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INTRODUCTION

“A lot of help you are.”

“But we are,” said the calico koi. “We’re just not supposed to do it directly. That’s not part of being oracular. Our job is to make you think.”

Diane Duane, *Wizards at War*

PANTHEACON, FEBRUARY 13, 2010

I sit in the high seat, pulling the veil down to hide my face, clasping my hands around the staff carved with the images of raven, cat, and bear. With doubled vision, I see the hotel function room, where sixty people are thinking about how to word their questions, and the mighty gate to Helheim, its timbers banded with iron and graven with runes of power. Outside, energy surges as the rest of the two thousand pagans who have come to Pantheacon continue to celebrate. But here we have created a warded place outside of time, and the way to wisdom is opening.

Passive, I wait as I have done so many times before, trusting my guide to watch over me, trusting the warders to take care of the people. The scene blurs, and I see a lantern-lit circle of redwood trees at an Asatrú camp-out in Big Sur, torches and tall images at an Ár nDraíocht Féin: A Druid Fellowship (ADF) festival in Arizona, a green lawn beside a luminaria maze at Trothmoot in Indiana, the banner-hung walls of a Unitarian church in Berkeley, whispering trees in the Runestead at Brushwood in New York, a log building at a Covenant of the Goddess (CoG) Merrymeet in Washington, and a succession of workshop spaces and hotel function rooms, all transformed, like this one, by candlelight and song.

How many times have I sat here? How many questions have I answered since the night twenty years ago when I asked my circle of rune students if they

would join me in learning how to do the work of an oracle for the pagan community. As always, I wonder if the magic will work, if I will be able to pass through the gate, if the visions will come. And as always, I remind myself that I am here to see for the people, and I make my will the offering.

“Seeress, thy way through the worlds thou must win . . . ,” my guide begins to sing.

My eyes close. Responding to the music, awareness shifts, my breathing slows, and the outer world whirls away.

We begin.

IN SEARCH OF AN ORACLE

Everyone has questions, and in every human culture there have been those who sought for answers. Soothsayers, prophets, spae-wives, seers, and oracles are found throughout history. Today, psychics, intuitives, palm-readers, astrologers, and Tarot readers advertise everywhere.

But what do these people actually do?

The term “divination” comes from the Latin *divinare*, meaning “to foresee, to be inspired by a god,” especially through the interpretation of omens. In earlier times, men sought omens in the flight of birds or the shapes of clouds or fire or the livers and other organs of sacrificed animals. Today, we use symbol systems, such as cards or lots or runes, or more direct means such as palmistry. In both divination and oracle work, the seer enters a trance state in which he or she receives information. The images that stimulate the diviner’s perception are external, whereas the oracle receives information directly, derives it from images encountered internally, or channels the information from a higher power. Both approaches can provide useful counsel. Many books have been written on the art of reading cards, stars, and runes (including my own *Taking Up the Runes*). Fewer address the art of the oracle, and yet, throughout most of history, the oracles have been the most renowned.

The shaman also answers questions and gathers information by journeying in spirit to the Otherworld, using drumming and dancing to shift consciousness, while maintaining just enough connection to this world to control his body while participating in the vision. To get answers, shamans may look for a scene or image that sheds light on the question,

or ask for information from his spirit allies or a being in the Otherworld. Shamans may also embody spirit beings, who then answer questions directly. All of this is very similar to the work of an oracle. Indeed, in *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic*, Jenny Blain discusses *seidh* practices, including our oracular ritual, as examples of neo-shamanism. However, oracular practice has its own history.

Orestes, hounded by the Furies, asks the Pythoness at Delphi how to break their curse. Aeneas consults the Cumaean Sibyl regarding where he should lead the survivors of Troy. Queen Maeve asks the ban-filidh Fedelm what the result of the Cattle Raid of Cualigne will be. And in the *Saga of Erik the Red*, Thorbjorg, the “Little Völva,” tells a gathering of anxious Greenlanders when the famine will end. Such literary episodes reflect the practices and beliefs of their times. But people have similar questions today. They want to talk to their lost loved ones, heal old family traumas, and find out about work, projects, and prospects. Now, as then, the uncertainties of life drive people to seek information on everything from love to livelihood.

