CHAPTER 7

# IN THE HANDS OF FRAUDS

If humans have the capacity to construct authentic avenues to the divine, these same avenues can also be usurped for fraudulent purposes. The idea of using artifice to fake divine connection offered rich content explored by a wide range of ancient authors, including historians, playwrights, and philosophers, long before the second century CE, when Lucian was composing his many works. The possibility of fake oracles and of bribing the Pythia is already woven into the *Histories* of Herodotus, for example.[1] The reputation of *chrēsmologoi* (oracle interpreters) suffers in the hands of Classical writers from Aristophanes and Thucydides to Plato.[2] Yet the conversation takes on a particular flavour in the first few centuries CE due, at least in part, to the religious circumstances at large.

The Roman Imperial period is known for being one of intensified religious choice and competition – it is the period for which John North created his famous model of the 'religious marketplace'.[3] Following the economic analogy, North made a case for how the change from embedded to differentiated religion in the Imperial period can be seen as analogous to a change from a monopoly to a market system. At the same time as offering individuals a choice of religious 'products' that served as identifiers of social grouping within communities, *poleis* were also competing with each other through religious

[1] Hdt. 5.62.2–63.2, 6.66.3, 6.75.3; 6.123. With Price 1985, 142; Flower 2008, 217; Kurke 2008–9.

[2] On which see especially Bowden 2003; compare Flower 2008, 62–5, 138–9. On protecting against fraud, see Rutherford 2013, 106–9.

[3] North 1992 adapts the model from the work of sociologist Peter Berger. For a robust critical assessment of the appropriateness of the 'religious marketplace' metaphor to this period see Wendt 2016, 217–23. See also the comments of Engels and Van Nuffelen 2014, 9–44 and the contribution of Eidinow in the same volume. MacMullen 1981 has suggested the metaphor of a 'melting pot', somewhat unhelpfully since religions were not blended together.

means from temple-building and renovation to the (re)establishment of festivals and games. Feeding into this religiously framed inter-*polis* competition was the well-known archaising Classicisms of the elite of the second century CE which led to the revival of traditional civic rituals and to an intensified interest in the best-known religious sites of the Classical period, especially oracular sites such as Delphi and Claros. This was a time, then, which offered rich contemporary inspiration for issues surrounding the legitimacy of and competition between cults, and these are reflected in Lucian's satiric *Alexander or The False Prophet*.[4]

Lucian's *Alexander* (written *c.*180 CE) follows its eponymous protagonist – a native of Abonoteichos, a small port city on the coast of the Black Sea in the region of Paphlagonia and administratively within the Roman province of Pontus and Bithynia – back to his home city, where he manages to establish and propagate the cult of Glykon, hailed as *Asklēpios neos*, the 'new Asklepios'.[5] The aim of the text is to reveal the cult as a complete and utter scam. To do so, the narrator pulls back the curtain on various tricks of deceit which Alexander used to create and then propagate the religiosity of the cult. The *Alexander* as a text is many things: part biography, part invective, part polemical exposure, part Epicurean apologetic. But rather than focusing on the elements of the text that make it a rationalistic tirade against the superstitious folk of Abonoteichos and a personal attack on the *goēs* Alexander, I will centre my examination around the idea of technique and religious fraud. I hope to bring into relief not just general issues surrounding how humans establish access to the supernatural realm and the implications of the human hand in creating and regulating access

[4] Contextualising *Alexander* and its themes in contemporary literature, see Caster 1938, 9; Bompaire 1958, 614–19; Anderson 1982, 80; Branham 1984; 1989, 181–210; Jones 1986, 135; Bendlin 2006; Elm Von der Osten 2006 especially 147–51 on Orakelkritik; Petsalis-Diomidis 2010, 42; Whitmarsh 2015, 230; ní Mheallaigh 2018, 246; Thonemann 2021, 6–9, 28–34. For Alexander within the phenomenon of religious freelancers, see Wendt 2016, especially 1–9.

[5] Luc. *Alex*. 43. The text has received a lot of scholarly attention from many angles. Two recent commentaries which provide ample further bibliography are Victor 1997 and Thonemann 2021.

to the transcendental, but, in particular, how the technological formed and informed (explorations of) theology in this period.

Lucian's *Alexander* relies on the two commonplace concerns: the role of the human hand in the production of sacred images and the potential anxieties surrounding such. These two ideas are then brought to life by embedding them in a narrative based on another characteristic element of ancient religion: the adaptability of the system to incorporate new gods. As we have seen, although this is not a novelty of the Imperial period, the changing religious landscape through the introduction of new cults – from the Isis, Mithras, and Imperial cults to Judaism and Christianity – was a germane issue of Lucian's time.[6] Yet if there always existed and continued to exist old-fashioned competition between cults and sanctuaries, the story of Alexander of Abonoteichos is also very much embedded within and symptomatic of an early Roman Imperial world where there is a final important feature at play: the rise of religious freelancers. As Heidi Wendt has shown, despite stories of self-authorised religious actors being frequently bound up in highly interested, usually negative commentaries, evidence confirms that these specialised forms of religion abounded, especially in the first two centuries CE.[7] Just as we see in Lucian's text, there existed great competition between individual religious experts to enlist followers or students. Certainly, Alexander of Abonoteichos is characterised by the narrator as a religious entrepreneur actively participating in spreading his religious 'product' to a market that had other options. Creating a genuine sense of religious aura through various techniques is thus integral to Alexander's success. Beyond comments about cultic competition at the general level, then, Lucian's *Alexander* through all of its satiric baggage makes a particular contribution in its exploration of the importance of successful manipulation of *technē* on an individual level for the fabrication of miracles, and so for the reputation of cult.

