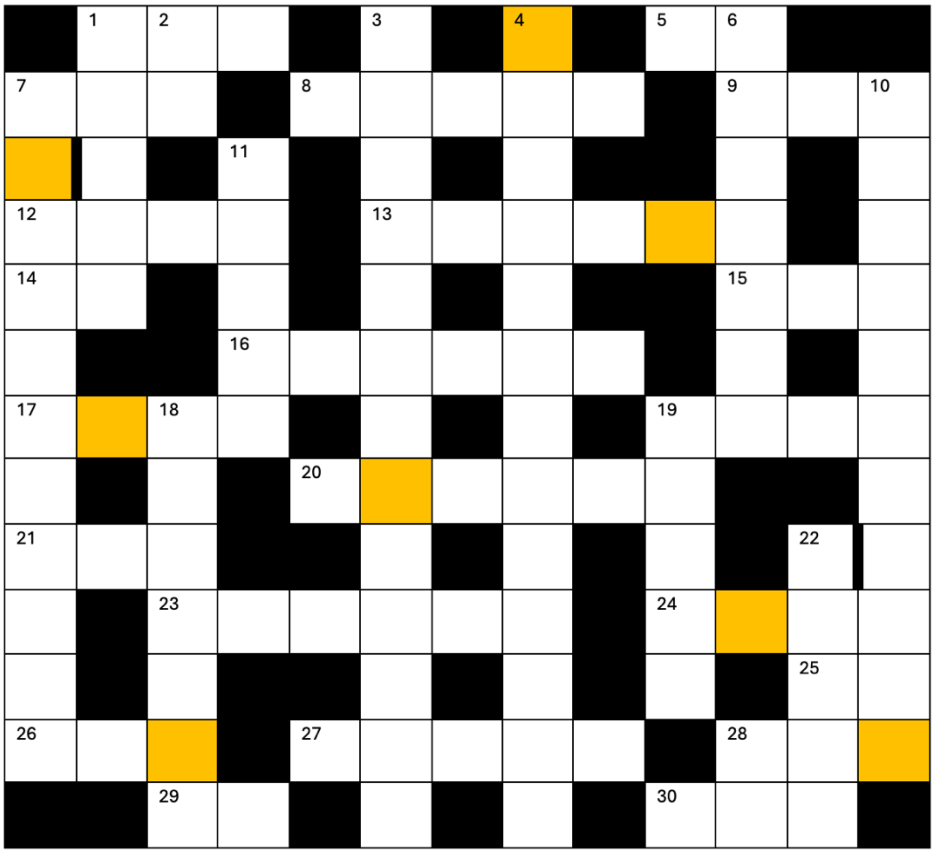
The horses are depicted grieving, just as mortal characters often do in the *Iliad* – and in ancient epic and tragedy more broadly. Their grief is physical: although, being horses, they cannot pull at their hair or befoul their bodies, they are able to shake their heads in distress or wave their hooves. Notably, Homer deploys a simile comparing the horses to 'a grave monument (*stele*) which is set upon the tomb of a dead man or woman', as they remain motionless and sombre. Cavafy replaces this statuesque incapacitation with a corporeal, earthly form of grieving that more closely resembles that of human characters, whose physical and performative mourning is an outward display of their internal state. Immortals typically have no need of such a social practice, for their world exists by and large separately from death and the processes of bereavement.

And yet this separation can never be absolute when mortal-immortal relationships come into play, as is highlighted by Cavafy's reference to Peleus. Achilles' immortal, unageing mother Thetis knows that her mortal husband Peleus will die soon, having reached his old age; she must live through his death. She knows, too, that Achilles himself will also die soon. The house of Peleus is wrought with lamentation, amplified by the fact that the lament of the horses and of Thetis for Achilles and for Peleus will last as long as their unending lives will.

Cavafy's 'endless tragedy that is death' may be interpreted as the continuous cycle of death and life, expressed by Homer's famous simile in *Iliad* 6: 'Just like the generation of leaves is that of men. The wind scatters leaves on the ground, but the flourishing timber bears them still, and the hour of spring comes again: just so does one generation of men come forth while another passes away.' But it may also, and perhaps more compellingly, be interpreted as the ceaselessness of their own pain due to their immortality. Though it may dwindle, it will never wholly leave them.

Cavafy deals with the fact that immortals are not unaffected by death. They are not immune to the emotional response that death elicits. In some ways, it affects them more strongly, as their grief is not confined to a mortal lifespan. Though they may delay it, they cannot stop it. Even Zeus, in Book 16 of the *Iliad*, knows that it is wrong to intervene with fate's command that his son Sarpedon must die. These horses of Achilles, these gifts of the gods, are a reminder that the divine sphere can never be completely free from the impact of human affairs. 🏺

Classical Crossword



Use the letters in the orange boxes to find the hidden word. Then email this word to lsaclassics@gmail.com by **Saturday 13 December** and one entry will be picked at random to win a copy of *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome* by Chris Scarre!