But what can oracles actually predict? To accurately foretell the future assumes a deterministic universe in which fate or some higher power has already decided what *will* be. If knowing what is going to happen does not allow you to change it, why bother to ask? I prefer to believe in probability rather than predestination, and I choose to act as though my decisions can make a difference. I believe that the role of the oracle is not to declare what *must* be, but to identify probabilities and clarify the questioner’s choices in a way he or she can understand.

Just as some people are born with perfect pitch or the hand-eye coordination of the artist, for some, seeing possible outcomes may be only too easy. The agonies of the unwilling prophet are a staple of literature. And yet, like manual dexterity and singing, perceiving probabilities is a basic human ability. In this book, we will see how this ability can be trained and used.

The methods presented in Part Two build on the basic trance skills laid out in my earlier book, *Trance-Portation*. Improving communication between your unconscious and conscious minds brings self-knowledge and helps you make decisions. Oracle work is a unique and rewarding experience, in which exploring the potential of other minds expands our

own. It brings us into contact with spirits, human and other. Seeking answers, we range through the inner worlds.

BIOGRAPHY

My own oracular journey started in the eighties, when I was simultaneously beginning a career as a writer of fiction and becoming a priestess. While researching *Brisingamen*, a novel based on Norse mythology, I encountered descriptions of the Viking Age magic called *seidh*, which included an oracular ritual, and wondered if this skill could be practiced in the modern world.

The core shamanic techniques described in Michael Harner's *The Way of the Shaman* fit well into the array of skills I was developing, but I felt the need for a more culturally embedded tradition. On the other hand, I was not willing to immerse myself in the culture of any of the indigenous peoples who were then being proclaimed as the only authentic sources for shamanic practice.

In 1987, I was able to take Harner's "Basic Workshop." I came to the workshop hoping for help in recovering the shamanistic skills of my own Northern European ancestors. When, on the second day, Harner announced that we would be journeying to the Upper World to find a teacher in human form, the figure I encountered was the Norse god Odin. That was the beginning of a continuing relationship. The rune study with which I began my exploration of Germanic culture is presented in *Taking Up the Runes*, but that was only the prequel to an effort to reconstruct northern oracular practice—an effort that continues to this day.

To fill in the gaps in the Norse *seidh* lore, I have explored oracular practices wherever I could find them. Thus, although a great deal of the material in this book will be drawn from the Germanic tradition, what I am presenting in Part Two might be termed a "Core Oracular Practice" drawn from the prophetic literature of many lands, whose principles can be used to retro-engineer oracle work within a variety of traditions. The pythias at Delphi and the *völv*as of early Scandinavia had the support of a trained team, but many seers in the past worked alone, giving responses spontaneously rather than in the context of ritual. By analyzing both communal and solo oracular practices, we can identify the basic skills

and process and explore ways to incorporate them into individual and community practice today.

Since the beginning, my purpose has been not only to serve my local community, but also to introduce oracular practice to a wider audience. In the mid-nineties, I began to conduct workshops, and a number of individuals and groups using or influenced by these techniques are working in the United States and Europe today.

I and my group are not the only ones who do this work, and our approach is not the only one that can succeed; otherwise, although the historical information on the work of an oracle might be of interest, there would be no point in sharing what we have learned. My hope is that this book will encourage readers who feel the call to improve their own oracular intuition and to serve their communities to develop their own variations on a practice that can be immensely rewarding both to those who ask questions and those who answer.