[6] The bibliography is large. As a start for Athens see Garland 1992; Parker 1997b, 152–98; 2011, 273–7 (appendix 2). For the Roman Empire see North 1992; North and Price 2011; Price 2012; Engels and Van Nuffelen 2014.

[7] Wendt 2016.

## Technology and Cult Propagation

Epigraphic and numismatic evidence has convincingly corroborated Lucian's description of the Glykon cult, at least from geographic and iconographic angles.[8] The evidence also suggests, further to Lucian's brief comment at the end of his text, that the cult outlived Alexander by at least a century. This evidence has become well known, and I restrict myself to a few historicist comments on the basis of this material corpus.[9]

The peculiar iconography of the god described in the *Alexander* – a snake with an anthropomorphic head[10] – is at least partially corroborated by three surviving statue(ette)s contemporary with the cult from Romania and Athens which have serpentine bodies and humanlike heads (Figure 7.1).[11] Towards the end of the *Alexander*, the protagonist is said to have petitioned the emperor to change the name of Abonoteichos to Ionopolis and to have struck coins with this new name showing the images of Alexander on one side and of Glykon on the other.[12] The numismatic evidence confirms that the request was at least partly granted.[13] The cult appears to have had a regional numismatic presence too, as coins bearing the name of Glykon and his image are found around the wider Bithynia region at Tieion, Gangra/Germanicopolis, Pergamum, and Nicomedeia.

These pieces of evidence proving the existence of a cult of Glykon do not prove the existence of Alexander as a person, nor of any specific detail in the text except perhaps the changing of the

[8] In general for the material and epigraphic evidence for the Glykon cult, see Weinreich 1921; Caster 1938, 95–8; Robert 1981; Jones 1986, 137–8; Petsalis-Diomidis 2010, 14–17; Thonemann 2021, 15–21.

[9] Lucian's precise relationship with historical truth in writing this text is a complicated issue which continues to vex scholars: see Weinreich 1921; Caster 1938; Jones 1986, 133–48; Branham 1989, 182; Victor 1997; Sfameni Gasparro 1999; Chaniotis 2002b; Dickie 2004; Elm Von der Osten 2006; Bremmer 2017; Thonemann 2021, 13–34. All accept the basic historicity of the cult with different ensuing agendas.

[10] For analysis of the Glykon iconography, and in particular the relation to Asklepion iconography, see Petsalis-Diomidis 2010, 14–30.

[11] Museum of National History and Archaeology, Constanza, Romania 2003; Boston Museum of Fine Arts 03.986; Agora Museum, Athens B 253.

[12] Luc. *Alex.* 58.

[13] A number of inscriptions have also been associated with the cult of Glykon, and to Lucian's text, with varying degrees of surety. For a full discussion see Petsalis-Diomidis 2010, 43–5.


Figure 7.1 C2 CE marble statue of Glykon from Tomis. Museum of National History and Archaeology, Constanza, Romania 2003.

name of Abonoteichos to Ionopolis. My ultimate aim is not to discover whether the autophone was actually constructed by Alexander, or whether Glykon's Mysteries were celebrated as they are described in the text. Instead, I seek to explore how technology and religion intersect *both* as literary fictions and as plausible historical realities, and to ask how that might have been

experienced and interpreted in historical context. Though sympathetic to cautions against historicising the text, I will endeavour to offer an interpretation which does justice to the literary strategies of Lucian's *Alexander* without shying away from the insights that adducing literary and non-literary parallels might offer.[14]

The material evidence which offers a historical basis for the cult has been used by scholars to draw further conclusions regarding the cult's formation and propagation.[15] Chaniotis has demonstrated that if the inhabitants of Abonoteichos were willing to accept the new god, this was not because of their stupidity, as the narrator posits, but because they were confronted with very familiar processes.[16] These range, for example, from the way that Alexander dresses, tosses his hair, speaks in tongues, and claims divine descent, to the legion of cult personnel he accrues, his use of torchlight and hymnody, as well as the cult's 'package-deal' combination of divination, healing, and initiation. This approach to understanding the *Alexander* has proved fruitful, yet in these analyses, the mechanical component is invariably relegated to theatrics: stripped of its capacity for genuine religious persuasion, simply branded as a classic Lucianic rhetorical tool. In other words, the most striking element of Glykon's epiphanic and oracular manifestations – the mechanical component – is never taken seriously as a technique to create religious aura, despite evidently playing an important role in the authenticity of the cult for its believers, and what the narrator considers forgery or, as we could reformulate it, in the construction of belief and disbelief.