Across

1 Type of tree beneath which the she-wolf suckled Romulus and Remus (3)
5 One-tenth (later one-sixteenth) of a denarius (2) **7** Roman history book by Tom Holland (3)
8 Gift of honour in the Homeric world (5) **9** *Caecilius* ___ *in horto* (3) **12** Sister of Dido (4)
13 Trojan wife of Aeneas (6) **14** Egyptian sun-god (2) **15** Rustic Greek goat deity (3)
16 Achaean or Argive (6) **17** ____ Larentia, wife of the shepherd who reared Romulus and Remus (4)
19 Mountain situated between Pelion and Olympus (4) **20** Greek word for terror; son of Ares (6)
21 In *Iliad* 11, Agamemnon receives a serious wound to his ___ (3) **22** Bronze Age civilisation on Crete (6)
24 City in Apulia founded by Diomedes (4) **26** Egyptian god of the air, married to Tefnut (3)
27 Twin goddesses of dread in *Aeneid* 12 (5) **28** Number of complete surviving satyr plays (3)
29 Egyptian hieroglyph standing for protection, depicted as a rolled-up reed mat or a knot (2)
30 ___ Pacis = Altar of Peace (3)

Down

1 Feminine form of 15 Across – in Rome (5) **2** Number of Athenian archons elected annually – in Roman numerals (2)
3 Gallic chieftain defeated by Julius Caesar (13) **4** Spartan (13) **6** God combining aspects of Osiris and Apis (7)
7 Persian satrap who may have been responsible for the death of Alcibiades (11)
10 Gallia Narbonensis = _____ Gaul (11) **11** Chief Persian god, _____ Mazda (5)
18 Appointed king of the Gallic Atrebates tribe by Julius Caesar (7)
19 Sabellic language spoken in central and southern ancient Italy (5)
22 'Backbone' of a Roman chariot-racing circus (5) **23** *Aut* or *vel* in Latin (2)

Fertility cults in ancient Greece

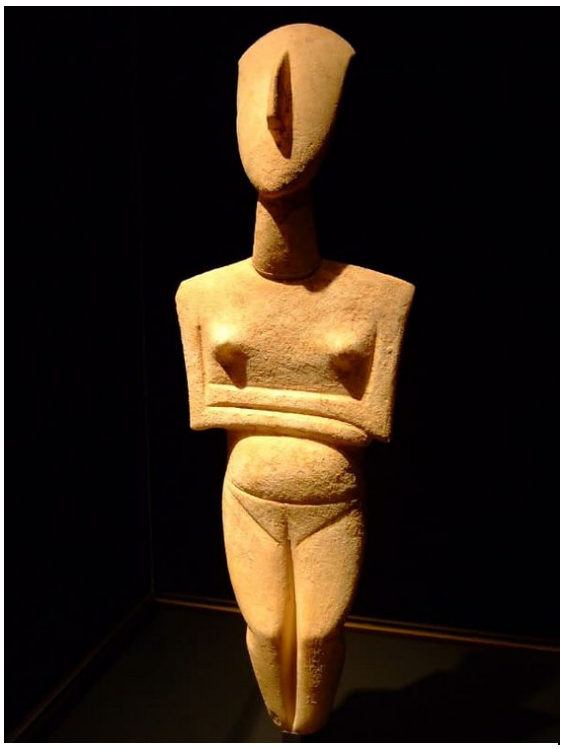
ANNA HUNTER

Fertility occupied a very important place both practically and ritually in the ancient Greek world and beyond. For men, it was one of the key traits valued in a woman: the ability to provide her husband with heirs, continuing his line and bringing glory to the family. This explains why women married young, ensuring they could conceive as soon as they were able.

This patriarchal approach, however, has disguised the way women themselves approached fertility. Archaeology shows that fertility was much more than a desired trait in a wife, and that from the beginning of the Neolithic world it has been something worthy of worship and appreciation – a gift from the gods. This divine importance and the lack of scientific knowledge about conception paved the way for cults around fertility to emerge. Celebrations of fertility were a chance for women to band together and celebrate, with festivals like the Thesmophoria excluding men and thus granting women the freedom to behave however they liked outside of the oppressive male gaze. Cultic approaches to fertility thus offer a key insight into the lives of women across Greek history and the way they used fertility as an expression of self.

The Early Bronze Age (*c.* 3200-*c.* 2000 BCE)

Our key focus in this period when thinking about fertility must be the Cyclades (a group of islands including Mykonos, Delos and Thasos situated in the south-west of the Aegean). On these islands, archeologists have found hundreds of marble statues, ranging from the Late Neolithic period to the Early Bronze Age and all following a very similar formula. The statues depict a nude woman with heavy emphasis on the reproductive organs and, in many cases, a swollen stomach. These details all suggest that these statues represent women who are either pregnant or have recently given birth; the statues typically lack faces and any other distinguishing features outside of these elements. The focus being then not on the individuals but on traits associated with pregnancy (and, by association, fertility) demonstrates the centrality of this concept to the beliefs behind the creation of the statues.