Part One

IN SEARCH OF THE ORACLE

I

SEERS AND SPEAKERS: THE SELECTION, TRAINING, AND ROLE OF AN ORACLE

Then I take, as prophetess, my place and seat.
And this time may (the gods) bless the going-in much more than
ever before,
Both to me and to all from Hellas who are admitted,
As the custom is, by fall of the lot;
For I give response according as the god may lead.

Eumenides, Act I



King Aegeus consults the oracle at Delphi, Attic red-figured Kylix by the Kodros painter, Antikensammlung Museum, Berlin

“What is your name?” Medb said to the girl.
“I am Fedelm, and I am a womanpoet [banfáid] of Connacht.”
“Where have you come from?” Medb said.
“From learning verse and vision [filidecht] in Alba,” the girl said.
“Have you the imbas forosnai, the Light of Foresight?” Medb said.
“yes I have,” the girl said.
“Then look for me and see what will become of my army.”
So the girl looked.

Tain Bo Cuailnge II

And now many things are revealed to me which were before hidden from me and others. I can now say that the famine will not last much longer, and that conditions will improve with the spring; and the epidemic which has persisted for so long will abate sooner than expected. And as for you, Gudrid, I shall reward you at once for the help you have given us, for I can see your whole fate [forlög] with great clarity now. . . .

Saga of Erik the Red 4

I see two things. They are related. I see a small creek high in the mountain, fresh melting snow. The first crocus raises her head, stretches open to the sun. The rune with this is Jera. We are coming out of the dark side of the year. Like the crocus you are sprouting but have not yet budded open. Give it time, trust in the sun, and let yourself be tickled, or healed.

Answer 13 from Seidh session,
January 11, 2005, Berkeley, California

Since humans first became self-aware, we've sought to understand the forces that shape our lives. The scientist collects data to predict the probability of events; the farmer uses experience to decide when to harvest. But when ordinary sources of information fail, men seek guidance by other means. Throughout history, some people have had a talent for giving advice and making predictions. The pythia at Delphi, the Irish druidess, the Greenland völvá, and the modern seer are all called to serve as oracles. But who are they? How did they come to their calling, and how do they answer questions?

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Oracular practitioners come in both genders. Except when a female is specified, throughout this book, the term “seer” will be used for both. Although words such as “oracle” or “prophet” are often used to mean someone who prognosticates future events, the terms themselves have a broader meaning, derived from roots meaning “to speak” or “to see.” Whichever element is foremost, both must be present. The mystic may or may not communicate his experiences; the oracle must do so. The word “oracle” itself comes from the Latin *oraculum*, “to speak,” and can refer to the person who channels information or instructions or to the place in which the answers are given.

In Greek, the word for a seer or soothsayer is *mantis*. A “prophet,” from the Greek *prophētēs* (from *pro* “for” and *phanai* “to speak”), utters divine revelations or foretells future events. A “seer” or “seeress” is someone who has extraordinary moral and spiritual insights, and whose information comes in the form of visions. In the ancient Mediterranean, we find the Latin *sibyl*, a title given to a number of legendary prophetesses, especially the Sibyl of Cumae, and the Pythia, or Pythoness, a title derived from the serpent who once guarded the Delphic shrine.

In Viking Age Scandinavia, the *spákona/spaewife* (a woman) and the *spámadhr* (a man) entered a trance state and “spoke” answers. Oracular trance was also among the magical skills of the wisewoman called the *völva*, while the *thul* (Old Norse) or *thyle* (Old English) was a “speaker.” The term *uatis*, or *ovateis* (modernized as “ovate”), was used by Strabo (*Geographia* IV, 4) for the Gaulish priestly class that included diviners and natural philosophers. In early Ireland, one of the skills that the *filidh*, the druidic poet, was expected to master was prophecy. In Ireland, a male seer was called a *fáith*, and in Britain, an *offydd*. In the selection from the *Tain*, we meet a female seer, Fedelm the *banfáid*.