There are (at least) two reasons scholars have been reluctant to use the technological elements of the cult of Glykon in any meaningful way in their analyses of the *Alexander*. The first is the emphasis on the sociological aspects of cult formation, which has been the focus of historical analyses of the text to date. This was encouraged by the adoption of John North's 'religious marketplace' model on which, for example, Chaniotis' work leans strongly. If North's model has value for looking at the propagation of the cult through social means, it is limited in that it does not help

[14] Bendlin 2011 resolutely opposes historicising the *Alexander*.
[15] Victor 1997; Sfameni Gasparro 1999; Chaniotis 2002b. [16] Chaniotis 2002b.

us understand why one religious 'product' was preferred to another, or how these differed theologically. Here, I want to distinguish between the sociological issue of establishing a cult and the anthropological one of creating religious aura. The social effectiveness of cult must go hand in hand with, but is not identical to, the theological effectiveness. The social propaganda of the cult of Glykon – and the situation of religious competition of the Graeco-Roman world in the second century CE – is often acknowledged and foregrounded, while the technological marvels are relegated to the category of 'religious trickery', as if to count these elements as authentic parts of the cult would decrease its claim to historical validity. This is inadvertently to fall prey to Lucian's rhetoric while claiming to see beyond it. Instead, I contend that real theological persuasion was going on in the use of technological epiphany and prophecy, and that Lucian's text is useful for us in unpacking the power of enchantment of this category of religious mediator.

Alongside the sociological focus of scholarship on the *Alexander*, the tendency to assume that the technology in the text was a fictional product of the satiric genre – part of the theatrical metaphors throughout the text and nothing more – comes from ignoring our other evidence for technological epiphanies in ancient religion. This in turn likely stems from a Protestant sensibility where spirit is privileged over matter, theatricality is disavowed, and any connection between the technical and the divine is resisted. In fact, this is precisely the attitude of our early Christian texts, which explicitly denounce the combination of mechanics and religion as fraudulent. But to see the evidence from Christian apologists as supporting Lucian's satiric description of these techniques of 'religious quackery' is to miss the broader historical point regarding the place of mechanics and theology in antiquity.

The early third-century *Refutation of All Heresies*, usually attributed to Hippolytus of Rome,[17] provides some of the best examples of the use of technologies for religious effect in pagan religion in general, and specifically corroborates Lucian's description of the

[17] On the authorship of the text see Litwa 2016, xxxii–xl with further references.

cult of Glykon.[18] *Refutation of All Heresies* condemns the following religious tricks (among many others): perforating and resealing eggs,[19] loosening and resealing wax seals,[20] and fashioning oracular autophones.[21] These are all familiar to the reader of Lucian's *Alexander*. Hippolytus' account does not guarantee the historicity of the cult of Glykon, or of Alexander's actions, but it does allow us to broaden the picture of the phenomenon at stake beyond the confines of Lucianic fiction. Yet while *Alexander* and *Refutation of All Heresies* are often made to speak to each other on equal terms, the defrauding 'mission' of Hippolytus is different to the Lucianic narrator's in important ways.

Hippolytus' text is concerned with identifying Hellenic practices – namely Greek philosophy, mystery cults, astrology, and magic – that have been adopted by the narrator's Christian enemies.[22] In presenting the sources that are 'plagiarised' by his opponents, Hippolytus draws a genealogy between Hellenes and heretics which in turn deauthenticates the miracles according to (his) Christian doctrine: that it is the *logos* of God which is true.[23] In Hippolytus, Hellenic practice (including the construction of technological miracles) is put against the Word of God. In the *Alexander*, the situation is more complex because Alexander is acting in a world where the very same miracles *could* be authentic. In one case, it is about proving that the miracles belong to a different theology; in the other case, these very same mediators *are* what holds pagan theology together: it is not available to the *Alexander* simply to say that Alexander's miracles are fraudulent because God does not act like that. The core issue that the narrator of the *Alexander* faces is how to debunk a miracle when God *does* work by these very same mechanisms. For Hippolytus, science and technology are excluded from the theology altogether, but in the case of Lucian's *Alexander*, science and technology are implicitly acknowledged as integral *to* the theology. This is not to say that

[18] Compare discussion in Caster 1938; Ogden 2009, 284–6; ní Mheallaigh 2018, 230–6.
[19] Hippol. *Haer.* 4. 29; compare Luc. *Alex.* 14.
[20] Hippol. *Haer.* 4. 34; compare Luc. *Alex.* 19–20.
[21] Hippol. *Haer.* 4.28 (boy as medium), 4.41 (empty skull as medium); compare Luc. *Alex.* 26–8.
[22] Hippol. *Haer.* 1.8; compare 1.11 on the heretics as 'plagiarisers', with Litwa 2016, xlii–xliv.
[23] Hippol. *Haer.* 10.32–4.

Lucian is or is not adhering to traditional religion. Rather, the point is that as an author, Lucian is well aware that the incorporation of scientific and technological knowledges into Greek religion from at least the *deus ex machina* of fifth-century Attic theatre offers him considerable scope to play with these same themes in his text. While for his Christian contemporaries polemical exposure was just that, for his pagan readership, Lucian is toying with the divide between exposure and didactic manual, a point on which I will further elaborate shortly.

