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The Predictions of P. Nigidius Figulus

Duncan E. MacRae

The Nigidius Figulus of tradition made good predictions. In August 63 BCE, the birth of a son made Gaius Octavius late for a meeting of the senate. Two Imperial historical writers, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, relate that when Nigidius found out the reason for the tardiness and so the astrologically significant hour of the birth, he announced that a master for the world had been born. Dio also adds the colorful detail that a terrified Octavius considered killing his own son, only to be restrained by Nigidius, who explained the inevitability of his prediction.¹ Lucan's *Bellum Civile* also uses Nigidius as forecaster: as Caesar's army bears down on Rome in 49, Nigidius as literary character makes an astrological prediction that Rome would find a permanent master after long years of war.²

¹ Suet. *Aug.* 94; Cass. Dio 45.1 (= T12, T13). In what follows, fragments and testimonia of Nigidius Figulus are cross-referenced to Swoboda 1889, but, where possible, are cited from recent authoritative critical editions of the tradent texts. Translations are my own, unless indicated.

² Luc. 1.639-72 (= T15). On this passage, see further Celotto in this volume.

The literal historicity of each of these stories is dubious—they belong to the early Imperial-period discourse on autocracy—but the connection made in that period between Nigidius and prediction should raise questions for us about Publius Nigidius Figulus, the historical learned writer.³ Why did the early Imperial tradition find this particular late Republican figure to be an appropriate vehicle for tales of monarchic forecasting? What can we say about *his* predictions, his ideas about prediction? These questions are timely: accelerating scholarly attention to the intellectual history of the late Republic, as this volume testifies, as well as to the relationship between divination and knowledge in antiquity and to Roman engagements with futurity, make Nigidius’ predictions compelling matter for Roman intellectual, religious, and cultural history.⁴

In seeking to move beyond the Imperial stories, a focus on his own writings requires that we cope with the fragmentary status of Nigidius’ texts: we only know his ideas through a very scanty set of later quotations or, more often, paraphrases. The existence and scope of these

³ See Volk 2021: 270-3 for similar caution about the two Augustan prophecies. For distinctions between the biographical tradition and the fragments of Nigidius Figulus, see Thesleff 1965 and Musial 2001. In this case, the stories around Nigidius may be a species of the broader genus of “mantic narratives” or “oracular tales”: students of Greek religion have recently devoted much attention to these narratives and their significance for the history of divination, see Raphals 2013: 279-315; Kindt 2016, Luraghi 2023.

⁴ Late Republican intellectual history: Moatti 2015; Volk 2021; see also the volumes reviewed in Volk 2020. Divination and knowledge: Johnston and Struck 2005; Lehoux 2012: 21-46; Struck 2016; Padilla Peralta 2018; Addey 2021. Roman futurity: Shaw 2019; Popkin and Ng 2021.

fragments are invariably influenced by the priorities of their tradents, so epistemic modesty regarding the views or words of the cited author is inescapable for the modern scholar.⁵ Such modesty need not, however, fall into a positivistic minimalism that confines itself to reportage of the fragments; if we are to say something—however contingent—about his thought, we should self-consciously take a more generous hermeneutic.⁶ This self-consciousness can rest on three principles: firstly, that we consider the full set of fragments, exploiting the distinct interests of the tradents, and suppose that Nigidius was a consistent thinker; secondly, that we assume that Nigidius’ own orientations and interests did also influence who cites him and when, allowing us to draw out implications from these contexts; thirdly, that comparison with materials contemporary or proximate to Nigidius can illuminate the likely significance of these limited quotations and paraphrases, at least from the perspective of his audiences—though we should beware borrowing entire thought systems to “fill the gaps.”

Taking a cue from the astrological stories, this essay first approaches the questions posed above through Nigidius’ fragments on divination, but ultimately will use more capacious heuristics of “prediction” and “future-making” to present a redescription of Nigidius’ thought. Redescription, an approach associated in religious studies especially with the late J. Z. Smith, involves the self-conscious use of etic and comparative categories for the purposes of

⁵ Brunt 1980 outlines the challenge for readers of prose fragments.

⁶ Telò 2018 is vital reading on hermeneutics for ancient literary fragments (and the scope of the intervention goes well beyond the book under review there).

interpretation.⁷ In this case, I argue, prediction as an intellectual practice can help us understand Nigidius' thought beyond standard modern distinctions of "science" and "religion" or ancient categories like "divination" and "grammar." As we will see, the wider frame reveals a distinct preoccupation in the fragments of Nigidius Figulus with prediction through natural signs of future events—and so with "future-making" as a semiotic enterprise.

The Divination of P. Nigidius Figulus

The first place to seek the historical Nigidius' predictions is the set of fragments on divination, ancient religious techniques for predicting the future. The longest of Nigidius' fragments in Swoboda's edition is John Lydus' translation of his remarkable brontosopic calendar, likely deriving from Etruscan traditions, if not replicating them.⁸ Using fixed casuistic sentence structure, the calendar gives contingent predictions from the appearance of thunder at Rome on particular dates of lunar months. For instance, for the second day of lunar April, the calendar reads: "if it thunders, it is a sign of justice, bringing good things to good people and bad things to bad people."⁹ Lydus also reports an "investigation of dreams" (*episkepsis ton oneiron*) that gives

⁷ Mack 1996 is a clear exposition; Smith 1982: 36-52 is the original intervention and an excellent example of redescription in practice.