THE ROLE OF THE ORACLE

To reconstruct oracular practice, we need to understand not only who the seers were, but also what they did. The seer perceived an answer directly and delivered it in his or her own words, while the prophet channeled or was possessed by a deity, but the kinds of questions they answered were essentially the same. The oracles responded both to individual needs

and community concerns, providing counsel and consolation in times of prosperity and uncertainty. They do the same today.

THE MYSTIQUE OF DELPHI

From the earliest times, we find mention of prophets and oracles in the Mediterranean world. One of them is Cassandra, a Trojan princess who was a temple seer before she refused Apollo's attentions and was cursed to utter prophecies that no one would believe. Even more interesting is Tiresias, a prophet of Thebes. In the *Bacchae* of Euripides, he tries to warn King Pentheus that he must accept the new cult of Dionysos. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, he unwillingly reveals to King Oedipus that the young king's own inadvertent sin is the cause of the plague currently threatening the town. The prophecies come from Delphi, but it is Tiresias who interprets them.

Although Delphi seems to have been an oracular center as early as the Mycenaean period, its great fame developed after the Dorian migration into Hellas and the Peloponnese, when it was taken over by the cult of Apollo and endured for a thousand years. As Dempsey puts it in his comprehensive and enthusiastic survey of the influence of the Delphic oracle,

Greek and barbarian alike consulted it: envoys came from Asia and Libya and distant Italy seeking advice on all matters of moment. The framing of laws, the founding of colonies, the making and unmaking of kings, the beginning of wars, the healing of disease or pestilence—these and such-like questions were submitted to the unerring judgment of the omniscient Apollo. From the earliest times the Oracle of Delphi influenced the history of noble houses, aye, and of whole nations. The Delphic Oracle of Apollo, as no other oracle of antiquity, long inspired a living faith, and for centuries retained its credit unimpaired. (Dempsey 1918, 39)

One reason for this popularity may have been its location, for although its impressive setting on the slope below Mount Parnassus requires a climb, the area is accessible from both the north and east and the Peloponnese. As its reputation grew, the many rich gifts with which grateful questioners adorned it would have added to its appeal, and it didn't hurt that

Pindar, one of the most renowned of the Greek poets, was a devotee. Still, none of that would have mattered if the seeresses had not established an enviable track record of useful answers and a reputation for integrity.

As we shall see in the discussion of oracular answers in Chapter IV, many of the questions were personal. However, a fair proportion of the recorded answers were given to cities whose questions affected the whole community. Even Apollo could not impose political unity on the Greeks, but his answers helped to create a consensus regarding religion. Nor was prophecy all the site had to offer. Delphi hosted numerous festivals and the Pythian Games, which featured artistic as well as athletic competitions.

During the first centuries of the Roman Empire, another important site was the great temple of Apollo at Claros, on what is now the coast of Turkey. Visitors inscribed their names, origin, and the dates of their visits on the marble blocks of the sanctuary. Where pilgrims from mainland Greece visited Delphi, Claros served clients from all over the Near East. Though the prophet here was male, the answers were very similar to those given at Delphi.

BARDS AND OVATES

The Druid order was divided into three specialties: the bards, the ovates (variously given as *uatis* or *euhages/orates*), and those druids who were mystics and philosophers. In later Irish lore, the bards serve as seers. The Classical sources indicate that the druids also served as judges and arbiters. According to Diogenes Laertius, the Druids, “make their pronouncements by means of riddles and dark sayings, teaching that the gods must be worshipped, and no evil done, and manly behaviour maintained.” (*Vitae* I:5, introduction, in Matthews 1996, 20), which sounds like the kind of response given by an oracle. Female druids are said to have given impromptu prophecies to the future Roman emperors Diocletian and Aurelian. Among the officers required to attend upon King Cormac was a druid, “to offer sacrifices, and to forebode good or evil to the country by means of his skill and magic . . .” (Keating, in Matthews 1996).

