

5 Risk and the humanities

Alea iacta est

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Introduction

In a series of paintings from the walls of a bar in Pompeii – painted sometime in the ten years before Vesuvius erupted in AD 79 – is a scene of two Roman men playing a game of chance (Figure 5.1). They have a board between them balanced on their knees, and we can just about make out some counters on it. The man on the left has just been shaking the dice in a shaker, and, in the ‘speech bubble’ above his head, he is claiming a winning throw. ‘I’ve won’, he shouts (‘Exsi’ in Latin). ‘No’, says his partner and opponent, ‘it’s not a three, it’s a two’ (‘Non tria, duas est’).

The other paintings in the series show other activities you might expect to find going on in a bar: drinking, brawling, sex and flirtation (Figure 5.2). In fact, it is a line-up of exactly the kind of things that Roman puritans (who saw an obvious connection between alcohol, sex and dice-games) were very keen on deploring. It is perhaps hardly surprising that in the next painting (and so in the final episode of this little visual narrative), the game is leading to blows. Although the panel is badly damaged, it is clear enough that the two men have left the table and are trading insults in some almost incomprehensible speech bubbles. What we *can* understand is predictably rude: ‘Look here cock-sucker (*fellator*) I was the winner.’ Almost completely lost is the figure of the long-suffering landlord (or alternatively the hard-nosed supremo of the gambling den, depending on how we choose to see him). But his speech bubble survives. He is saying, as landlords have said for thousands of years: ‘If you want to fight, get outside’ (‘itis foras rixsatis’).¹

¹ Clarke 2007: 120–5.

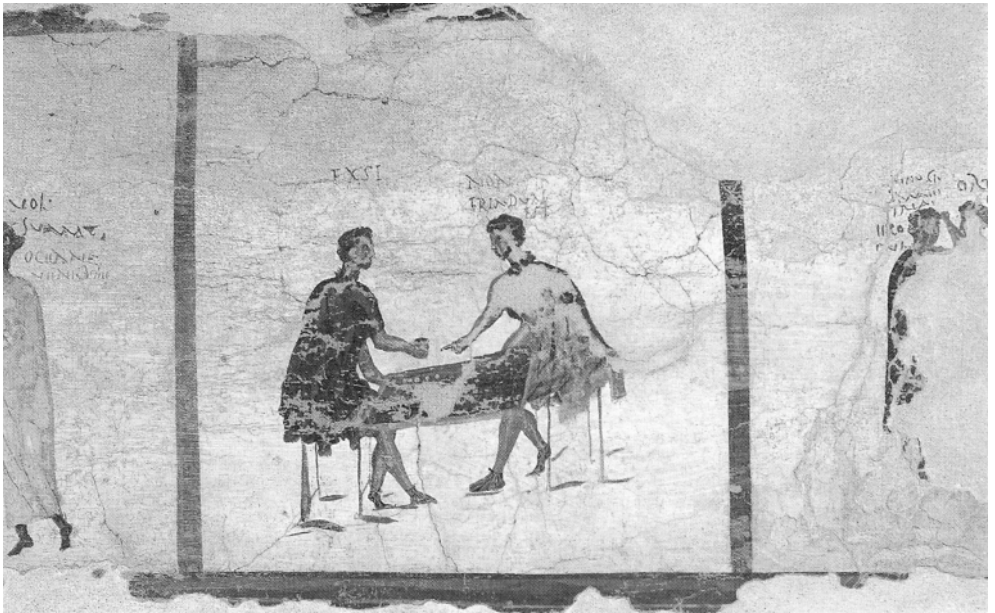


FIGURE 5.1 A game of dice from the painting on the wall of the 'Inn of Salvius' in Pompeii (now in the National Archaeological Museum, Naples). First century AD.

The scene is both familiar *and* deeply unfamiliar to us. It is familiar because we too are used to making that association between sex, violence, seedy drinking dens and the throw of the dice. But there is a much less familiar world here of danger, chance, uncertainty and what we (but not they) would call 'risk', whose principles I want to explore. No gamblers in ancient Rome, whatever their rough and ready common sense, would have formally conceptualised the idea that a six-sided dice had an equal, one in six, chance of landing on each of its six sides (perhaps, of course, given the irregularity of many ancient dice, they did not). And of course, when this pair left the bar and saw their local mountain puffing out smoke, they certainly did not engage in our kind of calculations of disaster planning; they might not even have sniffed risk or danger at all.