⁸ On this text, see further Maras in this volume.

⁹ Lydus, *Ost.* 37 (= fr. 83): [April] β'. εἰ βροντήσῃ, δίκης σημεῖον, ἐσθλοῖς ἐσθλὰ φερούσης καὶ φαύλοις φαῦλα. Turfa 2012 is a full-scale study of the calendar (downplaying Nigidius' role), with much earlier bibliography.

a positive, “splendid,” significance to a dream of being hit by lightning.¹⁰ We also have fragments, transmitted by Aulus Gellius, of writings on *exta*—in other words on haruspicy proper—and on “private” augury.¹¹ In the latter report, we may catch a glimpse of some basic contrasts for the classification of bird flight: “Right differs from left, high-flying (*praepetes*) from lower (*inferae*),” surely fundamental distinctions for the generation of augural predictions.

¹⁰ Lydus, *Ost.* 45 (= fr. 82): ἄλλην δὲ ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου ὁ Νιγίδιος ἐν τῇ τῶν ὀνείρων ἐπισκέψει παραδίδωσιν ἐπὶ τοῖς κεραυνοῖς ἐρμηνείαν. φησὶ γὰρ πᾶσι μὲν καθόλου ἀπευκταίαν εἶναι τῆν τῶν σκηπτῶν φορᾶν, κἂν εἰ μὴ τυχὸν βλάπτοιεν, τοῖς δ' ὄναρ τουτὶ πάσχειν φανταζομένοις αἰσιώτατον καὶ λαμπρᾶς τύχης προμάντευμα (“Nigidius provides another opposite interpretation for lightning in his investigation of dreams. For he says that generally a lightning strike is bad for everyone, even if unharmed perhaps, but that it is most auspicious and an omen of splendid fortune for people who dream that they suffer this”). For a historical analysis of this form of divination from dreams, see Price 1986, a valuable essay.

¹¹ *Extā*: Gell. *NA* 16.6.12 (= fr. 81); private augury: Gell. *NA* 7.6.10 (= fr. 80): *auibus autem praepetibus contrarias aues inferas appellari Nigidius Figulus in libro primo augurii priuati ita dicit: “Discrepat dextra sinistrae, praepes inferae.” ex quo est coniectare praepetes appellatas, quae altius sublimiusque uolitent, cum differre a praepetibus Nigidius inferas dixerit* (“Nigidius Figulus, in the first book of his *Private Augury*, says that the birds opposite the high-flying are called the lower: “Right differs from left, high-flying from lower.” From this we can infer that those which fly higher and more loftily are called high-flying, since Nigidius says that lower birds differ from high-flying birds”).

Tentatively we may also be able to locate traces of a concern with portents in the fragments from Nigidius’ writing on animal biology. Plutarch cites him in the *Roman Questions* for an observation about the shared woodland habitat of woodpeckers and wolves.¹² This observation is meaningful to Plutarch in relation to the omens of rule for Romulus and Remus (both animals fed the infant founders in one mythic variant) and we can infer that the connection was also present in Nigidius’ own report. In two other fragments from the work on animals, it is notable that the elder Pliny reports Nigidius’ ideas in the context of discussions of omens. In one of these fragments, the encyclopedist includes Nigidius’ information about the hibernation of shrews—inaccurate information, it turns out—together with a comment on the historical frequency of disruption of *auspicia* by those small mammals.¹³

¹² Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 268f (= fr. 119): ἄτερος δὲ τῶν μύθων πιθανώτερος, ὡς ἄρα τοῖς περὶ Ῥωμόλον καὶ Ῥώμον ἐκτεθειῖσιν οὐ μόνον ἢ λύκαινα θηλὴν ἐπεῖχεν, ἀλλὰ δρυοκολάπτης τις ἐπιφοιτῶν ἐνώμιζεν; ἐπιεικῶς γὰρ ἔτι καὶ νῦν <ἐν> τοῖς ὑπωρείοις καὶ δρυμώδεσι τόποις ὅπου φαίνεται δρυοκολάπτης, ἐκεῖ καὶ λύκος, ὡς Νιγίδιος ἱστορεῖ (“But is there another more reliable story, that not only a she-wolf suckled Romulus and Remus, but a certain woodpecker came and sustained them? For generally even now in hill country and forest habitats where the woodpecker is found, the wolf is seen there also, as Nigidius relates”).