In addition to the divination accomplished as part of a ritual or sacrifice or through the interpretation of auguries, the druids were noted for

spontaneous prophecies, and it is these that we find most often in the tales. In the eighth-century *Compert Conchobair*, we find an impromptu prophecy by the druid Cathbad. The king's daughter Nes asks, "What is the present hour lucky for?" "For begetting a king on a queen," he replies. Seeing no other man nearby, she takes him inside, and nine months later she gives birth to Conchobar, the king who will later command Cuchulain in the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*. Cathbad also foretells that the newborn Dierdre will bring great misfortune and mischief to the kingdom.

In another early tale, the warrior-woman Scáthach uses the *imbas forsnai* ("the light of foresight") to chant a long poem foretelling Cuchulain's future. As seen in the quotes at the beginning of this chapter, the *ban-fáith* Fedelm also uses the *imbas forasnai* to answer Maeve's question about the outcome of the war against Ulster.

GERMANIC SEERS

In the histories of Tacitus, we learn that during the first century the Germans honored a seeress called Veleda,

a maiden of the tribe of the Bructeri, who possessed extensive dominion; for by ancient usage the Germans attributed to many of their women prophetic powers and, as the superstition grew in strength, even actual divinity. The authority of Veleda was then at its height, because she had foretold the success of the Germans and the destruction of the legions. (*Histories IV*, 61)

She is said to have lived by the Lippe River on the German side of the Rhine, but she was influential throughout central Germany. When the Batavian chieftain Civilis rebelled against Rome, she became his chief advisor. Like the seers of the Mediterranean, Veleda stayed in one place, where she received questioners, and her answers, like theirs, determined the fate of nations.

The Viking Age *völva* operated on a smaller scale and moved from place to place rather than requiring querents to come to her. Chapter 4 of the *Saga of Erik the Red* describes an oracular ritual at a farmstead in Greenland:

A woman named Thorbjorg was in the settlement. She was a prophetess [*spákona*] and called the "Little Völva." She had nine sisters,

all of whom were prophetesses [*spákonur*]. She was the only one left alive. It was Þorbjörg's custom to go to feasts in the winter, and people invited her to their homes most who wanted foreknowledge of their destiny [*forlög*], or that of the season.

The situation was similar in mainland Scandinavia. In *Nornagestthattr* 11, Gestr tells King Olaf that when he was born, “Völvur were travelling around the countryside. They were called spákonur, and they prophesied men's fates. Therefore people gave them lodgings and prepared feasts for them and gave them gifts upon their departure. My father did this too, and they came to his place with their entourage.” We find similar descriptions in the *Arrow-Odd's Saga 2* and the *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* in the *Flateyjarbók*.

It would appear that whereas each area of the Mediterranean world had its permanent oracular site, in the North, a seidh-group would operate in each region, moving from the steading of one jarl or prosperous farmer to another to answer questions of general importance, such as the prospects for a good harvest, and personal interest, such as marriage.

THE CALLED AND THE CHOSEN

Where did (and do) these seers and prophets come from, and how did they learn their craft?

Many assume that psychic sensitivity, like perfect pitch or the ability to draw, is inborn. While some individuals have innate abilities in these areas, even the born genius will not make effective use of them without training and discipline, and the gifts of the natural psychic can be a curse if they are not trained. But talent, in any field, is not an either-or matter. In *Trance-Portation*, I presented a sequence of exercises to develop the controlled ability to do trance work. These basic disciplines can be directed to specific applications, such as oracular practice. Changing one's state of consciousness is an innate human ability. Just as those of moderate talent can be taught to make music or paint, many, with the proper support and training, can achieve a state in which they can answer questions with a deeper wisdom than they have while in an ordinary state of mind.

Both independent and community-supported oracles have served their people well. In general, prophets who function independently and

spontaneously have a great deal of natural talent and/or long and intensive training behind them. On the other hand, a good support team and a powerful ritual can enable a less-experienced seer to serve.