Hippolytus furnishes the most easily comparable material in terms of the specific techniques that are ascribed to pagan fraudsters, but similar issues also come out of other early Christian apologetic texts. Clement of Alexandria, for example, not only denounces material idols in general for the indirect contact they offer with God,[24] but also condemns religious technologies, especially as they are used in Mysteries. Given his agenda, Clement's description of pagan mystery practices must of course be taken with a pinch of salt, but in a passage that does not seem to exaggerate or invent too drastically, Clement lists the worthless *symbola* that the initiates of the Mysteries of Dionysus are duped into believing. These include 'the knucklebone, the ball, the spinning-top, apples, wheel, mirror, fleece' (ἀστράγαλος, σφαῖρα, στρόβιλος, μῆλα, ῥόμβος, ἔσοπτρον, πόκος).[25] We have examined many of these objects over the course of the book. But, as with Hippolytus' text, this is more than just additional evidence for the existence of the kinds of technologies already discussed (this time in the context of mystery cults): these Christian apologists help to confirm the efficiency of such objects in creating authentic religious experience in the pagan context.

This is another point at which theories of play are useful for interpreting the material at hand. Play can only be effective if the players believe in the game. Doubt, we have seen, is a core part of the attitude of belief and bears a similar role in religious context to indeterminacy in a game which explains the variations in

[24] Clem. Al. *Protr.* 67: 'I seek God not the works of God'; compare Clem. Al. *Strom.* 2.4.14.2.

[25] Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.15. The orphic couplet quoted by Clement mentions wheels and, curiously, articulated dolls of some sort: 'κῶνος καὶ ῥόμβος καὶ παίγνια καμπεσίγυια.'

a player's commitment.[26] Yet it is neither indeterminacy, nor even cheating, that destroys the game but rather the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional and who thus refuses to play because the game is meaningless.[27] The Christian authors here are the nihilists, while Lucian, through the character of Alexander, is interested in bringing the ideas of the cheat and of doubt into his exploration of the agonistic game that is cult propagation by religious freelancers in the Imperial period. Lucian's text is certainly humorous, light-hearted, and playful, but it is also ludic in a way that is not frivolous but impacts arguments on religious belief in general, and on the technological miracle in particular.

## Mechanics among Literary and Literal Theatrics

While it is now generally acknowledged that Lucian's story around the cult of Glykon includes various familiar features of cult, scholars of the text still tend to see Lucian's descriptions of the technological elements as part of his theatrical presentation of the whole 'drama'.[28] If we acknowledge that Lucian might instead be presenting technological forms of epiphany and divination as part of his exploration of the avenues of the human creation of the sacred, we might be moved to see a different relation between the text, the technological, the sacred and the theatrical. Could it be that as well as forming part of the typical Lucianic literary repertoire, the theatrical metaphors throughout the *Alexander*, and Lucian's staging of the entire cult as Alexander's theatrical performance, were enabled by the prominent place that technology plays in the theatrical realm? In this case, Lucian does not include the technological as part of the theatrical analogy he is making in the *Alexander* but, instead, the technological elements of the cult allow him to make a link to the theatrical precisely through the use of technology there too.

[26] See pages 26–7. [27] Caillois 1961, 7.
[28] Especially see Branham 1989, 196–207; Chaniotis 2002b. A notable exception is ní Mheallaigh, who integrates mechanics into Roman *Wunderkultur* 2014, 261–77; 2018, 246–9. On theatrical imagery in Lucian in general, see Whitmarsh 2001, 254–63.

Lucian recounts how the fourth day of the celebration of the Mysteries of Glykon involved a re-enactment of the marriage of Alexander to the moon goddess Selene.[29] In this ceremony, Alexander – recasting himself as an Endymion figure – lay down pretending to be asleep, and the woman chosen for the role of Selene, a certain Rutilia, descended from the ceiling 'as if she were descending from heaven' (ὡς ἐξ οὐρανοῦ).[30] Unlike the movable cult statue of Glykon and unlike the autophone, Lucian here gives no indication of the precise technology in place, but scholars have, I think rightly, tended to imagine the use of a *mēchanē* of the sort used in the theatre explored in depth in Part I of the book.[31] The *mēchanē* was, in many ways, ground zero when it came to mechanical epiphany: it stood as the most obvious and long-standing context in which viewers were used to associating the divine and the technical. On one level, the theatre works with Lucian's repeated literary theme of appearance and reality and on another, it offers Lucian the image of spectacle and illusion which he uses to characterise Alexander as a charlatan. Yet on a third level, the fact that mechanics were used in the theatrical context to manufacture onstage epiphanies allows Lucian also to absorb the *deus ex machina* within his complex exploration of the human manufacture of the sacred.

## (De)limiting the Miraculous

The success of Lucian's *Alexander* lies in its artful presentation of both the hatred and the fanaticism that surrounds the cult and the idol of Glykon.[32] The hatred is filtered through the narratorial perspective, while the fanaticism is represented by the (hyperbolically)

[29] Mysteries described Luc. *Alex*. 38–40. On the mysteries of Glykon see Bremmer 2017, 62–9. On the marriage scene more specifically see ní Mheallaigh 2020b, 44–6.

[30] Luc. *Alex*. 39.

[31] Thonemann 2021, 122 notes the parallel with Plut. *Sull*. 11, where a statue of Nike descends mechanically to crown Mithridates from above, and Plut. *Sert*., where Nikes (plural) descend by machinery. Ní Mheallaigh 2018, 235–6 sees this as a staging of a 'drawing down the Moon' illusion of the sort described in Hippol. *Haer*. 4.37–8. For more on 'lunar technologies' see ní Mheallaigh 2020b on the moon in the literary and scientific imagination.