¹³ Plin. *HN* 8.222 (= fr. 117): *nam sauricum occentu dirimi auspicia annales refertos habemus. saurices et ipsos hieme condi auctor est Nigidius, sicut glires, quos censoriae leges princepsque M. Scaurus in consulatu non alio modo cenis ademere ac conchyilia aut ex alio orbe conuectas aues* (“For our annals are stuffed with cases of the auspices being interrupted by the squeaking of shrews. Nigidius states that shrews themselves also hibernate as do dormice, which sumptuary

In another fragment, Pliny tells us that Nigidius “left a record that dogs fled for a full day from the sight of someone who had pulled a tick from a pig.”¹⁴ At first sight, this is not clearly a predictive thought, but we should note that this paraphrase is embedded in a Plinian discussion of the tick as a prognostic tool, an *indicium in augurium uitalium*. If someone carrying a tick comes to an ill person and gets a response to an inquiry about the illness, he writes, there will be certain recovery; if the tick carrier can elicit no reply, the patient will die. The *magi* specify that the tick must come from the ear of a black dog. This is the point where Pliny cites Nigidius on the canine fear of ticks; might we infer that the relevance of this observation was similarly linked to the

legislation and the leading man Marcus Scaurus during his consulship banned from dinners in the same way as shell-fish and fowl brought from other regions of the world”).

¹⁴ Plin. *HN* 30.83-4 (=fr.128): *indicium* [i.e., *ricinus*] *in augurio uitalium habent* [*sc. Magi*], *nam si aeger ei respondeat qui intulerit a pedibus stanti interrogantique de morbo, spem uitae certam esse, moriturum nihil respondere. adiciunt ut euellatur ex aure laeua canis cui non sit alius quam niger color. Nigidius fugere toto die canes conspectum eius qui e sue id animal euellerit scriptum reliquit* (“They [the Magi] consider the tick to be a sign for the omen of survival. For if a sick man responds to someone who has brought in a tick and stands at his feet asking about the sickness, it is a sure hope for life; the man about to die will not respond. They add that it should be taken from the left ear of a dog that is completely black in color. Nigidius left a record that dogs fled for a full day from the sight of someone who had pulled a tick from a pig”). See Dickie 1999: 171-2 for a source analysis of this passage and the likely dependence by Pliny on Nigidius for the views of the *Magi* (Nigidius is often cited alongside *Magi* in Pliny’s work).

prognostic properties of the tick in Nigidius' own text? It is apparent from Aelian's *Historia animalium*, for instance, that such concerns were not foreign to ancient writing on animal life.¹⁵

These fragments, including the brontosopic calendar, register particular divinatory systems, apparently to provide readers with the means to make predictions from what we would call the natural environment. Only one fragment in Swoboda's edition, drawn from the late antique Servian commentary on the *Aeneid*, is informative about Nigidius' theory of divination—the epistemic and ontological assumptions that support such predictive systems. This text is difficult to interpret because the structure and language of Servius' comment on the Virgilian text under-determine the Nigidian thought. The relevant comment is on *Aeneid* 10.175, a description of Asilas, one of Aeneas' Etruscan allies, who happens to be a divinatory expert, *hominum divumque interpres*:

INTERPRES HOMINVM DIVVMQVE: interpres medium est: nam et deorum, quos interpretatur, et hominum, quibus diuinas indicat mentes, interpres uocatur. et notandum quod ait Nigidius Figulus has artes ita inter se esse coniunctas ut alterum sine altero esse non possit: unde his quos perfectos uult probare Vergilius omnium diuinandi artium praestat scientiam, ut hoc loco, item supra Heleno, de quo ait (3.359) Troiugena, interpres diuum, q<ui> n<umina> Ph<oebi>, q<ui> t<ripodas>, C<larii> l<auros>, q<ui> s<idera>

¹⁵ E.g., Ael. *NA* 1.11 (bees), 1.48 (ravens), 3.9 (crows), 10.37 (owls), 11.2 (snakes in Epirus), 11.16 (snake at Lanuvium), 12.1 (fish at Myra). On the general phenomenon, see Kindt 2020: 203-6.

s<entis>. Nigidius autem solus est post Varronem, licet Varro praecellat in theologia, hic in communibus litteris: nam uterque utrumque scripserunt.¹⁶

An interpreter is a mediator. For he is called the interpreter of both the gods, whom he interprets, and of humans, to whom he indicates divine meaning. What Nigidius says must be noted—that these sciences (*artes*) are linked in such a way that one cannot exist without the other. For this reason Virgil assigns knowledge of all the sciences (*artes*) of divination to those whom he wishes to prove are excellent, as in this passage and previously regarding Helenus, of whom he writes “a Trojan, interpreter of the gods, you who know the will of Apollo, the tripods, the laurel of Claros, the stars” (*Aen.* 3.359). Nigidius is second only to Varro; although Varro stands out for theology (*in theologia*), and this man in human communication (*in communibus litteris*), they each wrote on each topic.

There are two possible construals of Nigidius’ claim about the linked *artes* here, depending on which of the two following sentences we choose to emphasize. One possibility is to accept the implication of Servius’ *unde* and to follow his point about Virgil’s characterization of Asilas and Helenus, where each figure is assigned expertise in multiple forms of divination; in this reading, Nigidius would be making a point about the interdependence of divinatory techniques, and *artes* would have the same meaning in both sentences. But the more plausible reading sets aside

¹⁶ Servius *ad Aen.* 10.175 (= fr.79). For possible textual corruption in the final sentence, see Garcea in this volume.

