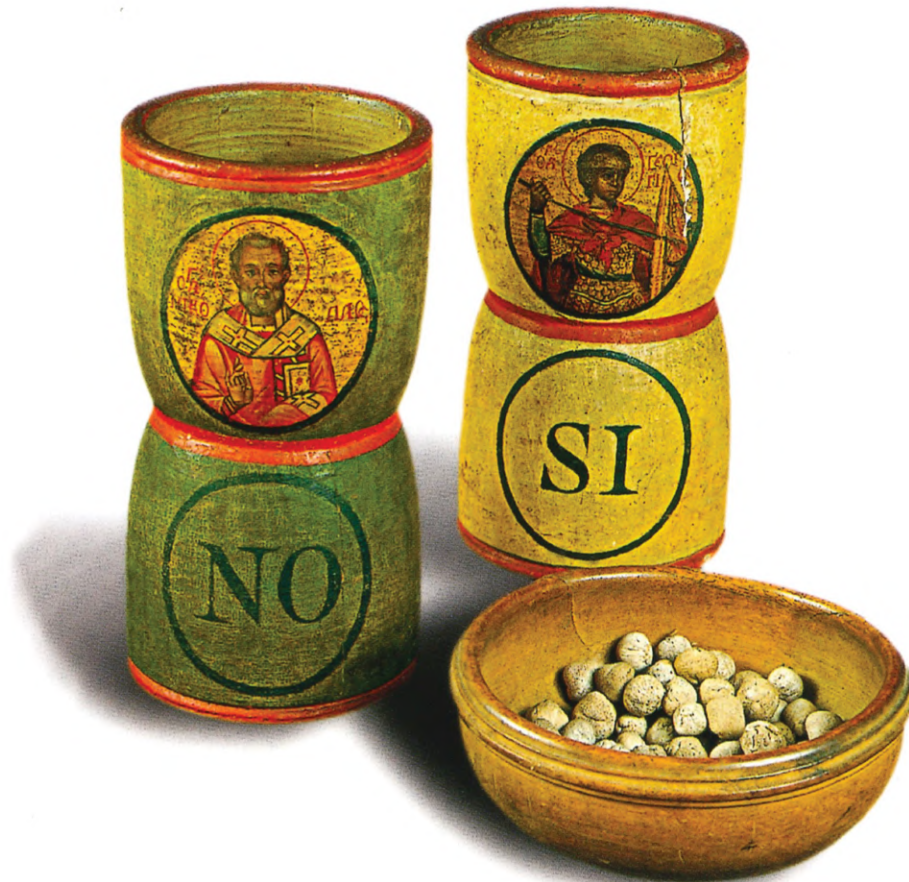


# THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHARACTER OF LOTS/SORTITION

- a transcultural and diachronic approach -

Michael Grünbart – Florin Filimon  
Institute of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, WWU Münster

A virtual workshop on May 11, 2021 | 14:15-20:00 CET



From antiquity to modern times, drawing lots constitutes an established tool for making definitive decisions. The Athenian lot-machine is a symbol of democracy, while sortition was a prime component of the process by which the Venetian doge was elected, which belongs to the most sophisticated processes of appointing a leader. Further, in the American electoral system tied elections are resolved through a “game by lots”. What makes sortition so attractive a method is that it produces an instant and, possibly, unambiguous result.

The virtual workshop aims to discuss what sortition means in the Mediterranean and adjacent regions and which techniques can be grouped under this term.

Does sortition refer solely to throwing a pebble, retrieving a sherd, or an inscribed object? Does lot denote one written piece of paper on which a query is affirmatively or negatively formulated? Furthermore, are there similar processes that can be compared with lots? Another question concerns the religious context of these practices: to what extent is it necessary to include the supernatural?

Moreover, framing the sortition process is another aspect worthy of attention. Firstly, we refer to the contexts in which such methods were used to find a solution, while a second dimension of framing would be the enactment (Inszenierung) of sortition.

The discussion will revolve also around the term ‘lot’ and the cultural technique of unambiguity in important decisions, possibly in times of crisis, and to explore the understanding of lots and decisions in a temporal and transcultural perspective using meaningful examples.

To attend registration is required. Register to [byz@uni-muenster.de](mailto:byz@uni-muenster.de) until May 05 2021.

The multidimensional character of lots/sortition

– a transcultural and diachronic approach –

May 11, 2021 | 14:15-20:00 CET

To attend registration is required. Register to [byz@uni-muenster.de](mailto:byz@uni-muenster.de) until May 05 2021.