[32] The conflicting responses to images through scientific, religious, and artistic lenses form the basis of the idea of *iconoclash*, for which see Latour 2002.

increasing number of worshippers – starting from Abonoteichos, extending into the neighbouring regions of Bithynia, Galatia, and Thrace, then to farther parts of Ionia and Cilicia, and, eventually, 'the whole Roman Empire'.[33] Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis has shown the way that these two registers work to contrast elite concepts of *logos* and *paideia* with the irrational values associated with the low-class and the foreign, and how this forms part of a critique of the binary model of elite religion versus popular superstition.[34] Building on Petsalis-Diomidis' demonstration of how Lucian is satirising the use of false *paideia* to criticise the elite, I suggest that part of this involves demonstrating his own *paideia* as it relates to the knowledge of certain practical applications of knowledge (*technai*) in order, precisely, to position himself as (pseudo-)*didaskalos* of the miraculous. As with so many of Lucian's texts, the *Alexander* is concerned with distinguishing truth from falsity, yet the *Alexander* is particularly forceful in its mission not only to demonstrate that appearances can be deceiving, but to indicate *how to determine* a hoax. The distinction I am making is the one between the observer noting 'that trick can't be true,' and 'that trick can't be true, because I *know* that it is done in the following way . . . '. This plays out in the text at the level of religious mediation, in determining whether these strategies and objects intended to connect with the divine are genuine or not, and how one can tell the difference.

Alexander as a prophet is clearly a quack, but what of the miracles he produces? Lucian intentionally complicates the narrator's defrauding programme by engaging with contemporary discourse around the miraculous in both religious and scientific terms. Specifically, he makes room for the text to act as an instruction manual leaning into the inherent didacticism of technical texts. The narrator's unravelling of the miracles of Alexander acknowledges and dramatises the interactions between science and religion, pushing the reader into complicity with the fraudulent.[35] The *Alexander* is not just an exposé (of the exposé,

[33] Luc. *Alex*. 2 ('The whole of the Roman empire'), 15 (Paphlagonia), 18 (Bithynia, Galatia, Thrace), 30 (Ionia, Cilicia, Paphlagonia, Galatia, Italy).
[34] Petsalis-Diomidis 2010, especially 42–66.
[35] This dynamic is demonstrated in ní Mheallaigh 2018. For science (and) fiction in Lucian more broadly, see ní Mheallaigh 2014.

as nicely put by ní Mheallaigh) in which Lucian 'colludes with the reader about the more slippery aspects of his own wonder-work, in a form of authorial self-exposure',[36] but in the process of such exposure, the narrator leaves a workable record of how to re-enact the same miracles. If on a literary level Alexander's text uses the discourse of wonder to promote his writing to wonder-worthy levels (both Alexander and Lucian are wonder-workers), on a practical level, in the process of doing so, Lucian renders the reader complicit not just by *understanding* the fraud, but by empowering them to replicate it. This is at once a critique of the educated people's (i.e. the *pepaideumenoi*'s) incapacity to see the tricks for what they are, as noted by Petsalis-Diomidis, as well as a kind of forced 'education' of the various *technai* that have gone into the manufacture of the cult. I take two examples from the text to demonstrate how Lucian brings scientific vocabulary and technical knowledge into the processes of cult in order to show the mediated nature of *both*, and, given that they are not as opposed as might first appear, how one can be learnt and used to facilitate the other.

The *technē* of medicine forms an important part of the religiosity of the Glykon cult since the god is seen as the new Asklepios, able to enact healing miracles. Early on, we learn that a man from Tyana educated (*exepaideuse*) Alexander, but that this teacher was a disreputable *goēs*, 'magician' and total charlatan.[37] The man was also, however, a public physician (*iatros*). A brief quotation from the *Odyssey* allows for a swift demonstration of erudition and, more to the point, of the narrator's perception that the tension in the Tyanan's character was reflected in the latter's profession, since *pharmaka* too were both terrible and wondrous, dangerous but indispensable (*esthla* … *lugra*). Ridiculed though he is, this man clearly did a decent job of teaching medicine to Alexander, who is later reported not just to have prescribed medical treatment and diets to his worshippers, but to have produced 'many useful remedies' (πολλὰ καὶ χρήσιμα φάρμακα).[38] Given the narrator's overwhelming disdain for every part of the pseudo-prophet and his cult, this brief compliment is unusual. Healing was typical of

[36] Ní Mheallaigh 2018, 237. [37] Luc. Alex. 5. [38] Luc. Alex. 22.

Asklepeia in general, but *neos Asklēpios*, we are told, developed a new, particularly effective healing ointment made from bear fat.[39] The effectiveness of this restorative ointment stands in direct opposition to the fraudulent oracles that Alexander delivers. While he may have 'combined guesswork with trickery' when it came to his oracular answers, Alexander was able to dispense accurate medical knowledge, and even invented a novel and efficient treatment. He is walking evidence of the importance of the instruction of *technai* as part of the discourse of the wondrous because if we judge a miracle by its outcome, Alexander's medical knowledge has made the jump from suspicious to sincere. Does he then pass from charlatan to legitimate miracle-worker, at least in the field of medicine? There is also an issue of double determination at play here, whereby Asklepios as patron of medicine is involved in any physician's success. Does that mean that *neos Asklēpios* is being promoted to authentic divine patron of medicine? In any case, Lucian's presentation certainly (and perhaps bizarrely) legitimises Alexander's medical abilities and in doing so, complicates the relationship between that technical expertise, its teachability and the (authenticity of the) divine.