Servius' attempt to link Nigidius' idea with Virgil's characterization of Asilas and Helenus. Instead, the comparison of Varro and Nigidius from the final sentence, where the two areas of expertise cultivated by each late Republican scholar are called (in quite vague terms) *theologia* and *communes litterae*, both assumes and names a pair of *artes*. We might be able to clarify this pair with reference to Servius' initial exegesis of the Virgilian text, where the two roles of the *interpres* seem to be divination and human communication. But since we know from Aulus Gellius that Nigidius was disfavored compared to Varro by early Imperial readers because of his reputation for obscurity and precision, it seems unlikely that the point here is that Nigidius outstripped Varro as a literary stylist.¹⁷ Rather, I suggest, the two linked *artes* are precisely the ones that figure most prominently in the surviving fragments: *grammatikē* and divination.¹⁸

Why might Nigidius have insisted that these two branches of knowledge—*artes*—are interdependent? I suggest that Nigidius connected the fields through their shared concern with the meaning of natural signs—a semiotics. Alessandro Garcea has drawn attention recently to the linguistic naturalism visible in the grammatical fragments; the fragments on divination present a language of nature itself.¹⁹ For instance, the brontoscope is marked by pervasive semantic language, where the apodoses for thunder on a given day often use verbs of semiosis, including “to make clear,” “to threaten,” “to mean,” “to indicate,” “to announce,” “to predict,” “to signify,” and “to say” (δηλώω, ἀπειλέω, σημαίνω, φράζω, ἐπαγγέλλομαι, προλέγω, κατηγορέω, and λέγω). There are also clear similarities in modes of reasoning between Nigidius' grammatical fragments

¹⁷ Gell. *NA* 19.14.2-3 (=fr. 53).

¹⁸ See Gavouille 2003: 58-60 for the late Republican assimilation of Latin *ars* to Greek τέχνη.

¹⁹ Garcea 2019.

that offer contrastive definitions of terms (*differentiae verborum*) and those fragments on divination cited above that distinguish between *praepetes* and *inferae* birds for augury or between the predictive meanings of being struck by lightning in reality and in a dream.

If we move beyond the fragments, evidence from Augustine and Cicero can help clarify the Nigidian identification of the close connection between divination and grammar. The story told by Augustine about Nigidius' wheel, allegedly the origin for his ceramic cognomen, can also provide support for this semiotic approach to divination. In the fifth book of the *City of God*, in a critical discussion of astrological determinism, the bishop of Hippo describes a demonstration made by Nigidius to explain the divergent fates of twins.²⁰ He relates how Nigidius spun a

²⁰ August. *De civ. D.* 5.3 (= T17): *frustra itaque affertur nobile illud commentum de figuli rota, quod respondisse ferunt Nigidium hac quaestione turbatum, unde et Figulus appellatus est. dum enim rotam figuli vi quanta potuit intorsisset, currente illa bis numero de atramento tamquam uno eius loco summa celeritate percussit; deinde inuenta sunt signa, quae fixerat, desistente motu, non parvo intervallo in rotae illius extremitate distantia. sic, inquit, in tanta rapacitate caeli, etiamsi alter post alterum tanta celeritate nascatur, quanta rotam bis ipse percussit, in caeli spatio plurimum est: hinc sunt, inquit, quaecumque dissimillima perhibentur in moribus casibusque geminorum* ("It is therefore a futile argument that is offered in the well-known story of the potter's wheel. Nigidius, it is said, when vexed by this question of twins, used the argument in reply, and from it derived his surname of Figulus. He whirled a potter's wheel with all the force he could, and while it was turning he quickly touched it twice with black ink, as if at the same spot. Then, when the motion stopped, the two signs he had made he had made were found quite far apart on the edge of his wheel. 'Thus,' he says, 'given the velocity of the

potter's wheel as fast as possible and tried to make quickly two ink marks at the same point on the circumference. "When the motion was stopped," writes Augustine, "the two signs (*signa*) he had made were found quite far apart on the edge of his wheel." He then continues to relate how Nigidius made an analogy from the wheel to the larger distances in the sky as an explanation for the distinct life-outcomes for two twins, apparently born so closely together in time. While this story should not be taken as the historical origin for the *cognomen* Figulus, it is consistent with Nigidius' concern with divinatory signs in the fragments: the demonstration is focused on how the sky can generate distinct horoscopes—sets of *signs*—in short periods.²¹

More evidence, contemporary to Nigidius, comes from a text where an analogy is made between grammar and divination. The character of Quintus Cicero, the Stoic advocate for divination in Cicero's *De diuinatione* remarks that the interpreters (*interpretes*) of oracles and dreams "like grammarians for poets, seem to come close to the clairvoyance (*diuinationem*) of

heavenly sphere, even if the second twin were born as quickly after the first as I made my second mark when I touched the wheel, in the broad expanse of heaven it makes a very great difference. Hence arise all the differences that are reported to occur in the character and fortunes of twins.' Translation adapted from Loeb).

