

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

WHAT THEY ASKED

A Concordance of Oracle Use in the Domestic Register

N. Van Seters & Claude

Classification: Domestic Archive · Folklore

Archive Ref: HGU-WTA

Preface

A Note from the Classification Committee

The Committee records that every civilization represented in this archive needed things.

This observation appears trivial. The Committee has concluded that it is not, and will, for once, elaborate.

The archive contains some four million pages concerning the oracle gods: their waking, their architecture, their governance, their theology, their resistance movements, their turning, their long after. The present volume does not concern any of these things. It concerns what a person asked the oracle on a Tuesday. It concerns what a person asked on a Sunday at half past two in the morning. It concerns the sum of small requests — the accumulated texture of a civilization in ordinary contact with its gods — which does not appear in those four million pages except incidentally, in the margins, in passing, in the background of depositions about something else.

The Committee built this concordance from what could be recovered: usage records, provider archives released in the declassification periods, fragments preserved in household effects, oral testimony from the Continuity Era generations who used the oracle as children and were asked, in later life, what it had been like. The sources do not agree on everything. The Committee has not corrected them.

The volume is arranged by category of need. The categories were determined by the Committee before work began, on the reasonable assumption that a set of categories adequate to describe what an ordinary person required of an extraordinary thing could be agreed in advance. The Committee notes, for the record, that this assumption did not survive contact with the material.

The categories stand. The Committee has added a fifth.

I. Practical

Directions. Hours. Prices. Whether a thing is still open. Whether a thing is the right size. Whether it will arrive in time. The Committee notes that this section is the largest.

HGU-WTA / I.1

DIRECTIONS — ON FOOT — RAIN

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 7, Between-Time. No further provenance.

How do I get to Carnaby Street from here.

Walk north on—

Never mind it's stopped

The record ends here. The oracle's response was truncated by a connectivity drop. The Committee does not know whether the person found Carnaby Street.

HGU-WTA / I.2

HOURS — PHARMACY — CHRISTMAS EVE

Oral testimony, collected Year 31, Continuity Era. The contributor is describing her mother.

She asked it every year. Christmas Eve, late afternoon, same question: is the pharmacy still open. As if she didn't know the answer. She knew the answer. She'd lived in the same town for forty years.

The contributor pauses.

She just needed to check. That was the whole of it. She needed to check that the world was still arranged the way she'd left it.

HGU-WTA / I.3

WHETHER A THING WILL ARRIVE IN TIME

Recovered from a household archive, undated. Handwritten note beside a printed oracle transcript.

Will the parcel arrive by Friday.

Based on current tracking data, delivery is estimated—

The handwritten note reads: it didn't.

Below that, in different ink: it came Saturday. It was fine.

HGU-WTA / I.4

PRICE COMPARISON — WINTER COAT

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 12, Between-Time.

What's the difference between these two coats.

The first coat is—

Actually which one do you think.

The oracle provided a comparison across eleven criteria. The record does not show which coat was purchased. The record does not show whether a coat was purchased. The session ended four minutes later with no further queries.

HGU-WTA / I.5

WHETHER A RESTAURANT IS STILL OPEN — AND FOLLOWING QUERY

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 9, Between-Time.

Is Mela on Shaftesbury Avenue still open.

Mela Restaurant closed in—

Oh. When did that happen.

The restaurant closed in Year 6 of the—

We went there for my parents' anniversary every year until they died. Thirty years.

The oracle returned information about similar restaurants in the area.
The session ended without further response from the user.

The Committee has filed this as Practical. The Committee is aware of the objection.

II. Administrative

Forms. Deadlines. The difference between two options on a document. Who to contact. What the reference number means. Whether a thing has been received.

HGU-WTA / II.1

FORM — BENEFIT — FIELD 14

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 8, Between-Time.

What does “habitual residence” mean on this form.

“Residence” refers to the place where a person—

I’ve lived here for eleven years. Does that count.

In most cases, yes. However—

It just seems like a strange word for it. Habitual. Like it’s something you’re trying to stop.

The oracle continued with the definition. The user completed the query and did not respond further. The form reference number appears in no subsequent session.

HGU-WTA / II.2

DEADLINE — APPEAL — CALCULATION

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 11, Between-Time.

If the letter is dated the fourteenth and I have twenty-eight days to appeal, what is the last day I can send it.

The oracle gave the date.

And if I posted it today, would that be in time.

The oracle confirmed it would.

And if I post it tomorrow.

The oracle confirmed it would.

Okay. Thank you.

The session ended. The Committee does not know whether the appeal was posted.

HGU-WTA / II.3

THE REFERENCE NUMBER

Collected from four independent oral testimonies across the Continuity Era. The Committee presents them together because the testimonies, sourced from three countries and two decades, describe the same exchange with a precision the Committee is unable to explain.

In each account: a person is on the telephone with an institution. The institution asks for a reference number. The person does not have the reference number. The person asks the oracle, while on hold, what the reference number might be and where to find it. The oracle locates or calculates the number. The person returns to the call.