I am concerned with how men and women in the ancient world (and it is mostly men, I must confess) saw, represented and understood the uncertainties and dangers of their lives. I am also interested in what they

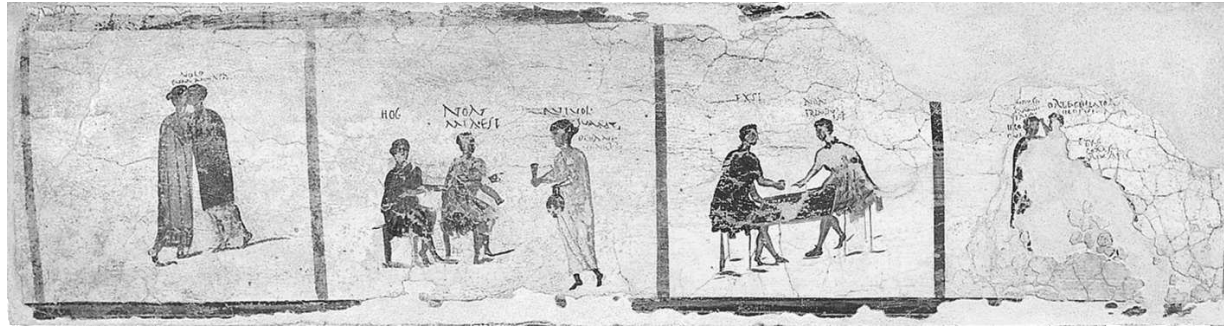


FIGURE 5.2 The full series of paintings from the 'Inn of Salvius' captures the story of life in a Roman bar – from a kiss, through more alcohol being provided by the waitress ('Whoever wants it, take it,' she says) to the final damaged scene of the quarrel – and the landlord's instruction to 'get outside'.

were anxious and uncertain *about*, which we should certainly not assume were the same issues as trouble us. I shall be concentrating on the world of the Roman empire from the first to the fourth centuries AD and I shall be trying, as far as I can, to look at the world of the 'ordinary' people rather than that of elite philosophers and their intellectual puzzles about luck, chance and divine providence. There is a notable tradition of ancient philosophical thought on this topic (in large part about how far luck can be a cause of anything, whether luck is different from chance, and whether luck or chance is 'automatic').² It is not, however, Plato, Aristotle or their Roman philosophical descendants, but the man in the street and in the bar, whose interests and fears I aim to recover.

This chapter is mainly an historical investigation. But I also want to ask if this ancient model of *danger* can still speak to us. When we reflect on how best to understand the dangers and risks of research and teaching in the humanities, might the ancient model I explore here actually be more useful than the current 'risk agenda' under which we are now asked to operate? That, at least, is the kite I fly at the end of this chapter.

Risk society: ancient and modern

Let us start by reflecting more carefully on some of the key differences between ancient (indeed any pre-modern) understanding and management of hazard and danger, and modern ideas of risk. Of course, modern definitions of risk themselves differ. There are debates and disagreements about how risk is to be managed or measured, even what it is to be called (is 'uncertainty', for example, a better term than 'risk?'). All the same, the simple fact that the 2010 Darwin lectures took *risk* as their theme was itself a nice illustration of how that idea occupies centre-stage in the contemporary academic and cultural agenda.

We can see the current resonance of risk in powerful, simple, albeit impressionistic, terms. Google News offers the opportunity of searching a wide range of international newspapers and magazines (those scanned

² Classic passages are Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 8, 2; *Physics* 2, 4–6 (where Aristotle considers whether a chance meeting with a friend in the market should really be ascribed to chance at all; no, he concludes, because the person had not gone to the market by chance but in order to buy something – which was therefore the cause of the meeting).

Google™ News

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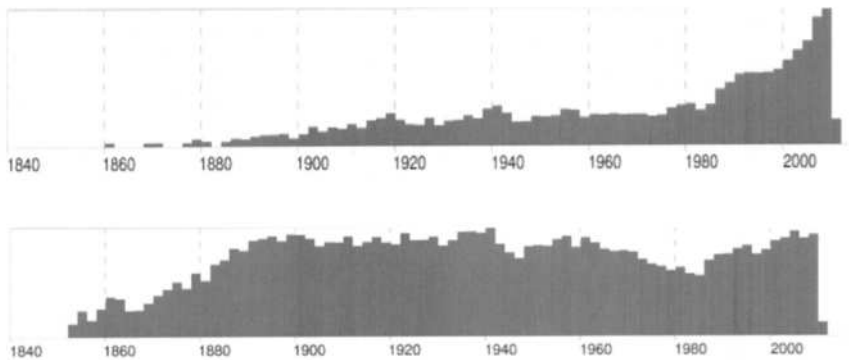


FIGURE 5.3 A snapshot of language change: the bar-chart shows the changing frequency of the word ‘risk’ in newspapers scanned by Google; the lower chart shows the frequency of the word ‘danger’.

by Google). As Figure 5.3 shows, a search for the word ‘risk’ in the Google News archive reveals a dramatic, and recent, explosion. ‘Risk’ rarely occurs as a term in the news media until the end of the twentieth century, but an enormous take-off occurred in the early twenty-first century (‘Christmas lights a serious safety risk’, ‘Women who walk reduce risk of stroke’, ‘How to reduce risk on Wall Street’, and so on). This is not merely a reflection of the expansion of news media themselves, nor of Google’s concentration on recent decades. For a comparable search for ‘danger’ shows no such change, but rather a more or less steady number of citations across the last two centuries (and so, in relative terms, a decline).