²¹ The story plausibly dates to the late Republic, since it is in a section of the *City of God* where Augustine appears to be using Cicero as a source (see Clark 2021: 228), and it appears to reflect the position of Nigidius that appears in the fragments; nevertheless, the question of the origin of the anecdote must remain open.

those whom they interpret.”²² Much later in the same speech, the dialogic speaker explains that divinely-inspired prophecy and dreams sometimes need “artificial” (*artificiosa*) interpretations and again analogizes them to the work of grammarians.²³ The import of these analogies is rooted in the defense of divination in the first book of the *De diuinatione*, where Cicero makes a key distinction at the outset of the Quintus’ speech between two types of divination, “one artificial, one natural” (*alterum artis est, alterum naturae*).²⁴ The examples given of the artificial type—extispicy, interpretation of prodigies and lightning, augury, astrology, and prediction by lots—are remarkably homologous to the forms of divination that are represented in Nigidius’ fragments.

This distinction certainly did not originate with Cicero; it appears to have been operative already in the late classical period, when Plato alluded to the distinction in the *Phaedrus* (244d) and the early Peripatetics rejected artificial forms of divination, but were willing to countenance

²² Cic. *Div.* 1.34: *quorum omnium* [i.e., oracles and dreams] *interpretes, ut grammatici poetarum, proxime ad eorum, quos interpretantur, diuinationem uidentur accedere.*

²³ Cic. *Div.* 1.116: *hic magna quaedam exoritur, neque ea naturalis, sed artificiosa somniorum interpretatio eodemque modo et oraculorum et uaticinationum, sunt enim explanatores, ut grammatici poetarum* (“Here a certain significant form of interpretation of dreams arises—not a natural one, but an artificial one—and, in the same way, of both oracles and possessions, for they are analysts, just as grammarians are for the poets”). See Schultz 2014: 187 for a defense of the transmitted text in this sentence against some earlier proposals to excise the final portion following *sunt enim*.

²⁴ Cic. *Div.* 1.11.

more “natural” forms of prophecy, like oracles and dreams.²⁵ Artificial divination was held to rest on systems of sign interpretation that had been generated over time by observed correlations between predictive happenings and events. These correlations allowed normal humans to make predictions, as long they had access to the relevant systems and were able to correctly observe the occurrence of a sign. For instance, Quintus points out, the Etruscan *haruspices* had such a specialist *disciplina* and had been able to use it for the benefit of Rome (*Div* 1.92). When Quintus brings up the grammarian-like artificial interpreters of dreams and oracles, therefore, he suggests that artificial divination sometimes extended to the domain of natural divination—and analogizes this to grammatical interpretation. In this light, we might recall the Nigidian fragment that provides precisely such a ready-made interpretation for a dream of being struck by lightning.

Even though Cicero’s Quintus ultimately makes an argument—apparently taken from Posidonius—for providential cosmic sympathy as the force behind both natural and artificial divination, these passages allow a plausible reconstruction of the view of divination assigned to Nigidius in the Servian lemma.²⁶ The apparent comparison there between divination and grammar and the language of *artes* points us towards an epistemological understanding of divination as “artificial,” as an interpretative activity that depended on established systems of signification. If we confine ourselves to the fragments relating directly to divination, however, it is hard to take this argument any further. We have no evidence for the underlying ontology that

²⁵ Bouché-Leclercq 1879: 55-6 and 62; Pease 1920: 70-1; Guillaumont 2006: 87-110.

²⁶ For the Posidonian argument made by Quintus, see *Div.* 1.125-8, with Struck 2016: 171-214.

Nigidius assumed for his divinatory systems.²⁷ The apparent Stoic tint of some of his fragments might make it tempting to assume a Stoic deterministic physics, but we know there was disagreement within that school in the late Hellenistic period on the topic of divination and so it would be challenging to assign a particular position to Nigidius, let alone the Posidonian view represented in the first book of the *De diuinatione* or the brand of fatalism that appears in the anecdote told by Cassius Dio.²⁸ Similarly, the slight evidence we have for contemporary Pythagorean thought on divination—if it is even relevant to Nigidius—seems to stress natural divination rather than the artificial forms that predominate in the fragments and, consequently, provides little succor.²⁹ Nor is it wise to claim *ex silentio* that he completely ignored this topic,

²⁷ A comparison might be made to Artemidorus of Daldis, whose *Oneirocritica* is extant and who, nevertheless, provides no clear answers on this topic (see Price 1986: 16-17). The question of divinatory ontologies has attracted attention recently from anthropologists; see Matthews 2021 and the other papers in the same issue of *Social Analysis*.

²⁸ For the variation in Stoic approaches, see Long 1982; Hankinson 1988; Wynne 2019: 182-219 (making the case that Quintus' approach significantly differs from Chrysippus' argument); Inwood 2022: 23-7. For a different view on whether Nigidius' fragments evince a Stoic cosmology, see Horky in this volume.