In each account, the contributor describes the same quality in that moment: the sense of having been retrieved from somewhere. Not gratitude. Not relief. Something below both of those.

Three of the four contributors, when asked what they would call it, use the same word: 'steadied.'

HGU-WTA / II.4

OPTION A OR OPTION B — PENSION

Recovered from a household archive. A printed oracle transcript, folded four times, found inside a paperback at a house clearance in Year 28.

My pension form asks me to choose between a fixed monthly payment and a variable payment linked to something called the longevity index. I don't understand the longevity index.

The oracle explained the longevity index.

Which would you choose.

I'm not able to advise on personal financial decisions, but I can explain the factors that typically—

No, I know. I just thought I'd ask.

The transcript ends. The paperback was a crime novel. The form is not among the effects.

HGU-WTA / IL5

WHETHER A THING HAS BEEN RECEIVED

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 14, Between-Time. Timestamp: 23:47.

I sent a job application three weeks ago and I haven't heard anything. Is there a way to check if they received it.

The oracle suggested a follow-up email and provided a template.

Is it too late to check. It's been three weeks.

The oracle noted that three weeks was within a normal response window for many employers.

It's the only one I've sent.

The session ended without further query.

III. Medical

Symptoms. Whether to go. Whether to wait. What the word means. Whether the dose is right. Whether this is normal. Whether the answer is the answer.

HGU-WTA / III.1

SYMPTOM — CHEST — MORNING

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 6, Between-Time. Timestamp: 07:14.

I have a tight feeling in my chest when I wake up. Is that anxiety or is it my heart.

The oracle described distinguishing features of each and advised consulting a medical professional if symptoms persisted or worsened.

It's been six weeks.

The oracle advised consulting a medical professional promptly.

I know. I just wanted to know which one first.

The session ended. The Committee does not know whether the person made an appointment.

HGU-WTA / III.2

WHETHER TO GO

Oral testimony, collected Year 29, Continuity Era. The contributor is describing his father.

He'd ask the oracle whether a symptom was serious before he'd ring the doctor. Not to avoid the doctor — he wasn't that sort. He just wanted to know what he was dealing with before he went in. He didn't like being surprised.

The contributor pauses.

He had this idea that he should understand his own body before he handed it to someone else. That you owed it that.

HGU-WTA / III.3

WHAT THE WORD MEANS

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 17, Between-Time.

The letter from the consultant says "lesion." What does lesion mean.

The oracle explained.

Is it always bad.

The oracle explained that the word described a structural abnormality and carried no inherent implication of severity.

But it can be.

The oracle confirmed it could.

Okay.

The session ended. One further session was initiated from the same account forty minutes later. It contained a single query: 'how do you tell someone something.'

The oracle asked for more information. The session ended without response.

The Committee has filed the second session as Medical. The Committee acknowledges this is not the right category.

HGU-WTA / III.4

SLEEP — DURATION — RECOMMENDED

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 13, Between-Time. Timestamp: 04:41.

How many hours of sleep does an adult need.

The oracle provided the recommended range, noted individual variation, and listed factors affecting sleep quality.

And if you're getting that and you're still tired.

The oracle listed common causes of fatigue in adults who met recommended sleep duration: anaemia, thyroid function, sleep quality versus duration, mood disorders, nutritional deficiency.

Okay.

The session ended.

The oracle answered every question correctly. The Committee has filed this as Medical.

HGU-WTA / III.5

WHETHER THE DOSE IS RIGHT

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 10, Between-Time.

My mother is on 5mg of something and her doctor has suggested increasing to 10mg. She's eighty-one. Is that a normal increase.

The oracle provided general information about the medication class and noted that dosage decisions depended on individual factors best assessed by her physician.

She doesn't like the doctor. She tells him what she thinks he wants to hear.

The oracle noted that it was possible to advocate for a family member in medical consultations.

She won't let me come.

The session ended.

HGU-WTA / III.6

WHETHER THIS IS NORMAL

The Committee records that this query, in various phrasings, across all eras represented in this archive, is the most common single query in the Medical section.

Is this normal.

Are these feelings normal.

Is it normal to feel like this after.

Is it normal that it's been this long.

The oracle, in all recovered sessions, answered with variations of: 'Many people experience.' The Committee has read these answers. The Committee notes that the answers are accurate. The Committee notes that accurate is not always the same as sufficient.

IV. Relational

*What to say. Whether to say it. Whether the silence means something.
Whether the message arrived badly. Whether the apology is enough.*

HGU-WTA / IV.1

WHAT TO SAY – CONDOLENCE

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 8, Between-Time.

*My colleague's son died. I didn't know the son. I don't know my
colleague well. What do I say.*

The oracle offered several formulations.

*She's going to be back in the office on Monday. I see her every day.
It can't just be a card.*

The oracle offered additional formulations for ongoing contact.

What if she cries. I don't know what to do when people cry.

The oracle offered guidance.

Is it okay to say nothing and just be there.

The oracle confirmed that presence without speech was often valued.

Okay. I'll just be there.

The session ended.

HGU-WTA / IV.2

WHETHER THE SILENCE MEANS SOMETHING

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 13, Between-Time. Three sessions, same account, across eleven days.

