



Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks

Esther Eidinow

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How did ancient Greek men and women deal with the uncertainty and risk of everyday life? What did they fear most, and how did they manage their anxieties? Esther Eidinow sets side-by-side two collections of material usually studied in isolation: binding curse tablets from across the ancient world, and the collection of published private questions from the oracle at Dodona in north-west Greece. Eidinow uses these texts to explore perceptions of risk and uncertainty in ancient society, challenging previous explanations.

In these records we hear voices that are rarely, if ever, heard in literary texts and history books. The questions and curses in these tablets comprise fervent, sometimes ferocious appeals to the gods. The stories they tell offer tantalizing glimpses of everyday life, carrying the reader through the teeming ancient city -- both its physical setting and its social dynamics. Among these tablets we find prostitutes and publicans, doctors and soldiers, netmakers and silver-workers, actors and seamstresses. Anxious litigants ask the gods to silence their opponents. Men inquire about the paternity of their children. Women beg the gods to help them keep their men. Business rivals try to corner the market. Slaves plead to escape their masters.

This material takes us beyond the headlines of ancient history, offering new insights into institutions, activities, and relationships. Above all, individually and together, these texts help us to understand some of the ways in which ancient Greek men and women understood the world. In turn, the beliefs and activities of an ancient culture may shed light on modern attitudes to risk.

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