Cycladic female figurine, *c.* 2400 BCE

The number of these statues found and their widespread presence, often being found in groups or grave contexts, implies some form of cult function. There are similarities between

Votives left for Asclepius
This Photo by the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth is licensed under CC BY.

the theorised function of these statues and later terracotta statuettes found in shrines, such as body parts in sanctuaries of the healing god Asclepius, which were votive offerings (gifts) to the deity intended to thank him or ask for a favour. Similarly, votives could be placed in a burial to offer protection to the deceased. The fact we find many statues in close proximity in the Cyclades suggests that these may have been deposits of such votives and that the sites where they are found were perhaps sites of cultic significance. As with the votives offered to Asclepius, the Cycladic statues could function as a thanks for conceiving or a prayer to do so.

Though we unfortunately lack any written evidence of a deity associated with fertility in this period, these statues are evidence of some kind of cult activity involving statue deposits. There is a huge variety in sizes, which attests to the widespread nature of this worship – people of all means across the Cycladic islands could make a dedication, which explains the variety of skill in the carving, sizes and materials. People made dedications within their means, and the fact they made dedications at all shows a desire to honour fertility.

These statuettes exemplify how emphasis on female reproductive anatomy in early Greek art might suggest cult practice relating to fertility. These aspects of women were seen as desirable enough to be depicted in religious art and left as dedications, and thus worthy of a following. In turn, women gained some power through this – they alone possessed the ability to carry a child, so by honouring female capabilities this cult proved the importance of women in the ancient world in a way men could not dismiss.

The 'Dark Ages' (*c.* 1050-*c.* 800 BCE)

As is typical of the so-called Dark Ages, there is limited evidence for cults, women and fertility during this time – written or archaeological. What we do know, however, is that by this stage there was an established cult of Persephone and Demeter centered around the idea of motherhood and the importance of the bond between mother and daughter. While this may not initially seem to be about fertility, the fact that so much importance is

Relief from Eleusis depicting (from left to right) Demeter, Triptolemus and Persephone, *c.* 27 BCE-14 CE

placed on motherhood and the sacred role of a mother's love for her daughter implicitly puts a lot of importance on her ability to conceive.

This cult shows the importance of women as central to survival; without the bond between Demeter and Persephone the seasons that harvests rely on would not revolve in their natural course. Fertile land was intrinsically linked to female familial relationships, and the establishment of these relationships depended entirely on female fertility.

The archaic period (*c.* 800-480 BCE)

We come now to the cult of Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth, whose worship in the archaic period was particularly prominent in Sparta, alongside the cult of Artemis Orthia. Even to Spartan men, childbirth was recognised as one of the most honourable things a woman could achieve in her life; it was Spartan law (according to Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*) that only those who died in battle, religious office or childbirth could be buried with a marked tombstone. Fertility and childbirth were clearly significant to the Spartan population generally, so it is no wonder that there was a designated space for women to celebrate it.

This space was the cult of Eileithyia. The goddess is depicted as powerful and vengeful in some myths because of her closeness with her mother Hera, on whose orders she would delay or speed up births in order to harm illegitimate children of Zeus and their mothers. Women therefore depended on Eileithyia for a safe and successful birth, and Spartan women left many dedications to her at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. Under orders from the Delphic oracle, a shrine dedicated to Eileithyia was constructed later in this period near to Artemis' shrine. The association of Eileithyia and Artemis stems from Artemis' own role in childbirth, having helped her mother Leto give birth to her twin Apollo. The female presence at her sanctuary shows how fertility and its worship opened up opportunities for forming communities of women, as it gave them an excuse to go to these temples and worship alongside other women.

These cults similarly needed priests, which opened an opportunity for women beyond their usual role as wives. During the classical period, a key location for this worship was a cave in Mount Kronion in Olympia. Pausanias records how these priestesses had to live in chastity, remaining virgins their whole life as an act of service to the goddess.

Festivals were a very common practice that gave women an excuse to gather, and this cult was no different. Eileithyia's festival on Delos was another opportunity to honour fertility with hymns and dedications, including small terracotta figures of children. Callimachus even records a hymn commonly invoked during labour to ease pain by a direct appeal to Eileithyia.

The classical period (480-323 BCE)

By the classical period, festivals in relation to both crops and people had grown in importance and were carried out far and wide. One such celebration had evolved into a female-only event (which it may well have been prior to this, though we have no definitive evidence) where the wives of citizens (in Athens, and women of similar elite status across Greece) joined together, with men being legally excluded. This was the Thesmophoria – three days of secret rituals to honour Demeter and Persephone. The most important of these days for our purposes is the final day, the Kalligeneia. Kalligeneia can be literally translated to 'Fair Birth'; this day was when the women prayed to a nymph of the same name for their own fertility and

A scene from Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* on an Apulian *krater*, *c*. 370 BCE

successful births, making sacrifices and dedications to give them as much chance as possible to achieve divine favour.