The distinction between divine knowledge and scientific skill or forecast is one that the Greeks and the Romans reflected upon more broadly, and since much earlier than Lucian's time. It is a conversation at least as old as the Hippocratic authors, if not the early natural philosophers, into which Roman authors of course also intervened. In Cicero's *De Divinatione* we read that certain types of men make predictions based not on divine inspiration, but on reason (*horum sunt auguria non divini impetus, sed rationis humanae*).[40] This does not make them divine, the text goes on to say; they simply know the laws of nature (*natura*). The angle that Lucian takes in the *Alexander* – namely the focus on the outcome of the miracle, rather than its source – is a particular spin on this familiar argument. Lucian shows a greater level of interest not just in acknowledging but problematising the line where divine

[39] Scholars note that bears were a nice local touch to the story given that until the nineteenth century, brown bears were common in the mountains in the Paphlagonian region. See Robert 1980, 415; Thonemann 2021, 26.

[40] Cic. *Div.* 1.111.

knowledge ends and human knowledge begins by leaning on the fact that the outcome looks the same. This resonates with the sentiments found in the Cynic philosopher Oenomaus' *Exposure of Frauds*, a polemic against oracles written a few decades earlier than Lucian was writing.[41] Oenomaus takes issue with the reliability of oracular responses on a number of fronts, including answers which have as their basis 'natural' (i.e. explicable through the laws of nature) rather than divine knowledge. In one instance, Oenomaus points out that the advice that an old man should marry a young woman if he wants children 'is not the advice of a prophet, but of anyone who understands nature (*physis*)'.[42] As with Cicero's comment, this is not quite as banal as saying that it is common-sense knowledge; there is some level of superior 'technical' understanding at play, but it is something that humans can attain without divine consultation.

The ideas of and discourses around *physis* were, as G. E. R. Lloyd has shown, utterly unique to the ancient Greek context.[43] Lloyd uses the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease* and the coalescing of medical and religious knowledges there to demonstrate the practical stakes of the debates around natural and divine. Following Lloyd's argument, we understand that behind these philosophical discussions are the realities of different practitioners delimiting their fields of expertise. The situation in the Imperial period is different from the early Greek medicine on which Lloyd bases his argument, perhaps most importantly in the sense that medical professionals had more formalised avenues for teaching and learning. Yet the problems that Lloyd identifies remain (or perhaps resurface as) relevant in a world where religious freelancers are particularly widespread and so where 'domains' of expertise were important to define.

Medical miracles are not the only kind in Alexander's repertoire. The oracular component of the cult of Glykon involved a series of techniques progressively introduced by Alexander to mediate

[41] See Hammerstaedt 1988 for the text and commentary. Thonemann 2021 helpfully offers and English translation and brief commentary of the fragments. See Elm von der Osten 2006 for *Alexander* read against Oenomaus and Plutarch's Pythian Dialogues. See Bendlin 2006 for Lucian's voice within wider imperial critique of oracles.

[42] Oenomaus fr. 11B Hammerstaedt. [43] Lloyd 1991.

divine foreknowledge. The first prophecies were delivered by worshippers writing their inquiry to the god on a scroll (*biblion*) which they proceeded to seal with wax or clay. Alexander then took the scrolls into the *adyton* 'inner sanctum' of Glykon's temple and returned them to the worshippers intact, but with the answer miraculously inscribed inside.[44] A lengthy and detailed explanation of three possible ways that Alexander could have forged this 'miracle', using different technical knowledge, ensues: unpeeling and re-sticking the wax by using a warm needle; making plaster (detail of the chemical composition of the plaster included) and then taking a mould of the seal impression to reuse once the scroll had been opened; putting marble dust into glue to make a paste that hardened and, again, using it to make a cast of the seal.[45] The didacticism is hard to miss. *Technai* here allow Alexander to forge divine responses and thus to look as if he were accessing divine knowledge. As in the case of medicine, however, it is possible to see this less as a straightforward denunciation and more as an exploration of the act of miracle-making, examining the extent to which forging a miracle still constitutes a miraculous act in the eye of the viewer/worshipper. On a textual level, this in turn brings the author-narrator-reader triangle into a forced teacher–learner relationship. The reader is released from being fed the knowledge that makes them complicit not just in identifying but possibly reproducing the fraud through an explicit mention of a contemporary work supposedly written by the intended recipient of the whole text, Celsus. The narrator praises the excellent treatise against sorcerers that Celsus wrote, which was able to preserve common sense in its readers despite citing so many instances of fraud like those just mentioned. Whether this evaluation of Celsus' texts is genuine or tongue-in-cheek is difficult to know for certain, but, in any case, it flags the potential for polemical exposures to go too far in the other direction and become helpful rather than harmful to the cause they are vilifying.