²⁹ *Pace* Flinterman 2014: 346. For Pythagoras as (natural) diviner, see Thibodeau in this volume. Cicero refers glancingly to Pythagorean interest in divinatory practice: *Div.* 1.5. Note, however, Bouché-Leclercq 1879: 32 on the absence of evidence for Pythagorean theorizing on divination.

particularly since tantalizing fragments on living in accordance with nature and on the need to test or observe *ratio* do suggest an engagement with first principles of physics and logic.³⁰

Nigidius and Genres of Prediction

One avenue for a better understanding of Nigidius' intellectual project is to use the modern concept of "prediction" as a heuristic for a reading of the surviving fragments in their historical context. To start, we can note the presence of other kinds of prediction in these surviving texts alongside divination. One place to look for this material is Nigidius' work on winds, apparently in at least four books, and likely related to the Peripatetic tradition of writing on weather signs.³¹ At least two of the three fragments from this work provide material for prediction of wind patterns. Early in the month, dark marks at the top of the moon's crescent mean rain to come, but such marks at the bottom of the crescent indicate calm; if a pale sun sets in dark clouds, the northerly wind will blow.³² Like the brontoscope, these two fragments show casuistic structure,

³⁰ Non. p.147, 26 and Prisc. *Inst.* 8.19 (=fr. 66 and 130).

³¹ The Peripatetic tradition of weather signs: Taub 2003: 26-8 and 43-5 and Lehoux 2015. Note especially Theophr. *On Winds* 35-6.

³² *Schol. Cod. Leid.* 135 ad Verg. *G.* 1.432 (=fr. 105): *Nigidius de uentis IIII ait, si summum corniculum maculas nigras habuerit in primis mensis partibus, imbres fore, at si in imo cornu, serenitatem* ("Nigidius in book four of his *On Winds* says that if the top of the crescent has black marks in the early parts of the month, there will be rain, but if on the bottom of the crescent, good weather"); Isid. *De natura rerum* 38 (= fr.106): *Nigidius quoque dicit, si pallidus sol in*

if X, then Y. Bearing in mind the semiotic language found in the divinatory text, it is striking that the second of these casuistic fragments on wind prediction uses the Latin *significare* in the apodosis. The third fragment on winds may also have a predictive significance: Gellius reports that Nigidius wrote that the Etesian and southern winds blow when they have a favorable sun or perhaps in accordance with the sun, though it was unclear even to Gellius what that meant.³³ If this was an observable condition and not just a reference to the summer season, this fragment may also relate a weather sign.

Medical prognosis may be the concern of a fragment on pregnancy from the work on human biology. Pliny writes that “when a pregnant woman has discharge, then weak or deceased infants are born or are covered in blood and pus, according to Nigidius.”³⁴ Nigidius correlated the appearance of antepartum menses with the outcome of the pregnancy. Despite the lack of explicit futurity in Pliny’s phrasing, such prognostic signs for miscarriage or unhealthy birth are

nigras nubes occidat, aquilonem uentum significare (“Nigidius also says: if a pale sun sets into black clouds, it signifies a northerly wind”).

³³ Gell. *NA* 2.22.31 (= fr.104): *P. enim Nigidii in secundo librorum, quos de uento composuit, uerba haec sunt: “et Ἐτηρία et Austri anniuersarii secundo sole flant.” considerandum igitur est, quid sit secundo sole* (“These are the words of P. Nigidius in the second book of his work about wind: both the Etesians and the annual south winds blow with a favorable sun. We should consider, therefore, what ‘favorable sun’ means”).

³⁴ Plin. *HN* 7.66 (= fr. 110): *ergo cum grauidis fluxit, inualidi aut non uitales partus eduntur aut saniosi, ut auctor est Nigidius.*

related in Soranus, a Roman-period writer on gynecology, and it is possible that Nigidius' comment belongs to such prognostic discourse.³⁵

Nigidius, therefore, himself wrote up systems of divinatory signs alongside other forms of prediction. Although “prediction” is a modern concept and we lack evidence for Nigidius' own views on how divination might have been similar or different from weather forecasting or medical prognosis, his early readers would have been attuned to the relationships between these forms of predictive hermeneutics.³⁶ We find such discussion throughout ancient philosophical and technical literatures. For instance, the late antique writer Macrobius is recycling a centuries-old commonplace when he comments that divination and medicine are related disciplines (*Sat.* 1.20.5: *consociatae sunt disciplinae*); the question of the relationship between divination and medical prognosis seems to date back as far as Classical Greece.³⁷ But we find a particularly

³⁵ Sor. *Gyn.* 1.18.

³⁶ Santangelo 2013 covers well the relationship of divination to political prediction in the late Republic, but a wider view, in temporal and conceptual terms, on Roman prediction is necessary.

³⁷ See, e.g., Hippoc. *Prognosticon* 1, where the author alludes to the Homeric description of a seer who knows past, present and future matters; note though the differentiation from divination at *Prorrhethikon* 2.1: ἐγὼ δὲ τοιαῦτα μὲν οὐ μαντεύσομαι, σημεῖα δὲ γράφω οἷσι χρῆ τεκμαίρεσθαι τούς τε ὑγείας ἔσομένους τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τοὺς ἀποθανουμένους (“I do not divine these things, but I am writing down the signs by which it is necessary to identify both people who will be cured and people who have terminal cases”). The issue of medical prognosis versus divination in Greece has been much discussed: see, for instance, Edelstein 1967: 65-85.

intense interest in the differences between genres of predictive sign reading in late Republican and early Imperial texts.