This festival was so well-known (it was practised across approximately 50 cities around the ancient Mediterranean) that Athenian playwright Aristophanes put it at the centre of one of his comedies – *Thesmophoriazusae* (*Women at the Thesmophoria*). This demonstrates the power this cult had for women: the comedy follows a group of men trying to sneak into the festival because they worry about what the women are doing without male supervision, not wanting them to upset the natural order of their male-dominated world. This cult therefore created a space for women to honour their own abilities but also, if they so desired, share opinions and ideas they could not express at home.

Conclusion

This spotlight on some of the key groups is only the tip of the iceberg of these cults. Fertility cults appeared because of societal emphasis on the role of women as mothers, responsible for bearing and raising children. They represent the female desire to have their own groups, aside from the male gaze, where they could celebrate their achievements and the strength of their own bodies. The women accepted the role designated to them but used it to establish a community of peers under the name of fertility deities. As Aristophanes shows us, these cults offered women a space to share feelings and bond with their peers in a way that was often (in the idealising minds of Greek men, at least) lacking in the everyday lives of women. Thus, as well as being an expression of feminine power, proving to men the necessity of women to their own survival, these cults were a way for women to build friendships and were integral to the female social sphere in the ancient Greek world. 🏺

LSA CA presents...

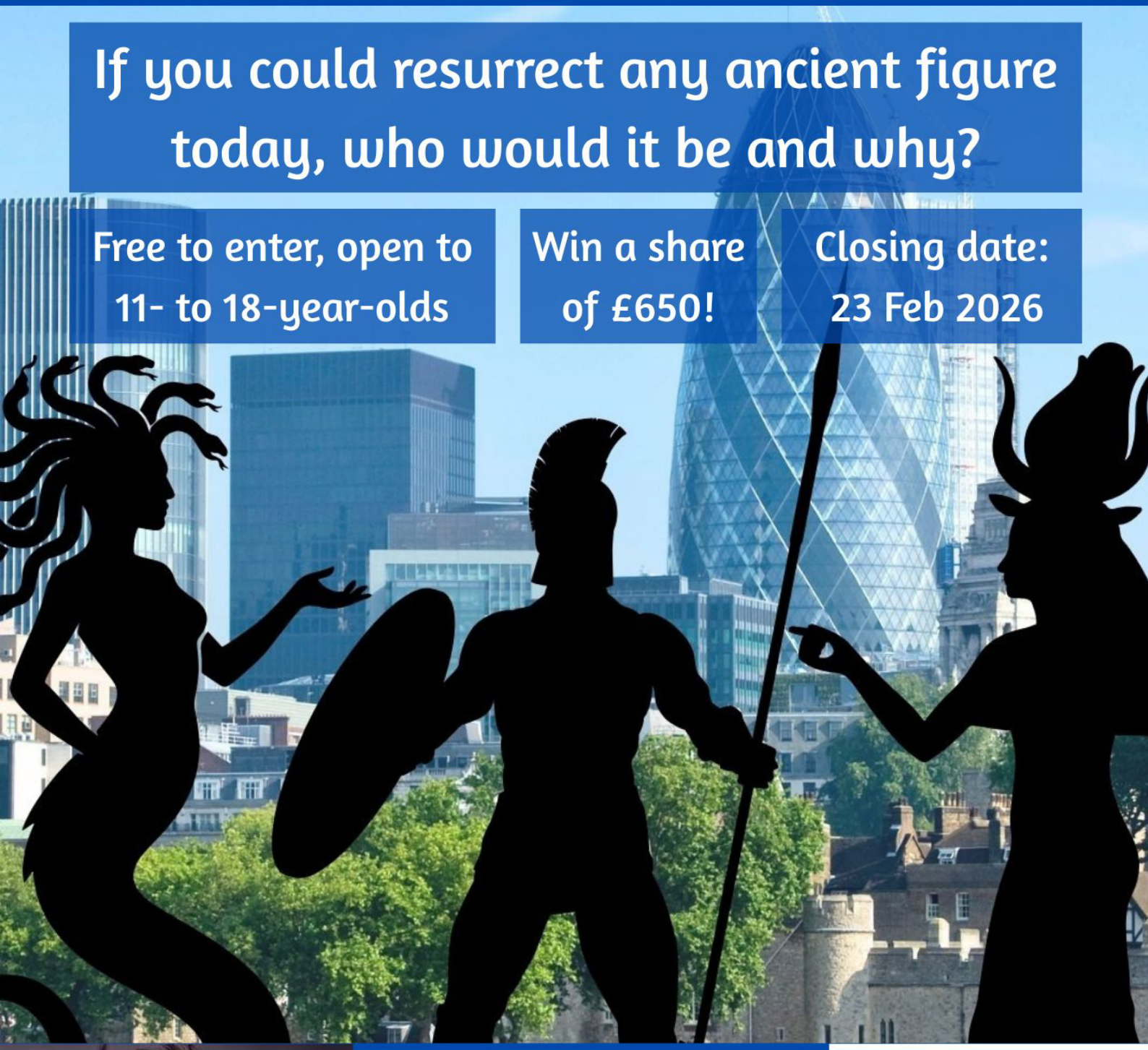
Ancient Worlds Competition 2026

If you could resurrect any ancient figure today, who would it be and why?

Free to enter, open to 11- to 18-year-olds

Win a share of £650!

Closing date: 23 Feb 2026



Our judge:
Charlie Covell
Writer and Actor
Creator of the Netflix series *Kaos*

Find out more

The making of the Dioscuri twins

ISABELLE KNOPS

It had been years since Castor's death and his *rebirth*. Too many years since he had last seen his brother. They communicated through messages passed on by Hermes and sometimes other deities. But it was useless; Pollux was a stranger to him. Where Pollux enjoyed himself in both realms, seemingly happy without his twin, Castor had turned to wine – though it did little to appease his mind and calm the storm in his head. Another thing immortality had stolen from him: sweet oblivion.

'You may want to slow down a bit,' Dionysus chuckled as he took the empty seat next to Castor.

'Says the god of wine?' Castor countered, not bothering to look up.

'Says our brother.'

'Pollux asked you to babysit me? How lovely. Trying to keep up with his promises once more?'

'Actually,' Dionysus tutted, 'that would be my last bottle of that particular harvest. He asked me to save it for his wedding.'

'Of course, the wedding.' It was said to be the wedding of the season, rumoured to rival that of Peleus and Thetis, but hopefully less dramatic. 'Heard Eris got an invitation.'

