

SUMMARY

Ancient palmomancy

Palmomancy was an ancient technique of divination whose aim was to predict future through involuntary bodily movements. From the vast amount of literature written about this topic in antiquity only five treatises have been preserved, the linguistic and intellectual level of which is rather disappointing. Educated writers have not found the matter worth of much attention. There is but one attempt to explain the movements with the help of Aristotle's explanation of cough. A number of elements seem to have contributed to the development of the technique: attribution of magical functions to various bodily parts (later systematized as physiognomy), or of divinatory significance to some bodily expressions (coughing, itching etc.); medical theories of doctors who since the time of Hippocrates used movement of bodily parts and organs (heart, belly) as diagnostic means; systematized interpretations of omens in popular handbooks of divination. It was a vulgar technique used by slaves, soldiers and women and associated with strata of society where religion was intermingled with magic and superstition. In the Middle East, the technique was known as early as the 14th century B. C. E., but there is no evidence that Greeks and Romans adopted it from there. Greek influence is detectable in later European and Arabic palmomantic literature, but it is surprisingly scarce.