Google offers only a schematic glimpse. But it fits closely with the insistence of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens that our own post-industrial society is a ‘risk society’.³ What characterises this ‘risk society’ are a number of key factors that we easily recognise in our own world and

³ Beck 1992; Giddens 1990. Douglas and Wildavsky 1982 is a related discussion on cross-cultural ideas of risk and pollution.

behaviour: for example, our belief that relative degrees of hazard can in theory be estimated (even if in practice we may disagree on what the estimate is); and our belief that the state, and we as individuals, have a duty actively to manage risk and hazard (usually, in popular parlance, by avoiding it – though we also take ‘calculated risks’ when we choose, say, to go potholing or rock-climbing). Despite this, we can also feel powerless in the face of risk: for in an increasingly global world, the causes of hazard seem ever more outside our control. The classic case of this would be the fallout from the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, whose effects we could manage by not eating Welsh lamb, but whose causes were out of our power (it was something, like so many modern hazards, that *happened to us*, of which we were the victims). I shall, at the end of this chapter, suggest that modern universities have also come to see themselves as victims of hazard in a similar way.

The ultimate drivers behind modern risk society, why it developed when it did, are intensely debated. But everyone agrees that one necessary condition for being able to approach risk in this modern sense is what the philosopher Ian Hacking has termed the ‘emergence of probability’ – the development of the ability arithmetically to calculate chance.⁴ In scientific legend, this goes back to 1654 when Pascal used probabilistic calculations to solve the problem of how to divide up the stake of an unfinished gambling game. True legend or not (and probably not), the date is roughly correct: probability theory (and the cognitive revolution that it launched) is a phenomenon of the seventeenth century.

In the Roman world, there are none of the key elements of our risk agenda. True the word ‘probability’ itself does derive from the Latin adjective *probabilis*, *probabile*, but in Latin that usually means ‘worthy of approval’ or ‘commendable’; when it is used in a sense more like our own – that is, ‘credible’ or ‘likely’ – it is never associated with any form of calculation. The closest you come to that in Rome (and it is not very close) is in a discussion by the first-century orator, philosopher and wit, Cicero, of playing the knucklebones, which were an alternative form of dice made out of animal ankle bones, with four numbered sides. Cicero is talking about the so-called ‘Venus throw’ (the prized result, where each

⁴ Hacking 1990 and 2006. See also (among many other discussions) Krüger, Daston and Heidelberger 1987.

of four knucklebones at a single throw displays a different number), and he draws a distinction between the chance of getting one Venus throw, and the chance of making 100 throws with every single one ending up a Venus throw. It is an argument that reveals some practical experience of dicing, but is a long way from a calculation of probability.⁵ In this sense, to return to the dicers at Pompeii, arguing about a three or a two, they could not have seen those different outcomes in terms of probability in our sense.

As for the idea of responsibility for the management of risk, we need only reflect on the story of Egnatius Rufus, who, during the reign of the first emperor Augustus, at the very end of the first century BC, used his own slaves to act as Rome's first fire brigade. In our terms, it seems a classic instance of simple but sensible risk management. So was he honoured for the initiative? No, his actions were taken as a sign that he was currying favour with the people, and a sign that he was aiming at power and so a threat to the emperor himself. He was in due course found guilty of conspiracy and executed.⁶

How then do we deal with ancient approaches to uncertainty? One option is to try to discern some faint traces in the ancient world of a risk agenda not wholly dissimilar to our own, though much less explicit – and to re-create an 'embedded' discourse of risk within this apparently very different material. I shall examine one attempt to see rational risk management in Greco-Roman oracles in a later section of this chapter, exposing the problems with this method of approach.

For the most part, however, in the absence of anything like a calculation of the probability of danger, let alone a recognisable risk agenda, we have tended to consign the ordinary Greeks and Romans to a world of unpredictable *dangers*. We have tended to see them as if they saw themselves buffeted by the capricious whim of fate, or chance, or the gods – with little defence apart from keeping on the right side of the supernatural powers and hoping for the best, or shrugging their shoulders and

⁵ Cicero, *On Divination* 1, 23; 2, 48 (the context of the discussion is whether one would need to see divine providence – Venus herself – behind the 100 Venus throws). Attempts – such as Garber and Zabell 1979 – to argue for some more finely conceptualised theory of probability in the ancient world have failed to prove their point.

⁶ Dio Cassius, *History of Rome* 53, 24; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2, 91–2.

accepting that everything was pre-ordained anyway. That is maybe not wholly wrong (and certainly ancient philosophers were much engaged in the fine distinctions between chance, fate and divine providence). But I want to argue that there are clear signs of a much more positive engagement with ideas of uncertainty than that rather gloomy picture suggests.

If we are the inhabitants of ‘risk society’, the ancients – I want to argue – were the inhabitants of ‘aleatory society’. This is a term that I am adapting from Nicholas Purcell’s now classic study of Roman dicing (for which the Latin generic term was *alea*).⁷ Purcell pointed to the analogy between success or failure with the dice and success or failure in other aspects of Roman life. Trade in particular, for the Romans, with all its hazards was a bit like a game of dice; it depended on luck – that is, it was *aleatory*. I want to push this further and to argue that it was not merely that various aspects of Roman life were *like* a game of dice (for that would not be far different from the passive model of danger I have just sketched), but rather that Romans used the imagery of dicing actively to parade (and so, in a sense, manage) uncertainty. They constructed other areas of hazard in their lives on the model of dicing, so that the luck of the board game became a way of seeing, classifying and understanding what in our terms might be thought of as risk. This was reinforced by a wider symbolic repertoire that I will not be able to discuss fully here but which included the personification of luck and good fortune as divine figures. One of the most famous, and much copied, statues of antiquity is the so-called ‘Tyche of Antioch’ – the ‘luck’ of the city of Antioch, in modern Turkey (Figure 5.4).