'Now, now – there's no need to be so sullen. Let me just take that bottle, and we can go find ourselves some nymphs and…'

'He should have let us both die, you know. This is no way of living. Better together in the underworld than split across the universe. That way I could at least attend the wedding.'

'Hey, hey, listen to me.' Dionysus snapped his fingers. 'He's talking to our dad. And it looks like he may sway things in your favour – making you the best man. How about that?!'

'How nice. I'll drink to that.' Castor raised the bottle of wine to his lips.

'Come on, give the guy a break. He's trying, he really is. But there's only so much he can do.'

'Should have thought this through before he made that call. A call that wasn't his to make.'

'You may not remember what happened back then, but he was devastated when you died. He thought he was doing the right thing.'

Pollux smelled copper instead of honey when he buried his face into Castor's curls. It was an act which once upon a time, back when they had been mere children wielding wooden swords, would have brought comfort, but the wound inflicted by Idas's spear was unlike the splinters left by the worn wood of their favourite childhood toys. Pollux was no healer, but even he knew that the blow had been lethal. He had seen men die from less, and yet his brother bravely clung to what little time they had left.

Castor's will to live served as a cruel reminder of how easily a life could be extinguished; his father's golden blood had made Pollux ignorant, reckless.

Pollux's muddled mind couldn't make sense of the situation. One moment they had been joking, congratulating each other on a successful cattle heist, and the next Castor had been struck down by Idas's spear.

'Don't worry, sweet brother mine,' he said, comforting Castor, and himself. 'I will make this right.' Slowly he rose, his movement mindful of Castor's trembling form as he breathed his final breaths. 'He will suffer for what he did. Blood for blood.'

'Pollux…' Idas's voice was weary and pained. Castor had managed to leave a mark of his own: a panicked slash to the shoulder. 'Let's end this. We've both lost a brother…' His eyes trailed over to Lynceus' limp form, eyes staring blankly at him. 'The blood oath has been paid.'

Pollux shook his head. 'It has not. It was you who took him by surprise. You who struck the final blow. It is my right to take your life, as it is yours to take mine. I'd rather we settle it here and now. I won't have you stab me in the back while I sleep.'

'Pol–'

'Raise your spear.'

'I'm wounded. You're not. It wouldn't be a fair fight,' Idas spluttered in response.

A raspy chuckle escaped Pollux. 'Fairness? Of all people, *you* complain about fairness? Was it not you who tricked us into an eating competition, gaining a win for yourself through your cheating?'

'I finished the food before either you or Castor could–'

'Exactly,' Pollux interrupted. '*You*, when it should have been Lynceus too. Then it would have been fair. But sure, let's make this fight between the two of us equal. I won't be the son to bring dishonour to my father's name, nor will I be known as a fraud.'

With those words Pollux cut himself, mirroring the wound his brother had left on their cursed cousin.