The Mediterranean

Prophets are a common figure in Greek legend. According to Hesiod, Tiresias of Thebes made the mistake of disturbing a pair of copulating snakes and was punished by Hera with transformation into a woman, in which shape he married and had children, including a daughter called Manto (meaning “prophecy”). After seven years, he encountered another pair of snakes, guarded them, and was changed back again. However, when Zeus and Hera asked him to give evidence regarding whether men or women got more pleasure from sex, he agreed with Zeus that women got more and was struck blind by Hera. In compensation, Zeus gave him the gift of foresight and the life span of seven men.

As a two-sexed ecstatic with serpent connections, Tiresias has a shamanic aspect to his character. He prophesies to Odysseus in the land of the dead and, in the Classical Greek plays, uses a number of prophetic techniques, including vision, augury from the songs of birds, and interpretation of images in the smoke of burnt offerings. His prophecies are usually enigmatic, and only after the tragic conclusion does their meaning become clear.

The priests and priestesses who served the oracles in the Classical period, on the other hand, were virtually anonymous, leaving the emphasis on the ritual and setting. Those we know of were local people from families that had served the oracle for generations. The most famous are the pythias of Delphi. What we know of their lives is culled from a variety of Classical sources, especially the writings of Plutarch, who served as a priest at Delphi for a time.

The pythias had to be freeborn citizens of the town. In an institution that lasted over a thousand years, there were inevitably changes. The early oracular priestesses were apparently required to be maidens, but after a querent attempted to seduce the pythia, the priestesses were chosen from among the postmenopausal women of good character, who were presumably less susceptible. According to Diodorus, however, they dressed in the style of a maiden. Plutarch tells us that

she who now serves the God has been born as respectably as any man here, and has lived as good and orderly a life; but having been reared in the house of small farmer folk, she brings nothing with her from art or from practice or faculty whatsoever, as she goes down into the sanctuary. As Xenophon thinks that the bride should step into her husband's home having seen as little as may be, and heard as little, so she, ignorant and untried in almost all things, and a true virgin in soul, is associated with the God. (*Pythia XXII*)

If, as Plutarch tells us, the priestess was neither educated nor a born psychic, how was she able to function as an oracle? In his essay on the decline of oracles, Plutarch stated his belief that it was the energies of the oracular site itself, whether they were the mysterious hallucinogenic vapors whose existence has been so often debated, or one of the many "potencies" sent forth by the earth, that altered the pythia's consciousness.

What he does not take into account is the fact that the pythia would have been brought up on stories about the oracle. Delphi received visitors from all over the world, and even its women would have had a relatively sophisticated knowledge of current affairs. The protections with which the pythia was surrounded would aid her in maintaining calmness and clarity. Even without the assistance of narcotic vapors, the expectation of a change in consciousness, the visual cues, and the ritual preparations and procedure would work together to put the priestess into a prophetic trance.

But Delphi was not the only place of prophecy. During the first through third centuries, the oracle of Apollo at Claros was nearly as prestigious. Unlike the pythias, the priests who gave the Claros oracles served for a term and then returned to ordinary life, but they did prepare for each session by withdrawing from the world for a day and a night of prayer and fasting. Tacitus tells us that

[t]here, it is not a woman, as at Delphi, but a priest chosen from certain families, generally from Miletus, who ascertains simply the number and the names of the applicants. Then descending into a cave and drinking a draught from a secret spring, the man, who is commonly ignorant of letters and of poetry, utters a response in verse

answering to the thoughts conceived in the mind of any inquirer. It was said that he prophesied to Germanicus, in dark hints, as oracles usually do, an early doom. (*Histories* II, 54)

The Celtic World

The first Roman writers to encounter the Celts noted that the Druid priests underwent an intensive training. According to Caesar, “many resort to their school even of their own accord, whilst others are sent by their parents and relations. There they are said to learn thoroughly a great number of verses. On that account, some continue at their education for twenty years” (*Bello Gallico* VI, 13, in Matthews 1996, 16).