Dicing at Rome

Gaming with dice or knucklebones, often for cash, was an absolutely central activity across all ranks of Roman society, despite the emphasis in elite Roman literature on prohibition and regulation of the activity. Gambling is, for example, supposed to have been banned except on particular holidays, and Roman law limited the redress you could seek for

⁷ Purcell 1995.



FIGURE 5.4 'The Tyche of Antioch' (the 'Luck' or the 'Goddess of Good Fortune' of the city). She sits on a rock and at her feet the swimming figure represents the River Orontes. The original statue was probably in bronze, dating to c.300 BC. This is a plaster cast of one of the several surviving versions of this popular work of art.

gambling debts.⁸ Dice and knucklebones are found in huge numbers on archaeological sites, and gaming boards too survive in their thousands from the Roman world, in wood or more often scratched on stone: you can find them carved into steps in the forum at Rome, and a recent excavation of a Roman military camp on the Red Sea produced no fewer than twenty gaming boards, and possibly, or so the excavators boldly concluded, a special games room for playing.⁹ The boards are of different forms and were clearly used for different games whose rules are now almost impossible to reconstruct (it is rather like trying to reconstruct the rules of *Monopoly* with just the board, some assorted houses and hotels and a ‘Get out of Jail Free’ card). But one of the most instantly recognisable boards seems to belong to an ancient type of backgammon, played with dice and counters, known as ‘twelve-point’ (*duodecim scripta*), with two or three rows of twelve squares or letters, serving as the points on to which to move the counters (Figure 5.5). Sometimes those letters are joined together into six-letter words, and then into sentences with a moral or ethical message (‘PARTHI OCCISI BRITTO VICTUS LUDITE ROMANI’, or ‘The Parthians have been killed, the Briton conquered. Play on, Romans’; ‘VENARI LAVARE LUDERE RIDERE OCCEST VIVERE’, or ‘Hunting, bathing, playing, laughing – that’s living’).¹⁰ Morality and ethics were literally written into the game.

There are also thousands of ancient representations of games being played, or of dicing paraphernalia. An image from a different bar in Pompeii shows another gambling scene (Figure 5.6), as does a street scene in an elaborate mosaic from Roman Antioch (gaming tables can be seen in the open air, outside houses or shops).¹¹ They occur too on images from illustrated calendars, where the emblem of the month of December sometimes includes a dice and shaker (Figure 5.7) – an allusion to the fact that dicing was a major feature of the festival of Saturnalia, which took place in that month, and which is often seen as the ancestor of our

⁸ The main ancient evidence is clearly laid out by Purcell 1995 and Toner 1995: 89–101.

⁹ Still useful for the material remains (and one of the many attempts to reconstruct the rules) are Austin 1934 and 1935. The recent excavation is discussed by Mulvin and Sidebotham 2004.

¹⁰ Purcell 1995: 19–28 discusses these and other examples.

¹¹ Megalopsychia Hunt Mosaic (fifth century AD) described and illustrated by Levi 1947: 326–37, plates LXXIX–LXXX.

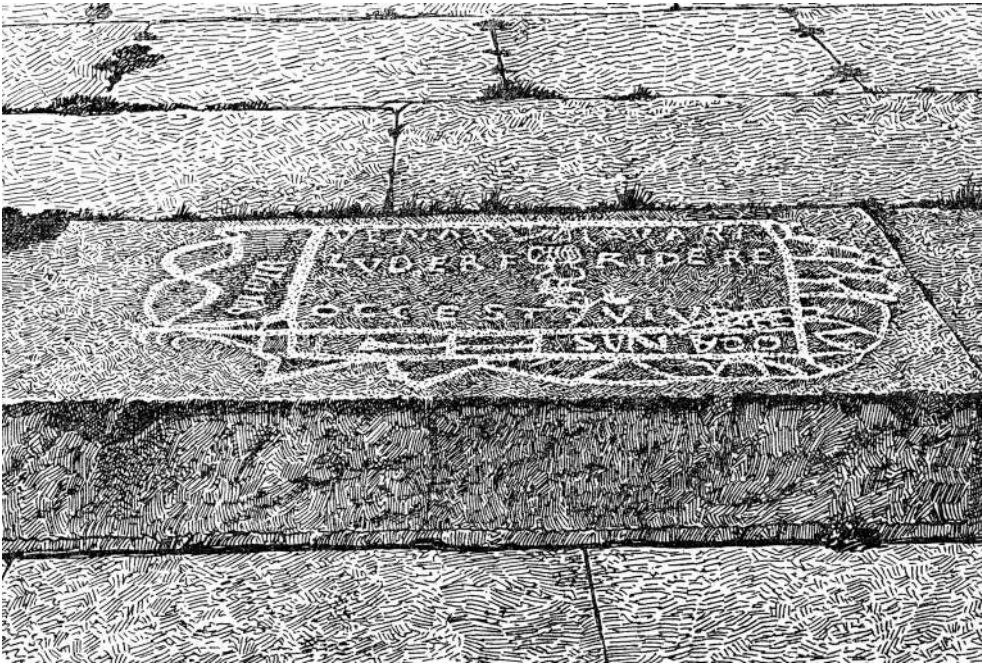


FIGURE 5.5 A gaming 'board', inscribed on the steps of the Forum in the Roman town of Timgad, in modern Algeria; you would presumably sit on the steps and pass the time with a game or two. Each of the letters (here making up the slogan 'VENARI LAVARE LUDERE RIDERE OCCEST VIVERE' – 'Hunting, bathing, playing, laughing – that's living') counted as a 'space' or 'square' on the board.