<b>14:15-14:30</b>	Michael Grünbart & Florin Filimon (University of Münster) <b><i>Opening remarks</i></b>
<b>14:30-15:00</b>	Michael Zellmann-Rohrer (University of Oxford) <b><i>Bread, cheese, birds, eyes, and more: sortition-like methods to catch thieves in Byzantine manuals</i></b>
<b>15:00-15:30</b>	Florin Filimon (University of Münster) <b><i>With icons and candles: non-textual sortilege in Byzantium</i></b>
<b>15:30-16:00</b>	Michael Grünbart (University of Münster) <b><i>Counting pigs and finding the right bed. Imitations of sortition in 6th century Byzantium</i></b>
<b>16:00-16:30</b>	Break
<b>16:30-17:00</b>	Karen Piepenbrink (Gießen University) <b><i>Sortition and democracy in the Athenian political discourse</i></b>
<b>17:00-17:30</b>	Rüdiger Schmitt (University of Münster) <b><i>Lots in the archaeological record of Israel and Judah in the Iron Age, ca. 1200-587 BC</i></b>
<b>17:30-18:00</b>	Petra Schmidl (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) <b><i>Lot casting practices in pre-modern Arabic sources: some reflections and examples</i></b>
<b>18:00-18:30</b>	Break
<b>18:30-19:00</b>	Stéphanie Homola (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) <b><i>Selecting through discarding: agency and drawing lots</i></b>
<b>19:00-19:30</b>	Yang Shen (The Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity Göttingen) <b><i>The efficacy of lottery divination in Buddhist temples in contemporary China</i></b>
<b>19:30-20:00</b>	William Klingshirn (The Catholic University of America) & Michael Lackner (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) <b><i>Closing remarks</i></b>

The multidimensional character of lots/sortition

– a transcultural and diachronic approach –

May 11, 2021 | 14:15-20:00 CET

To attend registration is required. Register to [byz@uni-muenster.de](mailto:byz@uni-muenster.de) until May 05 2021.

---

14:30-15:00

Michael Zellmann-Rohrer (University of Oxford)

**Bread, cheese, birds, eyes, and more: sortition-like methods to catch thieves in Byzantine manuals**

This paper considers ritual methods to reveal the identity of culprits among suspects in cases of theft. The basis is a new collection of texts, many so far unpublished, from a corpus of Greek manuals for ritual and magic of the Byzantine and later periods prepared by the author. Some 60 textual witnesses inform the analysis: the most popular type is a distinctive procedure in which suspects are fed bread and cheese inscribed with ritual text, which the culprit will be unable to swallow; other selection-methods include the movement of birds and the infliction of torture on effigies of the thief's eye. The methods resemble more traditional lot-drawing in mechanics and the promise of an immediate result. Important differences include the addition of extensive ritual apparatus and the requirement of supernatural assistance. The aim of revealing an established fact—so far known only to the culprits and presumably the divine intermediaries—also sets the methods in relation to divination and the judicial ordeals of western medieval Europe. The use of offering-bread co-opts a central rite of the Christian liturgy, and the texts align themselves in some cases with an even more venerable, biblical precedent, the Sotah procedure of the “bitter water” for cases of suspected adultery (Numbers 5:11–31).

---

15:00-15:30

Florin Filimon (University of Münster)

**With icons and candles: non-textual sortilege in Byzantium**

Recent scholarship on sortilege in late antiquity considered primarily lot methods that make use of texts. Considering the occurrences of sortilege in Byzantine narrative sources, the same pre-eminence is due to the text-based lot divination. Nevertheless, one ought not to discount other forms of divination that can be assimilated to sortilege. The paper discusses instances of divination that did not involve writing but instead involve icons and relate to imperial figures. An icon of Christ and one of the Virgin are set to provide clear answers in a binary form, signified through the changing of the hue and the movement of a veil respectively. Thirdly, icons of the Apostles are used in conjunction with candles for acquiring a propitious name that will ensure the newborn a long life.

The first two methods appear to be an eleventh-century phenomenon, whereas the third one, attested in a fourteenth-century Greek chronicle, represents a fully Christianised version of a late-antique procedure contested by Chrysostom. Whereas the means of electing a child's most fitting holy protector suits best the characteristics of what sortilege usually denotes, the way in which the miracle-performing icon of the Virgin at Blachernai ends an unresolved legal dispute resembles cleromancy too. Even if the icon of Christ "the Responder" replies to imperial inquiries in a manner akin to the ticket oracles, can one subscribe it to cleromancy?

---

15:30-16:00

Michael Grünbart (University of Münster)

### **Counting pigs and finding the right bed. Imitations of sortition in 6th century Byzantium**

Reading historiographical sources the need for definitive solutions and clear decisions becomes apparent. A ruling emperor, a military leader in charge or a high official constantly had to make decisions. Several ways to get an appropriate result can be found: They range from consulting experts and written records to asking the supernatural. But also techniques of producing decisions can be found: Casting lots formed the classical approach to select one option. Sortition by lots is defined as an objective and decisive approach in solving a problem. The method seemed to be confined to the selecting of persons in the Christian hierarchy, but a number of episodes demonstrate that procedures similar to casting lots still existed in early Byzantine times and later. Two examples taken from the Anonymus Valesianus and Procopius of Caesarea will be the starting point to discuss the intentionality, the framing and the consequences of such a method (*imitatio sortium*).