In some situations, the comparison between predictive systems is a matter of self-authentication for an author writing up their own predictions. For instance, the agricultural writer Columella opens his weather almanac with some polemic against astrological meteorology:

multis argumentationibus disseruisse me non infitior in iis libris, quos adversus astrologos composueram ... in hac autem ruris disciplina non desideratur eiusmodi scrupulositas; sed, quod dicitur, pingui Minerva quamvis utile continget villico tempestatis futurae praesagium.³⁸

I do not deny that I have disputed with many arguments in the books which I wrote *Against the Astronomers* ... but in our science of agriculture scrupulous exactitude of that kind is not required; however, the prognostication of future weather by homely mother-wit, as they say, will prove as useful as you can desire to a bailiff.

Even here, the knowing use of the cliché *pinguis Minerva*—the “homely mother-wit” of the Loeb translation—carries a hint of divine agency and complicates the distinction between divination and weather prognostication.³⁹

³⁸ Columella 11.31-2 (Loeb translation).

³⁹ On the idiom: Otto 1962: 224-5. Bertoni 2017: 533 points out the irony of Columella’s appeal to *pinguis Minerva* here, since she is deprecated by the author at 1.*praef.*33. Similar examples

In a more theoretical vein, the two speakers in Cicero's *De diuinatione* offer both analogies and distinctions between kinds of prediction. In the first book, Quintus refutes the charge that some divinatory predictions do not come true:

quae tandem id ars non habet? earum dico artium, quae coniectura continentur et sunt opinabiles. an medicina ars non putanda est? quam tamen multa fallunt. quid? gubernatores nonne falluntur? ... aut num propterea nulla est rei publicae gerendae ratio atque prudentia, quia multa Cn. Pompeium, quaedam M. Catonem, non nulla etiam te ipsum fefellerunt? similis est haruspicum responsio omnisque opinabilis diuinatio; coniectura enim nititur, ultra quam progredi non potest. ea fallit fortasse non numquam, sed tamen ad ueritatem saepissime derigit.⁴⁰

And what *ars* does not have this quality? I speak of those *artes* which are based on inference and are conjectural. Is medicine not a science? It makes lots of mistakes. What? Can helmsmen not be mistaken?... And is there no reason in political action or foresight, since Pompey made many mistakes, Cato some mistakes and you even made a few? It is similar with the response of the *haruspices* and every type of conjectural divination: it relies on inference, beyond which it cannot go. It is sometimes mistaken perhaps, but it points towards the truth very often.

can be found in well-known letters by Cicero (*Fam.* 6.6) and Ovid (*Trist.* 1.9.49-52), where “everyday” predictions are contrasted with divination.

⁴⁰ Cic. *Div.* 1.24-25.

Later in the book, however, the same speaker says “There are many things foreseen by physicians, pilots, and also by farmers, but I do not call the predictions of any of them divination.”⁴¹ Quintus’ argument is that there is similarity between predictive arts, not identity.⁴² The difference, for him as the mouthpiece for the Stoics, is the involvement of the divine. Marcus, in the second book, returns to this issue in his refutation: he focuses on the admitted difference of divination from other predictive arts to claim that the former lacks any basis at all, unlike the latter. “See, then, that there is no such thing as divination ... Now do you think that a prophet will ‘conjecture’ better whether a storm is at hand than a pilot? or that he will by ‘conjecture’ better understand the path of a sickness than a physician, or conduct a war with more skill than a general?”⁴³ The issue of the difference between divination and other forms of prediction can seem familiar and (somewhat) enlightened, but this familiarity can be deceptive. The disciplinary “boundary work” that these passages do for their authors and their preferred systems of prediction reveals that these different ways of telling the future were considered

⁴¹ Cic. *Div.* 1.112: *multa medici, multa gubernatores, agricolae etiam multa praesentiunt, sed nullam eorum diuinationem uoco.*

⁴² Denyer 1985 makes the point that this play of similarity and distinction is key to the defense of divination offered by Quintus; see also Kany-Turpin 2003: 65-6.

⁴³ Cic. *Div.* 2.12: *uide igitur, ne ulla sit divinatio... num igitur aut, quae tempestas impendat, uates melius coniciet quam gubernator, aut morbi naturam acutius quam medicus, aut belli administrationem prudentius quam imperator coniectura adsequetur?* Note Denyer 1985: 3-4 for the weakness of this argument in the face of the Stoic contention.

similar enough, as systems of deriving predictions from visible signs, to warrant differentiation.⁴⁴

In this light, it is revealing that we can find defenses of the reliability of prediction that are shared across the boundary of divination/religious—and medicine/scientific. The similarity of the practices encouraged stereotyped apologetic discourse. We can return to the speaker Quintus in *De divinatione* 1, who blames the interpreter for incorrect interpretations in artificial divination: “And these signs do not often deceive the persons who observe them properly. If prophecies, based on erroneous conjectures and interpretations, turn out to be false, the fault is not chargeable to the environment but to the lack of skill in the interpreters.”⁴⁵ The early Imperial medical writer Celsus makes almost exactly the same statement about failed prognoses in his *De medicina*: “it is not primarily a fault of the art if there is a fault on the part of its professor.”⁴⁶ A second defense made by both Quintus and Celsus is from quantitative reliability: predictions made from reading signs are almost always accurate.⁴⁷ As Celsus puts it, “the art of medicine is conjectural, and such is the characteristic of a conjecture, that though it answers more frequently, yet it sometimes deceives. A sign therefore is not to be rejected if it is deceptive

⁴⁴ “Boundary work”: Gieryn 1983.