The backdrop to Lucian's narrative – namely the unstoppable momentum of the cult described at various points in the text – intentionally works against the narratorial voice and attests to the

[44] Luc. *Alex*. 19. [45] Luc. *Alex*. 21.

success of Alexander's methods. Every gullible follower of Alexander serves both as a punching bag for the narrator and to strengthen the case for the effectiveness of the religious entrepreneur's techniques in creating religious aura. The reader is told to 'listen up in order to expose these imposters',[46] yet through his efforts to defraud, Lucian creates multiple new ways both to perform and to view – and therefore to see authentic meaning in – the miracle(s). Ironically – and the irony, I would suggest, was not lost on Lucian – the text condemning the *pseudomantis* provides his readers with the tools to (re)create the very tricks he uncovers, rendering narrator and reader *thaumatopoioi*, *goētes*, and disreputable *didaskaloi* too.[47] Lucian's pamphlet thus metamorphoses from exposure of fraud to instruction manual of fraudulent technique, precisely putting into the world the kind of text that contemporaneous authors – Celsus, Hippolytus, Oenomaus – feared: one which dwells on the ways that technical knowledge can be put to the service of religion, and the teachability of this knowledge.

## Mechanical Epiphany and Technoprophecy

Let us now turn to a close analysis of the use of mechanics in the cult of Glykon as described in Lucian's *Alexander*, first, through the mechanically enhanced image of Glykon, and, second, through the addition of the autophone to deliver prophecy.

Alexander first presents *neos Asklēpios* to the people of Abonoteichos by fashioning an anthropomorphic, painted, and lifelike head made of linen, which he affixes to the body of a real serpent. The head has a mechanism which, by horsehairs, would allow the snake to open and close its mouth, and to dart its black tongue in and out.[48] Viewing the divinity was orchestrated in such a way as to imitate the viewing of Alexander the Great in his

[46] Luc. *Alex*. 21.

[47] 'Magic' (*goēteia*) was a serious and convictable offence at the time as Apuleius' defence shows. Incidentally, part of Apuleius' defence deals with his use of the mirror, justifying its philosophical as opposed to magical use: Apul. *Apol*. 13–16. On mirrors used to create religious aura, see pages 113–16.

[48] Luc. *Alex*. 12.

last days, appealing to the cultural memory of a long-since deified human.[49] It is stressed that worshippers could and did touch the manifestation of the god, but the moment of encounter itself was fleeting.[50] The crowd passed by quickly, pushed towards the exit by the next wave of fanatical admirers, and this, apart from filling them with fervour, intentionally compromised the accuracy of their viewing experience (καὶ πρὶν ἀκριβῶς ἰδεῖν).[51] The worshippers are left wanting more, forced to rely on a brief but evidently powerful combination of visual and haptic connection to stand as proof of the god's existence.[52] The moment of manifestation was dimly lit by torchlight and this too likely worked to increase the religiosity, given artificial light's association with mystery cult.[53]

Lucian's explanation of the effect of Glykon's epiphany on its worshippers is another (albeit complicated) piece of evidence which we can use to think through the issues of viewership which recur throughout this book. Here we have a description of the effect of a technological epiphany in an ancient cult context or, at least, the purported effect, through the disdain of the narrator, of such an epiphany on the gullible masses. The vocabulary of Lucian's description is in line with what technical texts claim of the mechanical marvel. Various elements make the Glykon epiphany marvellous.[54] First, it was prodigious (*terastios*) that a snake which worshippers had seen a few days prior born from an egg was now a large serpent.[55] Second, this snake had a human face and was tame.[56] Third, the miracle was convincing precisely because Alexander allowed haptic contact with the deity, which also let them get close enough to see the head opening and shutting its mouth. In other words, while snakes are typically wild and unpredictable, the Pellan snake was tame and would submit to anything; while nature usually determines a fixed rate of growth, this serpent

[49] Luc. *Alex*. 16. And, of course, playing into the literary theatrics around the two 'Alexanders' of the story.
[50] Luc. *Alex*. 16–17. [51] Luc. *Alex*. 16.
[52] For touch as both the crudest and most discerning sense, see Purves 2018, 4–7.
[53] Deubner 1966, 87; Clinton 2004. On light and dark in ancient religion, see Parisinou 2000; Boutsikas 2017.
[54] I summarise the reasons given at Luc. *Alex*. 16–17.
[55] The 'first' epiphany is described in Luc. *Alex*. 13–14.
[56] Acquisition of this tame snake is described in Luc. *Alex*. 7.

grew unusually fast; while certain conventions existed for the visual representation of the divine, this god has a completely peculiar, humano-serpentine form with a smooth, writhing body and mechanically animated face. All these elements make *this* representation of the god religiously enchanting and explain why it drew such large crowds. The mechanical epiphany of Glykon was so successful because it contained so many elements that were *para physin*, that exceeded what nature was capable of without technical assistance. As we have seen, *para physin* (and its inverse *kata physin*) is terminology which lies at the very heart of the technological's relation to the miraculous in the technical corpus too.[57] From the time of the Peripatetic *Mechanical Problems*, the technological and the miraculous are presented as inextricably linked and, critically for the present discussion, the patterns of nature have a particular role to play in (understanding) this link. Humans marvel at that which happens *kata physin*, 'according to nature', if they cannot understand the cause, and at things which happen *para physin*, 'beyond nature', thanks to the intervention of the branch of *technē* known as mechanics. Lucian's specific comments on the artificial linen head affixed to the Glykon image equipped with a hair-drawn mechanism which allows for the mouth to open and the tongue to move play right into this acknowledgement of the way that visible mechanics adds to the marvel, rather than detracting from it.