Christmas. We find them also on cheap pottery lamps and, predictably enough perhaps, on tombstones, where they stand not only for life's pleasures, but life's (and death's) lottery. There are even ancient verses, which describe tombstones decorated only with dice. One starts:

This gravestone – come, let me see whose corpse it holds. But I spy
No letter cut anywhere upon the stone.
Merely nine thrown dice . . .

And it goes on to describe the throw shown by the dice on the memorial, which add up to cryptic clues about the dead man's name.¹²

¹² Antipater of Sidon (first century BC), from *Palatine Anthology* 7, 427, discussed by Goldhill 1994: 199–201.



FIGURE 5.6 The gaming table, from the painting on the wall of the 'Bar on the Via di Mercurio' in Pompeii (still in situ). Two men sit at the table to play; two others stand to watch (and no doubt offer advice!). First century AD.

But the cultural importance of dicing runs even deeper than this might suggest, providing a way of 'modelling' the hazards of trade, politics and war, or even the construction of national identity. In his ethnography of the Germans, the Roman historian Tacitus insists that they *diced* differently from the Romans.¹³ There is a striking political resonance too. One of the most familiar Latin quotes even now is the phrase 'alea iacta est' ('the die is cast') – the words that Julius Caesar is said to have spoken in 49 BC as he crossed the Rubicon to invade Italy and initiate that civil war which would lead to his own one-man rule over the city, and eventually to his assassination. There is some debate about the precise words used by Caesar. Our usual version derives from Suetonius' Latin biography of Caesar (though we tend to change the order of the words: Suetonius actually wrote 'iacta alea est'). The Greek biographer Plutarch, however,

¹³ Tacitus, *Germania* 24.



FIGURE 5.7 The month of December from an illustrated calendar of the fourth century AD (the so-called ‘Calendar of 354’), shown here as in a manuscript copy of the seventeenth century. A dice tower and two dice are on the table beside the figure who personifies the month.

states explicitly that he shouted these words in Greek: ‘ανερίφθω κύβος’ (*anerriphtho kybos*), which means literally ‘let the die be cast’; it was in fact, as we learn elsewhere, a quotation from the fourth-century Greek comic dramatist Menander.¹⁴ In our own cultural repertoire the phrase has become a slogan for ‘the point of no return’: as if Caesar was saying that civil war was now inevitable and there was no going back. But that, surely, is to misinterpret what Caesar had in mind. By choosing the metaphor of the dice, he was parading the uncertainty, the hazard and

¹⁴ Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar* 60; Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 60, *Life of Julius Caesar* 32; Athenaeus, *Philosophers at Dinner* 13, 8 (Menander). Erasmus, the famous Renaissance humanist, brought the two ancient versions into line by emending Suetonius’ ‘est’ to ‘esto’ – so making that phrase too mean ‘let the die be cast’.

the danger of the political and military outcome. The modern confusion may in part be connected with the traditional translation of the phrase: the noun 'die' is no longer a form currently in use as the singular of 'dice', but is still commonly used for the stamp or mould of a coin; the indelible stamping of a coin is an idea easily consistent with 'no turning back'.¹⁵

It should come as no surprise that dicing and gaming became an important element in the image of the emperors who followed Caesar. The emperor Claudius, for example, was said to be a dicing fanatic: he even wrote a book about it, and in a nasty Roman satire written shortly after his death he was envisaged languishing in the underworld and one of his peculiar punishments there was having to shake a dice in a bottomless dice-box, for eternity.¹⁶ But dicing was also a means of displaying imperial power. The emperor Augustus was said to have been a keen dicer and gambler, so keen that he would provide his guests with their stakes to allow them to join him in an evening's gaming with no danger of leaving the party destitute. This is a nice illustration of the generosity of the emperor, but at the same time of his overweening power and control. For gambling ceases to be gambling if your host gives you the cash with which to do it. This is as close as we come to the display of the emperor's control over chance itself.¹⁷

In general, though, as this powerful and repeated insistence on dicing and its symbolism illustrates, Rome was a culture that looked danger in the eye. It did not attempt to avert or calculate danger, but rather to assert (almost celebrate) the uncertainties, chances and dangers of human existence. That is what I mean by referring to it as an *aleatory* society. This is a very different way of imaging danger from our own, but it is not exactly the passivity we sometimes project on to the Romans. They were not simply the dupes of Fate, they 'managed' danger by repeatedly reminding themselves to face it head on.