In the later period, seership survived as a poetic function. Our information regarding the training of the Celtic *fili* comes mainly from the Old Irish literature, in particular the *Glossary of Cormac* and the *Metrical Tractates*. Nothing in Celtic literature is ever stated clearly. The surviving accounts sometimes contradict each other and were, in any case, written down in Christian times when some of the knowledge had been lost. There is a general agreement that among the fourteen poetic skills mastered by a *fili* were three that enabled him to prophesy: the *imbas forosnai*, *tenm laida*, and *dichetal do chennaib na tuaithe*, respectively translated by Kuno Meyer as “illumination of song,” “knowledge which illuminates,” and “extempore incantation” (Meyer, in Matthews 1999, 49).

In some accounts, prophecy was delivered within the context of a mantic ritual in which the seer lay in a certain position, or covered his eyes, or first made offerings or chewed on his thumb. These rituals will be discussed further in Chapter IV. In other sources, the *fili* utters his or her pronouncements without preparation in response to a question, developing them in the form of a poem or song.

Extemporaneous prophecy is certainly the pattern we find in later Celtic folklore, in which the Sight can be stimulated in those who are so gifted in response to things seen or heard, as well as in answer to a question. In the older stories, the power usually comes from an Otherworldly source. It is said that the Welsh bard Taliesin was in a previous incarnation the boy Gwion Bach, who was set to stir the cauldron in which the goddess Ceridwen was brewing a potion that would grant *awen*—wisdom and inspiration. When it splattered, he sucked from his thumb the magical first three drops. We find a similar tale in *The Boyhood Days*

of *Fionn*. Fionn MacCumhal studied with the druid Finegas to learn the art of poetry, but it was only when he inadvertently touched the roasting Salmon of Wisdom and licked his burnt thumb that he received the full power the salmon had absorbed from eating magical hazelnuts, which had fallen into the pool of prophecy at the source of the Boyne. In another and possibly earlier story, Fionn gained the power when his thumb got smashed in the door of a fairy mound.

Scandinavia

References to seers who speak as oracles are abundant in the lore of the Viking Age. There is, however, some debate about what their practice should be called. In *Ynglingasaga* 7, we learn that “Odin knew and practised that craft which brought most power and which was called *seidh* (witchcraft), and he therefore knew much of man’s fate and of the future.” Since forecasting the future and telling people their fates is exactly what the *völvur* are described as doing in a multitude of episodes in the sagas, it is clear that oracle work is among the practices included under the heading of *seidh*, but it is not the only form of magic described under this name. In the accounts, the terms *seidh* and *spá* (modern “spae”) are used interchangeably, as are the various names for those who speak prophecy. Because some of the references to *seidh* describe negative magic, there is some prejudice against the term; however, it is also the best known. For this reason, I refer to Norse oracular practice both as “Oracular Seidh” and “spae.”

In the *Shorter Seeress’ Prophecy* 6, we are told that the seeresses [*völvur*] came from Viðolfr, the magicians [*vitkar*] from Vilmeiðr, and the soothsayers [*seidhberendur*] from Svarthöfði. These are the names of giants, the implication being that like the *norns*, who are their Otherworldly analogue, people who worked magic, including the giving of prophecies, are literally or spiritually descended from the primal powers. I think, however, that this must be taken metaphorically, as the seers mentioned in the sagas, like the one in *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* who tried to change her prophecy when King Frodhi threatened to torture her, are clearly human beings.

A common belief that the folk of Finland (especially the Saami) were skilled in magic persisted through the Middle Ages. “A Finnish woman” is the seeress in *Vatnsdaelasaga* 10, and in the *History of Harald Hairfair*

33, Eric Bloodaxe meets Gunhild, who becomes his queen and a famous sorceress, in Finmark, where she has come “to learn seidh from the two Finns who are the cleverest men in Finmark.” However, it is unlikely that all of the women and men who worked seidh came from Finland.