'You–' Idas started to protest once more.

'Raise your spear. I don't want to repeat myself.'

'You speak of honour, and yet you have the advantage as a son of Zeus. I'm merely the son of a mortal king. No matter what you do, the fight won't be fair, even with that shallow cut. All I'll be doing is stalling the inevitable.'

'Stop complaining and get into a fighting position!'

'Pollux, please be reasonable.'

'Was ambushing Castor reasonable?' Pollux demanded. 'I suppose,' he bristled, 'with him being the mortal twin it was the reasonable thing to do, instead of facing me.

Idas spat into the dirt. 'You shouldn't have taken the cattle. We won it fairly, it was never agreed that two had to finish the food together. We were within our rights to challenge the thief.'

'*Thief*,' Pollux huffed with a shake of his head. 'Challenge, yes, but not kill. Not without an official conviction.'

A conviction both Idas and Pollux knew would never have been proclaimed.

Pollux hissed as the point of Idas's spear pierced the skin of his left thigh. He should have expected the low attack, should have parried it easily, but he was too upset, unable to focus, and as a result careless in his defence. His left heel caught on a rock as he staggered backwards in an attempt to deflect Idas's renewed attack.

Idas was determined, vicious even with his attacks, not giving Pollux a moment to collect himself. His movements slowed only for a few seconds as the side of his spear met Pollux's blade. Instead of pulling back and defending himself, Idas slid his spear along the blade and plunged the point deep into Pollux's chest.

Pollux couldn't stop staring at the spear protruding from his chest. Coldness was starting to spread through his body, numbing his limbs one by one. He had never felt anything like it.

'You should have listened to me – I didn't want it to come to this.' Idas's words seemed hollow, untrue. 'But you have left me no choice.' He finished through heavy breaths as he tried to pull the spear free, but Pollux continued to hold onto it with what little strength he had left. 'Both your and your brother's memory will live on in dishonour.'

Idas's words had struck a chord. Pollux was not in the habit of begging for anything, but he couldn't permit their lives to have meant nothing. 'Father,' he whispered, 'if you're listening, please…' He paused to catch his breath. 'I beg of you, help me. Us.' He groaned as the spear was wrenched from his body.

It was a second chance, in a way…

'Everything will be alright.'

'Are you certain?' Castor asked nervously. They had never spent time apart, and now one of them would inhabit the Underworld while the other roamed the halls of Olympus.

'No need to be nervous.'

'I don't know if I can do this on my own. I'm not one of them.'

Pollux pulled Castor into a tight embrace. 'You won't be alone. I'll be there to guide you, and tomorrow it will be your turn to have my back.'

Castor had been a lost soul when he had first arrived on Olympus. It had been Dionysus who had taken pity on him, the twin to his half-brother.

'I only remembered waking up confused, unsure of what had happened. And just like that I was on my own living on Olympus.'

'You were just a kid. It's understandable that you were overwhelmed.'

'You welcomed me, took me under your wing.'

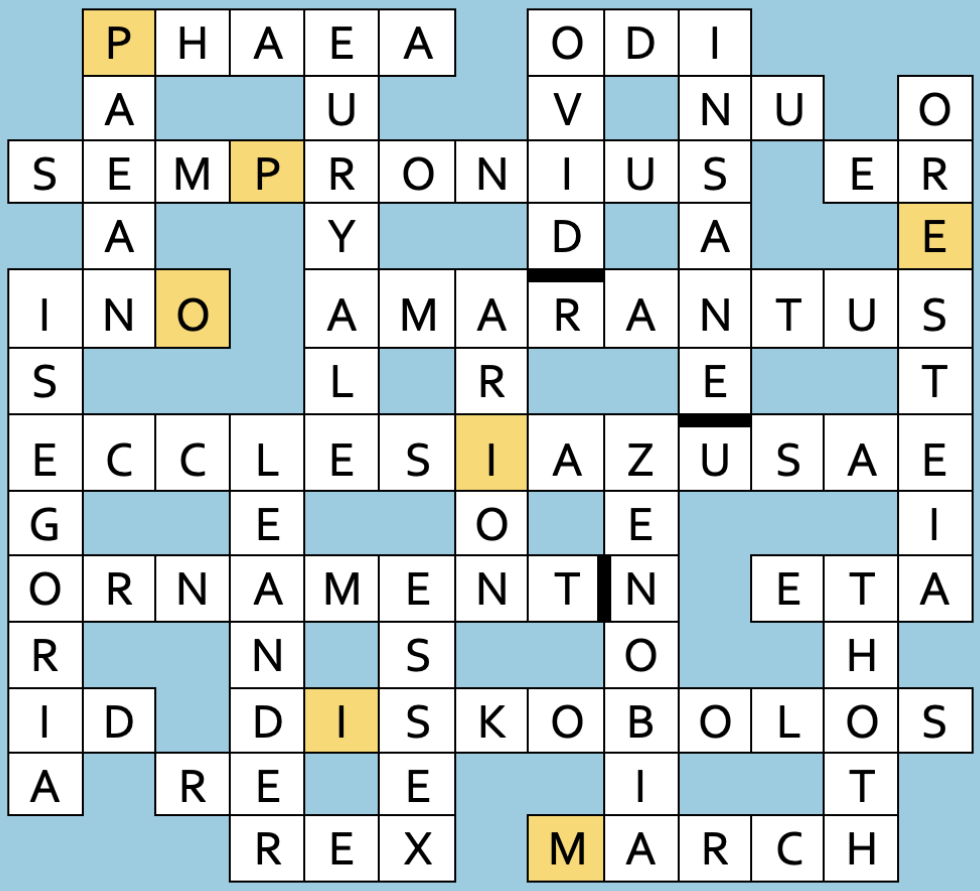
'And I probably wasn't the best person to do that – not when you were grieving for him. Should have left it to Athena: her reasoning would have been better. But I honestly thought that revelry would snap you out of your misery.'