¹⁵ I am very grateful to Michael Reeve for help on this point; though, as the citations in the *Oxford English Dictionary* make clear, the phrase is used to indicate 'the point of no return' from at least the seventeenth century (when 'die' was still common parlance as a singular of 'dice'). Purcell 1995: 26–7 raises further dicing and political implications of the ancient phrase.

¹⁶ Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 33; Seneca, *Pumpkinification of Claudius* 14.

¹⁷ Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 71.

Dice oracles

But there is even more to it than that. For, in fact, the throw of the dice could be used not only to expose uncertainty, but also to resolve it. I am thinking here of what are known as ‘dice oracles’ – a system whereby the numbers which came up on a throw of dice or knucklebones represented an answer to the question or problem troubling the thrower. This is nothing like the system of oracles found at the famous sanctuary of the god Apollo at Delphi, which has largely formed the modern popular image of ancient oracular practice. Here ancient kings and statesmen would come to consult the god and, so the stories go, they would leave with a riddling or ambiguous reply. In other words, the stock-in-trade of the oracular god at Delphi was to meet uncertainty with an almost equally uncertain response. So, for example, King Croesus of Lydia went to Delphi in the sixth century BC to find out if he should go to war against King Cyrus of Persia. The oracle said that if he did, he would destroy a great empire. Encouraged, he went to war, and he *did* end up destroying a great empire: the trouble was he lost and the great empire he destroyed was his own (the Delphic oracle had, perhaps, been hedging its bets).¹⁸

In fact, the vast majority of oracles in the ancient world (and by ‘oracles’ I am including everything down to street-corner fortune-tellers) were not riddling in this way. They gave a pretty clear steer, even if not absolutely straight answers, to their questioners. Some of these answers were, as at Delphi, authenticated as the voice of a god, but by no means all. Magic, arcane foreign lore, and the aleatory power of chance had a role too – as we see in dice oracles.

These were found widely, right through the ancient Mediterranean world, but they appear in a strikingly monumental form in some Roman cities in what is now Turkey, where large stone pillars were erected in the marketplace, inscribed with lists of all the fifty-six possible throws you can get with five knucklebones, and a response to match. Those responses were fairly standardised from one pillar to another, but not identical.¹⁹ Consultation could not have been easier: you shook the knucklebones, looked up your throw on the pillar and found your answer.

¹⁸ Herodotus, *Histories* 1, 53. ¹⁹ Graf 2005.

So, for example, on the oracular inscription in the town of Kremna, put up in the first half of the second century AD by a pair of local benefactors, we read as one of the entries:

13344 15 Of Zeus the Saviour

One Chian [i.e. a throw of one], two threes falling and the others are fours: the matter you undertake, be of good heart; go on, do it. Make the attempt. The gods displayed these oracles as favourable. Do not shun them in your intent; for nothing will harm you.

The predictions are not all so upbeat. On the gloomier side, a throw of 44444 gave the warning answer: 'Stop in the matters about which you ask me. For it is better neither to buy nor sell.'²⁰

And so on.

These inscribed responses not only illustrate one important ancient use of dice, but they give us some access to what the men in the marketplace who used these oracles 2,000 years ago felt anxious or uncertain *about*. It is to this that I want to turn to now. For, while the parade of uncertainty and hazard is itself important, we also want to know what issues made people in the Roman world uncertain or anxious. For not every culture worries about the same things, or indeed worries most about what might seem to be its most pressing, its most 'real' dangers.

It turns out that these dice oracles are not perhaps as revealing in that respect as we might hope. Or rather they appear to be serving a niche market. For very many of the responses reflect anxiety about one area of life only, that is, business ventures, travel and trade. To quote the inscription from Kremna again: 'Hold back quietly from a journey away'; 'With regard to the road which you are going along, there is no profit from it for you.' True, they are not all concerned with business. There are a few responses that refer to illness or death ('The gods will save the sick man') and a number that offer rather unspecific predictions, both good and bad ('If you relax a little, you will achieve success'; 'Be on your guard!'). But where the reference is clear, it is mainly economic life that

²⁰ Horsley and Mitchell 2000: 22–8. In the entry for 13344, the second figure (as is standard throughout the text) gives the total that results from adding the previous five numbers together. Each throw is also associated with a god (Zeus the Saviour in this case).

is at stake. And, of course, that fits with the physical position of many of these oracular pillars: right in the middle of the commercial area of these little towns. It is as if these oracles simultaneously paraded the uncertainties of ancient commerce and offered a resolution to them.

The Oracles of Astrampsychus

An even more vivid glimpse of the varied anxieties of the Romans is provided by another set of oracular texts, several copies of which are preserved on papyrus. The introduction to these texts claims that they have been handed down from the mathematician Pythagoras, through the Egyptian magician Astrampsychus (hence their title, ‘The Oracles of Astrampsychus’). They are even said to have been the favourite oracular devices of Alexander the Great, his secret decision-making process for conquering the world. In fact, all that is an entirely spurious, exotic advertisement (or celebrity endorsement) for what is probably a fortune-teller’s handbook of, we guess, the second century AD.²¹

The system here is a more complicated one than that of the dice oracle. This was not a do-it-yourself method as the dice oracle probably was. The text we have was almost certainly one of the professional tools of the trade of a fortune-teller – and a good deal of obfuscation was built into getting an answer (presumably to protect the mystery, and the business, of the fortune-teller concerned). Let us begin by seeing how a consultation of the oracles would have looked to an outside observer, and then explore so far as we can the methods used by the fortune-teller and how our text played its part.