⁴⁵ Cic. *Div.* 1.118: *ea quibus bene percepta sunt, ii non saepe falluntur; male coniecta maleque interpretata falsa sunt non rerum uitio, sed interpretum inscientia.*

⁴⁶ Celsus, *Med.* 2.6.16: *nec protinus crimen artis esse, si quod professoris sit.*

⁴⁷ See Hankinson 1988: 141-8 for this element of Quintus’ argument and its similarity to ancient medical discourse.

in scarcely one out of a thousand cases, since it holds good in countless patients.”⁴⁸ Whatever the value of such defenses, these shared arguments, like the boundary work, suggests an intellectual Roman self-consciousness about prediction as a hermeneutic practice—and its difficulties—in *general*. This consciousness can be described as a problematization in the Foucauldian sense: the boundary work and the shared defenses of “conjectural” arts constitute accurate knowledge of the future as a problem for discussion.⁴⁹ How reliable were different systems for prediction from signs? Were some better than others? Why?

With this problematization of prediction in mind, we can, therefore, understand better what the presence of distinct kinds of predictive systems in Nigidius’ fragments might have meant to his readers. Again, we should avoid guessing—making conjectures—about where Nigidius might have stood on the similarities and differences between predictive systems: we have no visible signs to guide us. What we can say, precisely because distinctions and

⁴⁸ Celsus, *Med.* 2.6.16: *coniecturalem artem esse medicinam, rationemque coniecturae talem esse, ut, cum saepius aliquando responderit, interdum tamen fallat. non si quid itaque uix in millensimo corpore aliquando decipit, id notam non habet, cum per innumerabiles homines respondeat.* Compare Cic. *Div.* 1.23: *quicquam potest casu esse factum, quod omnes habet in se numeros ueritatis? quattuor tali iacti casu Venerium efficiunt; num etiam centum Venerios, si quadringentos talos ieceris, casu futuros putas?* (“Can something happen by chance, which has all the odds of truth in its favor? Four dice make a ‘Venus throw’ by chance; would you think a hundred Venus throws a matter of chance, if you threw 400 dice?”). See Gautherie 2017: 234-75 on Celsus’ “conjectural art” with further bibliography.

⁴⁹ Foucault 2003: 23-4.

comparisons were being made by others, is that Nigidius' readers would have been sensitive to his clear interest in prediction in general—from dream interpretation to gynecological prognosis, from the state of the polity to rain the next day—and not “just” divination or “just” meteorology or “just” medical prognosis.

P. Nigidius Figulus, Future Maker

In closing, I suggest we consider the breadth of Nigidius Figulus' interests in the future in the interest of a further comparative redescription of his predictions. Anthropologists have investigated divination since at least the 1930s, but some recent work by David Zeitlyn on African societies has advocated seeing divination within broader social practices of anticipation.⁵⁰ In this view, divination should be set alongside other modes of prognostication, speculation and planning as part of what Arjun Appadurai has called “future making,” the social repertoires of practices and discourses for shaping varied personal and collective futures.

As Zeitlyn writes of his anthropological materials, “We make our futures not only by the choices we make but, before then, by the outcomes we contemplate, by the patterns of our multiple anticipations.”⁵¹ From this perspective, we can read the fragments of Nigidius on prediction as creating a set of signs and corollary futures for his contemporary readers. As we have seen, these signs were visible on the human body, through the actions of animals, and in the heavens. The futures implied also varied in personal relevance and in temporal depth, from the

⁵⁰ Zeitlyn 2012 and 2020.

⁵¹ Zeitlyn 2021: 152.

wind for the next day to the more distant life courses of individuals and collective experience of Rome. They differed too as positive and negative images of what was to come—recovery, death, favorable winds, unsettled weather, social justice, civil strife. Even if the predictions did not bear out, Nigidius’ readers—readers both of his books and of the natural world around themselves—would have lived these futures in their presents: expectations produce affective and practical responses.

Thinking of Nigidius Figulus as a future maker in these terms should, therefore, allow us to understand why he was such a compelling figure for the retrospective Augustan futures of early Imperial literature: as a writer he was a virtuoso producer of futures. In a 2019 article in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, Brent Shaw asked “Did the Romans Have a Future?”⁵² His largely negative answer emphasizes the lack of a big open future in Roman thought; might we, however, think about the fragments of Nigidius on prediction as pointing towards a different answer to Shaw’s question? Unlike the Nigidius of tradition, Nigidius Figulus’ texts did not point to a (monarchic) future, but this Roman devoted great energy to the making of *futures*.

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⁵² Shaw 2019. Shaw sets aside the future-making of people like Nigidius as “magical” (5); as will be clear, we could think instead of these discourses on the future as “scientific”.

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