I believe that a more probable explanation for the origin of the seers may be found in the sagas. The *völva* Thorbjorg who answers questions in the *Saga of Erik the Red* is said to be the only survivor of a group of nine “sisters.” In *Arrow-Odd’s Saga 2*, there is a description of a seidh session in which the seeress is

[a] woman was named Heidh. She was a seeress [*völva*] and sorceress [*seidhkona*] and she knew unspoken things by means of her knowledge [*frodhleikr*]. She travelled widely to feasts, to which farmers invited her, throughout the land. She told people their fates [*ørlög*] and forecast the weather for the coming winter or other things. She had thirty people with her, fifteen boys and fifteen girls. They were great reciters, as was she.

From this passage, we know that the spae ritual involved singing, which we will discuss in more detail in Chapters II and V. We also see that the rituals originally involved men as well as women. Although we are not told that they practiced prophecy, in the *History of Harald Hairfair* 25, 35, we learn that Ragnar Rettilbone and his eighty *seidhmenn* lived together in Hadeland and practiced seidh. He was a son of Harald Hairfair by the beautiful daughter of a Finn living in Norway, but perhaps because he had once loved her too madly, in his later years, King Harald banned seidh. When another seidhmadhr objected on the grounds that one of the king’s sons was practicing magic, Harald instructed his favorite son, Eric Bloodaxe, to deal with the situation, which he did by burning his brother and his eighty companions to death in their hall.

Although we have no specific information on their training, we can guess that *seidhberendr* learned the various skills involved in their craft, including spae, from older practitioners. One can imagine these groups touring the country, led by one or more experienced *völv*as or *spámadhrs*. In the ritual, they would raise energy through singing and serve their leader in exchange for the opportunity to learn. Those who proved to have talent would eventually become seers in turn. By the time Erik the Red settled in Greenland, encroaching Christianity was

bringing the old ways into disrepute, and parents were not sending their children to learn sorcery. Thus, Thorbjorg was the last of her kind.

BECOMING A SEER TODAY

As a child, I was very vulnerable. To protect myself, at an early age I developed such good mental shields that by the time I was grown I believed I had no psychic ability at all. Recovering those abilities took many years. I first encountered information about northern European oracular practices in H. R. Ellis Davidson's *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age*, and I have been learning ever since. Since I began doing public work in 1991 I have taught many workshops, and the idea has spread. In preparing this book, I questioned many contemporary seers, both those who have taken my workshops and those who have learned oracular practice independently. Here are some of their replies.

I was taught to do this as part of a family magical practice. Because I was the daughter born to the right part of a certain bloodline, it was my job. It started slowly and is part of a bigger practice. I was taught in stages and through many different processes; for example, some of it was taught by beings I call Fae.

Nanette Boyster

I worked alone for about four or five years, starting with Michael Harner's guidelines from his book *The Way of the Shaman* and taking off on my own from there. In 1995, I took a class with Diana Paxson and Laurel Olsen and established a more Heathen-oriented and community-service approach. Before the class, my work had been for personal religious and psychological development, skills development, and otherworldly exploration. After the class, my work became more oriented toward Heathen community service, including serving Heathen folk and departed kin and friends, and having contact with the holy ones for the sake of others as well as myself.

Winifred Hodge

In February 1997, after enough encounters with the runes to interest me in them as a divination technique and magical toolset, I had

a significant experience while watching Hrafnar's *seið* group (since named Seiðhjallr) perform their oracular *seið* ritual. In turn, this led me to seek out their method of oracular practice and learn it. Some years later, they allowed me to join the team.

Lorrie Wood

From the preceding accounts, it should be apparent that although some seers are born and some are chosen, it is also a skill that can be acquired with the proper training. The call to serve the people by conveying divine wisdom is still heard today.

Although many of those reading this book will simply be seeking more information about oracles and prophetic practices, some of you have heard that call. The exercises in Part Two of this book are intended to help you answer it.