After the initial epiphany of the god, Alexander unveils a new and improved version of the artificial snakehead, having developed it also into a talking device used to deliver oracles: the 'autophone'.[58] Lucian explains that Alexander had fashioned the windpipe from a crane – that is, a *trachea*, known to be elongated in the crane, thus revealing a level of biological and pneumatic knowledge – to the head of the snake, through which the prophet could talk. The development of the autophone has a very specific purpose: to produce further shock and enchantment (*ekplēxis*) in the crowd.[59] This subsequent invention demonstrates that the aura

[57] See pages 10–16.
[58] Luc. *Alex*. 26. On the autophone as an adoption of Eastern cultic practice, see Caster 1938, 46–9. On autophones specifically in (Roman?) Egypt, see Ripat 2006, 323–4 with further references in note 91.
[59] Luc. *Alex*. 26.

produced was in cumulative proportion to the complexity of the technology involved. This is precisely the point of Gell's enchantment of technology.[60] The increased *ekplēxis* which Alexander's technical addition prompts aligns directly with the explanation that Hero of Alexandria gives on the intended impact of automata on the viewer. In introducing his text, Hero says that study of automaton-making is worthwhile on two fronts: for the skill involved on the side of the maker, and for the *ekplēxis* that the spectacle engenders on the side of the viewer.[61] Lucian's *Alexander*, despite its satire, is consistent with Hero's mechanical text in its presentation of the principles behind the religious persuasion of mechanics.

This is another point at which we might want to return to the didacticism in this text. To the *pepaideumenoi* educated in *mēchanica*, all these *mēchanēmata* should not fool them, but they should instead be seen for what they are: products of human *technē*. Is there an expectation of Lucian's elite readership that, given their education, they should see the applied mathematics at work? Or is this a slightly more existential move meant to question what it means to subscribe to a theology that so intimately fuses the humanly manufactured with the divine? In a different Lucianic work, *On the Syrian Goddess*, the narrator also describes autonomously produced oracles. Though entirely different in genre, as a pseudo-Herodotean *periegesis*, *On the Syrian Goddess* is, like the *Alexander*, also about cult and religious *thaumata*, and is also a text whose relationship with history is fraught and contested.[62]

The narrator in *On the Syrian Goddess* dwells on a certain oracle to 'Apollo'[63] in Hieropolis which works without a priest or prophet: a statue moves by itself, prompted only by divine volition to bring its prophesising to fruition.[64] It is autonomous,

[60] See pages 17–21. [61] Hero *Aut*. 1.1. Compare Hero *Aut*. 1.7–8.
[62] Lightfoot 2003 is indispensable.
[63] On the identity of this Apollo as Nebo see Lightfoot 2003, 456–64.
[64] Luc. *Syr. D*. 36. A passage in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* (1.23.13) seems to confirm the Heliopolitan Apollo's unique oracular technique and to attest another oracle that works in a similar way from the cult of Fortunae at Antium. Another comparison to be made is with the of Ammon at Siwa (Diod. Sic. 17.50.6), where an oracular god is carried around on a golden barque by priests who are directed *automatōs* by divine will.

but not mechanical. The idea in *On the Syrian Goddess* is that the divinity has an independent desire to communicate something to the human realm which is then realised through the convulsions of the object. In the *Alexander*, the presence of the (false) prophet is a constant obstruction from the perspective of the narrator, and thus an essential enabler from the perspective of the worshippers. In *On the Syrian Goddess*, the autonomous action of the statue supposedly removes the need for a human mediator but in practice, the narrator goes on to relate that a priest is called in to make sense of the movements of the statue. Taken together, these texts show a general interest in working through exactly how the human hand fits into issues of animation, epiphany, and oracular communication. Both autonomous animation (as in *On the Syrian Goddess*) and mechanical animation (as in *Alexander*) form part of a discussion around the production and the effect of the miraculous, as well as the poles of sought and unsought epiphany discussed at other points in this book. The technoprophecy of Glykon, and of the *Alexander*, indulges in the difficulties surrounding sought epiphany and divination given their reliance on the cooperation between divine and human. The auto-animated oracle of *On the Syrian Goddess* instead speaks to theophanic epiphany that is unsolicited from the part of any worshipper, but which also makes little sense without human framing of some sort.

Taking these two oracles together, then, there are a few conclusions to draw. The first is a reinforcement of the idea presented in Part II that there existed a variety of contemporaneous oracular techniques, some of which relied on and intentionally leant into the mechanical more than others. Lucian was very aware that sought and unsought modes of epiphany existed in Greek religion, that both had their epistemological and theological complexities, but that both were considered part of the vocabulary of the miraculous which had gained currency in the first centuries CE. Both, therefore, are of use to Lucian and his vast corpus of stories of gods, humans, cults, and the miraculous. The issue that the *Alexander* ultimately raises and problematises is whether there is a point beyond which there is too much human intervention and not enough space for the gods.