---

16:30-17:00

Karen Piepenbrink (Gießen University)

### **Sortition and democracy in Athenian political discourse**

There has been a great deal of research on the political use of sortition in classical Greek poleis since a long time. Meanwhile, we are rather well informed in particular about the Athenian practice of lottery, especially of its application in personnel decisions. Despite of that, there is still a controversy about the intentions and connotations of sortition in fifth and fourth century Athens. This applies not only to modern research but to ancient political discourse, as well. My contribution will focus on the ancient reflections concerning the relationship of sortition and democracy. Different from former scholars who concentrated on non-democratic Athenian authors who wrote intensively on the subject, I will pay more attention to democratic writers who seem to be less interested in the topic but are nonetheless of great importance for a historical framing of the issue.

---

17:00-17:30

Rüdiger Schmitt (University of Münster)

**Lots in the archaeological record of Israel and Judah in the Iron Age, ca. 1200-587 BC**

Hebrew terms denoting deductive or instrumental divination are *qōsēm qēsāmîm* (Dt 18:10; Ez 21:26) 'drawing lots', but also used generally for divination. A pair of lots for divination purposes, the *'ūrîm* and *tummîm* are mentioned frequently in the pentateuchal and historical books, both as a pair and a single item. The nature of the *'ūrîm* and *tummîm* remains unclear from the texts, but it can be assumed that they are imagined as small objects like stones, game pieces or dice. Casting the *'ūrîm* and *tummîm*-lots is attested in the biblical sources as a legitimate way of seeking YHWH's will and is mentioned in the context of important state issues. The underlying practice seems to be a simple yes or no oracle. The paper will present an overview of the (possible) types of lots (astragali, game pieces, and dice) and their different archaeological contexts (temples and shrines, work-related spaces and – most prominently – households, as well as their possible ritual use in their respective archaeological contexts.

---

17:30-18:00

Petra Schmidl (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg)

**Lot casting practices in pre-modern Arabic sources: some reflections and examples**

Speaking in a general way about casting lots, one might conceive it as all practices that allow to choose randomly and unconsciously between two or more items. By doing so, one gets either an immediate result of one specific outcome, e.g., when rolling a die, or a limited number of random patterns, e.g., when dabbing dots on sand and finally resulting in a geomantic tableau. Accordingly, and by their very nature, lot casting practices do not only aim at predicting future events, but also help in making a quick and unaffected decision. These rather theoretical considerations are also reflected in examples found in pre-modern Islamic sources.

Therefore, this talk will first provide some general reflections concerning the nature and manifestations of lot casting practices. In a second step, they will then be supplemented by selected examples documented in texts and by artefacts, e.g., lot books, to illustrate the broad variety of lot castings practices and the attitude towards them in pre-modern Islamic societies.

---

18:30-19:00

Stéphanie Homola (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg)  
**Selecting through discarding: agency and drawing lots**

In many cultural contexts, drawing lots is used as a selection process which implies flipping a two-sided object (such as a coin) or randomly picking an object among a bunch of seemingly identical objects (such as a straw or piece of paper). In some cases, the selection process develops into more complex procedures which involve several steps or even sophisticated algorithms. Based on examples of such complex procedures taken out of the European and Chinese contexts, I will explore how selection is achieved through discarding processes which shed light on the various goals that human communities/groups wish to attain when resorting to drawing lots.

---

19:00-19:30

Yang Shen (The Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity  
Göttingen)  
**The efficacy of lottery divination in Buddhist temples in contemporary China**

Qian (“sticks”) or lottery divination is a convenient self-help technique for generic Chinese temple-goers to make a resolution. The practice involves a temple-goer shaking a tube of wood or bamboo-made sticks until only one stick falls out. The sticks are randomly numbered while the numbers are indexes of pre-written poems. Previous studies focus more on poem repositories or text-interpreters’ role in divination. My recent fieldwork indicates that temple-goers clearly distinguish a lot from a poem. The most critical transformative moment occurs in the ritual action of seeking the lot, by which temple-goers performatively turn themselves into a divine communicator and an asking agent. Interpretive relationships are secondary; they happen between various actors who share temple spaces contingently and are established case by case through a sequence of entrustment moves. On the whole, the paper discusses layers of efficacious production in lottery divinatory interactions, based on fieldwork in 2015-6 in a Buddhist temple in East China. It emphasizes the epistemic consequence of the drawing-the-lot ritual and its priority over ensuing interpretive conversations.

**Photo:** Two balloting urns and a wooden bowl filled with leather ballots  
(17th c.; Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici, Venezia)