Imagine an ‘anxious Roman’ who needs an answer to his uncertainties. He goes to consult the fortune-teller, who hands him a numbered list of problems and asks him to choose from this list the number of the problem that most closely matches his concerns. (Presumably a good deal of impressive mumbo-jumbo accompanied even this first stage of the process.) The inquirer examines the list and chooses a problem: ‘Number 100.’ More mumbo-jumbo no doubt follows, and then the fortune-teller

²¹ Two versions of the Greek text are available in two volumes of the Teubner series of classical texts: the first edited by Gerald M. Browne (1983), the second by Randall Stewart (2001). A composite version is translated in Hansen 1998: 291–324.

says (as magicians have said since time immemorial): 'Think of a number between one and ten.'

Now let's imagine that our inquirer chooses 'Number one'. Yet more mumbo-jumbo follows, until the fortune-teller reiterates: 'Tell me your number again.' Finally the fortune-teller beams (in this case) and says, 'I have good news for you, young man; for the oracles say "No, you will not get caught in adultery".' And off our anxious inquirer goes, happy.

It might not have turned out so well. If our inquirer had chosen the number six, the oracle's answer would have been 'You won't be caught as an adulterer *for the time being*', the number two would have produced, 'Yes you'll be caught in adultery soon', and the number seven would have brought a nasty surprise: 'You are not an adulterer but your wife is in love with someone else.'

So how was it done? And how did the written text that we still have produce an answer to the problems bothering the questioner? As we have just glimpsed, the consultation started from a list of ninety-two numbered questions that form the first part of the surviving text of the *Oracles*; these run confusingly from number 12 to 103 ('Will I be caught in adultery?', 'Will I inherit from my parents?' and so on). Our imaginary inquirer chose number 100 from the list ('Will I be caught in adultery?'). He then thought of his number between one and ten and the fortune-teller added that to the number of the question: 100 plus one equalled 101. The fortune-teller then went to another list (or 'Table of Correspondences'), also included in the text of the *Oracles*, which converted that total into a different number. According to the apparently random lists in the Tables of Correspondences the number 101 was converted into the number 32.

That still did not, by itself, produce the answer. But that new number would have directed the fortune-teller to one of a whole series of numbered groups of ten answers, or 'decades', which are the final part of the *Oracles*. For number 32 you went to decade 32, and within the decade that 'number you first thought of (in our case one) identified the particular answer that applied in this case: 'You won't be caught in adultery.' It was quite simple to operate – but if it *seems* baffling, that is exactly what it was meant to seem.

There are two important features here. First, each question posed had ten possible answers, and this takes us straight back to issues of the

calculation of probability (or its absence) in antiquity that I have already mentioned. In an important recent book, Jerry Toner discerned some strikingly accurate probabilistic or – perhaps better – actuarial statistics embedded in this range of answers.²² He looked, for example, at the ten possible answers that could be given in the *Oracles* to the question ‘Will I rear the baby?’ Three answers suggest that the baby will survive, three that it will survive with difficulty, two that it will die, one that it will be ‘not reared’ (a euphemism for exposed or killed) and one that it will thrive. Toner points out that this is not far from what we know of the demographic probabilities of an infant’s survival in the Roman world (in which three out of ten would have died within the first year). And he went so far as to suggest that this oracular system was popular precisely because it reflected what we would call the *real* risks of the situation.

If that were true, it would be significant indeed (and indeed would undermine much of the modern history of probability); but it is probably not true. If some distributions of answers produce a ‘realistic’ probability, even more do not. Take for example the question: ‘Am I being poisoned?’, where four out of ten answers say ‘Yes’. You might argue that anyone taking the trouble to ask whether they had been poisoned had a greater than average chance to be in an ‘at risk’ group, but even so, four out of ten seems in our terms to rate the risks rather high. Likewise, the eight out of ten positive responses to the question ‘Will I become a town-councillor?’ might indicate a relatively up-market clientele for the *Oracles* in general, or for this question a self-selected group of questioners (who only consulted the *Oracles* if they had a good chance of being elected anyway). Or it might indicate that there is much less connection between these oracular responses and social reality than Toner would like to imagine.

More interesting, as Toner himself would agree, is the range of uncertainties that these ninety-two questions reveal, where we see both anxieties that overlap with our own and a world of worry that is significantly different from ours. Similar is a whole array of questions about marriage, love affairs, sex, illness and commercial and career success: ‘Is my wife having a baby?’ (a question which has ten out of ten answers ‘yes’,

²² Toner 2009: 46–52. A more general risk-based approach underlies Eidinow 2007.

either firmly scotching the actuarial line, or suggesting an unusual level of fecundity among the questioners); 'Will I get the girl I want?' (seven 'yes's, three 'no's, though at least one of the 'yes's says that you will get her, but then go off her), and one later Christian version of the text has 'Will I become a bishop?' (five 'yes's and five 'no's).