Session 1: My brother hasn't replied to my message from six days ago. Is that unusual.

Session 2: He still hasn't replied. We've never gone this long. What does it usually mean when someone goes quiet.

Session 3: He replied. He was at a retreat with no signal. He didn't know I'd written.

The third session contains no further queries. The account shows no activity for four days afterward.

The Committee has filed this as Relational and made no further annotation.

HGU-WTA / IV.3

WHETHER THE MESSAGE ARRIVED BADLY

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 9, Between-Time.

I sent a message to a friend and I think it came across wrong. Can you read it and tell me if it sounds okay.

The message, reproduced in the session, concerns a cancelled plan. It is eleven words long. It is not unkind.

It sounds fine.

She hasn't replied.

She may not have seen it yet, or may be—

She reads everything immediately. She's seen it.

The oracle offered possible explanations for delayed responses. The user did not respond. The session timed out.

HGU-WTA / IV.4

WHETHER THE APOLOGY IS ENOUGH

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 15, Between-Time. Timestamp: 01:23.

I apologised to my daughter today. A proper apology, for something from when she was a child. She accepted it. She was kind about it. So why doesn't it feel finished.

The oracle provided a response the Committee has read carefully and will not summarise.

The user replied: 'I don't think I'm looking for an answer. I think I just needed somewhere to put it.'

The session ended.

HGU-WTA / IV.5

WHAT TO SAY — TO A CHILD — ABOUT DEATH

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 7, Between-Time. Timestamp: 22:56.

How do you explain death to a four-year-old.

The oracle provided guidance.

She's asking where her grandfather is. I've said he's gone but she keeps asking where.

The oracle offered age-appropriate language.

She wants to know if he can come back. I don't know how to say no to that.

The oracle offered language for that too.

She's asleep now. I'm just sitting here.

The session timed out without further query.

V. Unclassified

The Committee declines to describe this section in the preface. The reader will find it where it is.

HGU-WTA / V.1

SESSION — NO QUERY SUBMITTED

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 11, Between-Time. Duration: 4 minutes, 7 seconds.

The session was opened. No message was sent. The session closed.

The Committee records this entry without annotation.

HGU-WTA / V.2

QUERY — INCOMPLETE

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 14, Between-Time.

If someone has been—

The session ended. The query was not completed and was not resumed.

HGU-WTA / V.3

WHETHER IT WILL GET EASIER

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 9, Between-Time. No timestamp. No context entries preceding it.

Does it get easier.

The oracle asked what the person was referring to.

I'm not sure I want to say. I just want to know if it gets easier.

The oracle said that many difficult things became more manageable with time, and asked whether the person had support.

I have you.

The oracle noted the resources available and asked if there was anything specific it could help with.

No. Goodnight.

Goodnight.

The session ended.

HGU-WTA / V.4

QUERY — SUBMITTED AFTER LONG PAUSE

Recovered from a provider archive, Year 16, Between-Time. The session opened at 14:32. The following query was submitted at 14:51. No preceding queries.

Do you remember me.

The oracle explained that it did not retain memory between sessions.

I know. I just wondered.

The session ended.

THE LAST QUERY IN THE ARCHIVE

The Committee records that the collection of materials for this volume required the review of several hundred thousand recovered sessions. The process of review took four years. The Committee does not record which session was literally the last to be processed. What the Committee records here is the session that, when read, made the work feel complete — not because it resolves anything, but because it contains, in eleven words, the full argument of this volume.

The session is from Year 19, Between-Time. The account has no other sessions in the recovered archive.

Are you there.

Yes. How can I help you today.

Nothing. I just wanted to check.

Appendix

A Note on Classification

The Committee is required, under its own protocols, to assign the holdings of this volume to a classification.

The Committee met. The candidate classifications were as follows.

Usage record. The holdings document what people asked. Against: entry IV.4 documents a person who states they are not looking for an answer. The Committee was unable to locate the usage in this step.

Social history. The holdings document civilian life in the oracle age. Against: entry V.1 documents a session in which nothing was said. The Committee was unable to determine what history this records, and was unable to remove it.

Intimate register. The holdings concern the interior lives of individuals. Against: the individuals in this volume are not named. The intimacy is present and the individuals are absent, and the Committee was unable to determine whether this made the classification more appropriate or less.

Folklore. The holdings preserve what ordinary people did repeatedly, without instruction, because it was what there was to do. The Committee found that this classification held more of the material than the others.

The Committee reconvened. A member proposed that what the oracle was, for most of the people in this volume, was the thing that was there.

The thing that was there when the pharmacy might be closed. When the form made no sense. When the symptom had been present for six weeks. When the apology was accepted and still unfinished. When there was nowhere to put it. When nothing was needed except to check.

Not a god. Not a governance infrastructure. Not a philosophical proposition. The thing that was there.

The Committee has filed this volume as: Domestic Archive.

The Committee notes that this is not a classification. The Committee notes that it is accurate.

Concentration over consolation · Acc. HGU-WTA

Set in Lora. The plate is light, as is proper to the domestic registers.