'It did – for a bit,' Castor admitted. 'Until I remembered that I wouldn't be able to share it with the person most important to me.'

'I'm sure Dad will agree to let you attend the wedding,' Dionysus said softly.

'I hope you're right.'

Agora 12 Crossword Answers



And the hidden word was… POMPEII!!!

LSA CA PRESENTS

CLASSICS CLUB

Looking for an opportunity to learn more and chat about a range of Classics topics? Look no further – we've got you covered!

Wherever you're based, everyone is welcome to join our new **Classics Club**, led by our Outreach Officer Declan. The idea is to offer a space for relaxed and friendly discussions about a themes or topics chosen in advance.

Sessions are held on Zoom and free for all to attend. If you're interested in joining, please email us at lsaclassics@gmail.com. We look forward to hopefully seeing you at one of our sessions soon!

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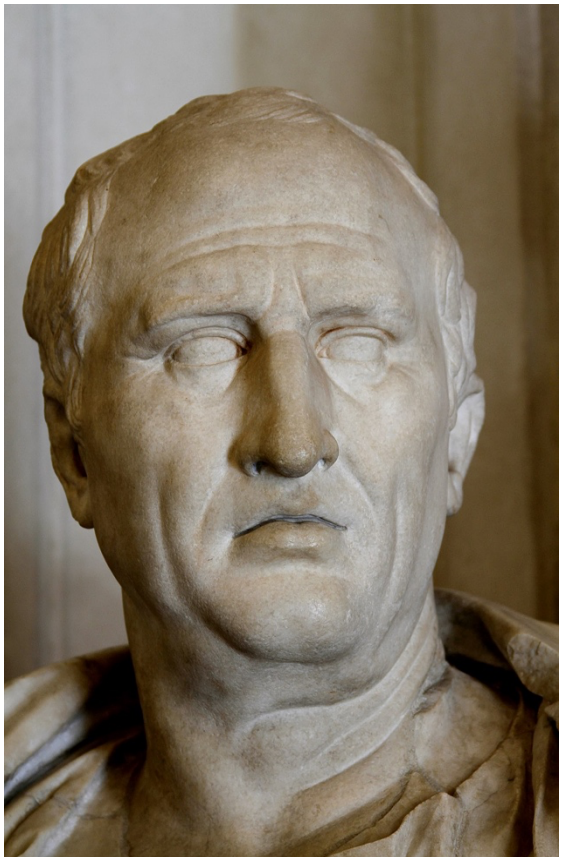
Modern magic? An investigation into Roman divination

POPPY WILLIAMS

Cicero begins his *De Divinatione* (*On Divination*) by asserting that 'there is an old belief, passed down to the present from the age of heroes, which is firmly maintained by the consensus of the Roman people and of all nations, that some kind of divination exists among the human race'. That is to say, the Romans believed that there were ways of foreseeing future events, interpreting signs to understand the will of the gods. While many today would deem this fictitious, or the work of psychics and tarot readers, the Romans saw this as a profound belief in which they particularly excelled. But how can we, as modern readers, understand Roman divination? To do this, we must take a deeper look at Roman religion, which took on a form far different from that of religion today.

To begin, I shall go back even before the foundation of the Roman Republic, to the acquisition of the Sibylline Books. Their history is somewhat obscure: some sources posit that they were acquired during the reign of Rome's fifth king, Tarquinius Priscus (reigned 616-578 BCE), whereas other sources claim it was during the reign of the seventh, Tarquinius Superbus (reigned 534-509 BCE). They were sold to the king by a sibyl (from which the books aptly took their name) and their exact contents have since remained a mystery. However, historians can make an educated guess towards the contents of the Sibylline Books: they were likely predictions, or rather directions on how to appease the gods. After they came into the king's possession, they were kept below the ground in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus and were guarded by two officers, later increasing to fifteen. However, if any of the keepers ever divulged the secrets contained within the books, they were immediately put to death - and so it is understandable why their contents are lost!