More striking, though, is the range of worries that do not match our own. I have already mentioned the question 'Have I been poisoned?' It is also clear that there must have been slaves among the inquirers, because 'Will I be sold?' is one question (giving us a tiny glimpse into slaves' uncertainties about their own future). But one significant surprise is the range of questions that refer to Roman law: 'Am I safe from prosecution?' 'Will I be informed against?' 'Will I argue my case?' We are used to thinking of the Roman legal system as a safeguard against danger, a protection for the citizen – or, in our terms, as a way of managing risk. That is not how it appears in the *Oracles of Atrampsychnus*, where it is a menace, a threat and its processes are themselves something to be feared. This is a pattern of assumptions that fits with some of the technical terminology of Roman law, which actually overlaps with that of gambling. So, for example, the Latin word for the deposit that you put down on entering into a court case (or the agreement to pay a stipulated sum if the case was lost) is the same as one of the words for bet: *sponsio*.

To put it another way, we come back here to that story of Egnatius Rufus and his fire brigade. In the Roman world, some aspects of what *we* think of as the mechanisms of risk-aversion are seen as dangers in themselves.

Coda: risk, danger and the modern university

So does this world have anything to say to us when we think of risk in the modern university, and more precisely of risk in the humanities? I want finally to suggest, in a slightly devious way, that it does.

Anyone who has worked in our university system over the last twenty years can hardly have failed to notice how the risk agenda has encroached on much of what we do. If someone had told me when I first started teaching that I would end up filling out a risk-assessment form to take a group of ten young adult students on a sedate visit to the British Museum,

I would have thought they were joking. This is now what I do with only a slight sigh of irritation.

But some of this is more than irritating. It is hard not to be worried by what we might call the ‘Chernobyl effect’ in higher education’s attitude to risk: the idea that risk comes free of responsibility for that risk. In going through the online risk assessments of (for the most part) American universities, it is hard not to be appalled. Among the *risks* you regularly find on these lists is ‘quality of academic staff’. This is not just laughable, but it implies a truly ‘irresponsible’ view of university teachers and researchers on the part of their administration – as if they were a risk to be managed, not a group of people to be cherished, enhanced and supported, and as if it was not the duty of any university actively to ensure the high quality of its academic (and other) staff.

We see much the same thing closer to home in our own, changing, obsession with student plagiarism, which is also increasingly seen not as cheating, for which the student is responsible, but an appalling catastrophic ill that might just happen to the student, unawares. One of the best (or the worst) illustrations of this is the online anti-plagiarism quiz sponsored by the University of East Anglia: ‘Are you at risk of plagiarism?’ it is headed (which does not mean, as you might have thought, are you at risk of *being* plagiarised, but are you at risk of plagiarising).²³ There are thirteen questions aimed to get across such key facts as that ‘plagiarism can happen accidentally, and you might not always know you have done it’, that fear of plagiarism ‘should not mean you don’t talk to your friends about your work . . .’, and so on. It all makes plagiarism appear a bit like a nasty illness that you might contract without knowing it, but one that shouldn’t prevent normal human contact (it might almost say – ‘just don’t share a toothbrush’). In fact, as one of my colleagues pointed out to me, ‘plagiarism’ *sounds* like an illness, ‘cheating’ does not.

But closest to my heart is the increasingly risk-averse agenda of humanities research, whether at doctoral level or in senior research projects. Twenty-five years ago in a completely different world, potential PhD students applied for ‘British Academy grants’, as they then were, by simply writing down a broad field of study, such as ‘Roman History’, ‘English

²³ www.uea.ac.uk/menu/admin/dos/quiz/ (accessed 25 July 2010).

Literature', or whatever. Now our students have to write a whole essay, summarising their conclusions before they have even done the work. And any more senior scholar who has ever applied for AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) research money will know all too well that you have to specify what the outcomes will be and even the timetable, week by week, towards achieving them. The AHRC has become so risk-averse in its selection procedures that the only safe and sensible way to get money out of them is to apply for funding for work you have actually already done. You then know the outcomes, can give a realistic timetable, and can use the research money to embark on another, new project.

We have come to think of all these mechanisms as prudence, and as the responsible management of public money. We seem to have forgotten that this is not how research in the humanities is carried out, certainly not good research. You do not know what you are going to find when you open a book, and you cannot say how long you will take to read it (it depends how interesting you make it). And an awful lot of the best work depends on a very great deal of *luck*. Indeed what distinguishes the successful humanities researcher from the less successful is, in part at least, that they are *lucky* – not that they have better managed the risks.

And this, of course, is where the Romans come in. Libraries are very *dangerous* places, and we should parade and face that danger. Research in the humanities is part of an aleatory culture, not a risk-managed culture. It is simply dishonest to pretend otherwise. *Alea iacta est* should be the motto of humanities research.²⁴

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²⁴ I have many people to thank for fruitful discussion in the course of preparing and writing up this lecture, especially: Christopher Kelly, Michael Reeve, Malcolm Schofield, Michael Scott and Jerry Toner. Thanks are also due to the Master, Fellows and students of Darwin College for trusting me with the topic and making the lecture series so enjoyable.

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