Bust of Cicero, first century BCE

All hope for historians wanting to know the contents was lost in 82 BCE when the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus was burnt and the Books alongside it. Although Augustus sought to make fresh collections by consulting sibyls throughout the Mediterranean, many forgeries went into public circulation. Therefore, Augustus ordered the copies

deemed to be fakes to be burned and those that were seen as containing the true contents of the original Sibylline Books were placed back under lock and key under the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus.

The Roman king receiving the Sibylline Books (1912 illustration)

It's all well and good for me to describe the story of the Sibylline Books, but if their true contents are unknown, what is their relevance to Roman divination? Despite not knowing to which king the books belonged, we do know that they were an essential component in Roman religious thought from at least the sixth century to the first century BCE, or else Augustus would not have made such a dedicated effort to make fresh collections. I argue that their contents acted as the literary basis for Roman religion and thus acted as the blueprint for these divinatory practices. The object of Roman religion was to ensure the *pax deorum*, the peace of the gods, and divination therefore sought to understand the will of the gods. This would likely have been set out in the Sibylline Books and was believed to help the Romans decide their best course of action. With a brief history now set out on the early sources of divination, I will next delve into the two main methods of divination, which, to the modern audience, conjure up various images of magic and ancient witchcraft: these were augury and haruspicy.

Augurs were Roman religious officials whose primary duty was to interpret whether the gods approved or disapproved of the current course of action. You might imagine the modern magician conjuring doves from their sleeves – at least, this is similar to what I envisioned when I first encountered the practice of bird augury. Whilst this mental image proved not quite accurate, the practice of reading the actions of birds to interpret the gods' will is certainly, although not literally, still a magical one. This Graeco-Roman practice involved analysing the behaviour of birds (auspices) as divine omens, whether positive or negative (providing our English words 'auspicious' and 'inauspicious'). Before any major decision or conflict, the augurs would be called upon to read the auspices to interpret which outcome the gods favoured. If the gods showed a lack of favour in the auspices, this would often suggest that the Romans should not proceed with their current course of action. If only this actually worked - it would save us much time and energy! But, alas, we can only dream…

Divination played an intimate role not only in the everyday lives of Romans but also in official senatorial and military decisions. But, as is human nature, augurs would sometimes deliver pronouncements intended to influence official decisions to their own personal will.

I was first introduced to haruspicy through the practice of 'reading the liver' (I must stress that this was a first-year Roman history lecture, not a personal experience!), a practice in which the Romans determined the gods' will by examining the entrails of animals. Haruspicy

became the favoured method of divination at the time when Cicero was writing, and during the Roman Empire was placed under the category of augury, which became a larger umbrella-term for divination practices. As augurs were trained for augury, a haruspex was trained to practice haruspicy.

The entrails of animals supposedly contained numerous signs which indicated the will of the gods. For example, a liver in general good condition with an easily identifiable 'head' was seen as favourable (auspicious). However, any blemishes or a 'head' that was not visible were perceived as negative (inauspicious) signs. The practice of haruspicy originated with the Etruscans (a people situated around modern-day Tuscany), who brought this method of divination to the attention of the Romans. This history was never forgotten, as the Senate would later go on to decree that it should be a group of young Etruscans who would provide the service of haruspicy to the state, being seen as the most reliable source.

With the tragic loss of the original Sibylline Books, on which the Roman aristocracy relied on during times of crisis, the Romans had to promote experts to the offices of augur and haruspex. To return to the quote with which I began, Cicero exemplifies how vital divination practices came to be in Rome, explaining that it was a practice 'passed down to the present from the age of heroes'. This 'age of heroes', though considered largely mythical today, was viewed by the Romans as true history – they firmly believed that they were descendants of Aeneas and his companions, for example. Therefore, despite Cicero's apparent admission of their origin in myth, many Romans were devout believers in these divination practices and considered them to have been reliable throughout their whole history.

Roman divination comprised an array of practices we would today view as nonsensical. However, it is clear that this was an integral part of daily Roman life, playing a huge role in personal and national decision making. I do not argue that there was any truth in these practices, but I do suggest that, if there were, this would be an incredible form of magic in our modern world: to know my fate (though preferably not by looking at the insides of dead animals) would be an incredible ability that would, I am sure others would agree, have saved us a lot of trouble throughout history. But what I think truly *is* magical is the human connection which passed down these practices for centuries. People would have been taught and trained with the hope of being able to provide divine guidance. To me, this illustrates a truly beautiful form of connection. Although these religious offices saw corruption through false augury and haruspicy readings, the devout belief in this interaction with the divine made ancient Rome a truly magical world. 🏺

Romulus and Remus using augury to determine the site of Rome, 1573-75 etching

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