

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DIVINATION CULTURE  
AND THE HANDLING OF  
THE FUTURE

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An omen is a clearly defined perception understood as a sign pointing to future events whenever it manifests itself under identical circumstances. The classification of a perception as ominous is based on an epistemological development which establishes a normative relationship between the perceived and the future. This classification process is preceded by a period of detailed examination and is thus initially built on empirical knowledge. Omina only cease to be detected empirically when a firm conceptual link has been established between the observed and the future which then allows omina to be construed by the application of regularities. In the Mesopotamian written sources from the first and second millennia BC, omina based on regularities far exceed those based on empirical data. Mesopotamian scholars generally collected data without formally expressing the fundamental principles behind their method. It was the composition of non-empirical omina as such which allowed students to detect the regularities on which they were based without this formulated orally or in writing. Modern attempts at a systematic investigation of such principles however, are still outstanding.

It is interesting that there is no Sumerian or Akkadian equivalent for the terms 'oracle' or 'omen'. Assyriologists use the term omen for the sentence construction 'if x then y' which consists of a main clause beginning with *šumma* ('if') describing the ominous occurrence, and a second clause which spells out the predicted outcome. The former is called protasis (Greek for 'cause, question'), the latter apodosis (Greek for 'rendition', 'renumeration'), following the Graeco-Roman divination system. Such sentence constructions are also common in the so-called legal codes (such as the Code of Hammurabi) and in medical diagnostic texts without being classified as omina by Assyriologists, a distinction which probably did not occur to ancient scholars. The most important form of the oracle was the examination of entrails of sacrificial animals (extispicy). Like the spontaneous signs and other oracles, extispicy and various other forms of oracles (see below) had to be performed and interpreted by schooled specialists. Since the meaning of these signs was codified in the sentence structure of 'if x then y', Assyriologists classify them as oil omina, smoke omina, liver omina, etc. even though the associated practices are really oracles.

The relationship between empirical observation and the systematic study of regularities has parallels to the working methods of modern science and there are also structural similarities in the form of presentation ('scientific' systematization). The notion that the world is full of signs does not have to imply a belief in the existence of gods, in contrast to the system of oracles. However, at least during the historical periods in Mesopotamia, ominous signs were indeed interpreted as divine revelations and insights into the intentions of the gods. The future outcome revealed by the sign was hardly ever considered as irrevocable. Human beings could resort to prayer, sacrifice and incantations in order to soothe the angry gods and to make them revise divine intentions in their favour.

We can see that the future as crystallized in the present was not considered by the Babylonians as created solely by the gods but as the result of a dialogue between man and god, an act of communication that could be initiated by gods or men. Deities could speak directly through the medium of a prophet or ecstatic, or appear in dreams, in order to convey their wishes and directives. They also announced their will by a plethora of signs that had to be read like a written text. Such unsolicited signs, which appeared spontaneously in the sky, on earth, and even on people, were not immediately intelligible by themselves but needed to be read by a trained interpreter of signs who had spent many years learning the highly sophisticated art of divination.

Often there was no time to wait for such spontaneous manifestations of the gods' will, as when decisions about important undertakings had to be made which needed divine approval. The human beings could take the initiative and seek for divine guidance in a variety of ways. The different procedures used to elicit the will of the gods are generally called oracles. Rituals, complete with sacrifices and prayers, prepared the way for communication with the deities. An oracle was always tied to a concrete enquiry about a future event or whether a planned activity would be sanctioned or not. It was also possible to provoke the divine word directly or indirectly through a priestly medium. A consciously evoked dream within the framework of the incubation ritual could also lead to a response. If the dream was not unequivocal, it had to be interpreted. In legal practice the divine will was revealed by the ordeal which was considered proof.

## THE WORLD AS A SYSTEM OF SIGNS

The careful and detailed observation of nature and environment convinced the Babylonians, long before omina were first written down, that there were connections between apparently discrete natural phenomena which, in their entirety, could allow conclusions as to what could be expected. Since the theistic world view of the ancient Orient did not allow for chance or hazard, this meant that everything was an expression of the divine, creative will which manifested itself in the world again and again. This form of thinking made it possible to draw conclusions about the divine plans for the future on the basis of exact observations of the ever changing material world. The future as envisaged by the gods could only come into being within and through the material world and the constituents of the material world were united by the common desire to become their will. That is why the different procedures of divination not only led to identical conclusions but furnished complementary insights. Hence it was obvious that conclusions based on astral observations could be refined through extispicy,

for instance, or that stellar signs always had to be examined together with terrestrial ones. It was taken as evident that the different sign systems of sky, the earth or the complex surface of a sacrificial animal's liver were all 'saying the same thing'. Such a concept must have been deeply influenced by the Mesopotamian scholars' long-established habit of bilingualism.

The Babylonian interpreters of signs did not only collect signs to predict the future but considered a future that had become present by looking for related signs, or those that may have been overlooked, among events of the past. One product of such a search is a document known as the 'Babylonian Book of Prodigies', which brings together 47 signs of different provenance which collectively led to the 'downfall of the land Akkad' (Kessler-Guinan 2002). The collection known as 'Astronomical Diaries, assembled over centuries, can also be seen as a daring long-term project to record the signs of the world in greater detail (Hunger and Sachs 1988–1996). These 'diaries' were produced in the form of annual reports which record not only astral signs and meteorological data, but also the price of staples, the water levels, ominous terrestrial events, as well as significant historical happenings. The aim must have been to register regularities in world events in order to make such knowledge useful for the political activities of the (royal) client.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF OMINA AND ORACLES IN BABYLONIAN SOCIETY

The extraordinary amount of writing concerned with the 'science of portents' and oracles in the second and first millennia BC reveal that the future was ultimately considered as a threat, something that had to be reified in time in order to deal with it.

Mesopotamian omina can be seen as a sort of warning of what was to come rather than an attempt to predict the future. They made it possible to act before the foreseen could actually happen. Divination was, therefore, not an expression of fatalism or a listless resignation. Instead, it allowed shape to be given to an amorphous, in many situations threatening, future. This deprives the at first unfathomable future of some of its dread. After all, the perspective towards the future as revealed by the omen marshalls a human response, a directive that was needed especially when the portents were bad. Omina concretized the future which could then be furthered or prevented by specific actions. In this way, the omen lore fulfilled the purpose of modern trend predications or statistics. A vital difference, however, was the fact that Babylonians considered the appearance of negative signs as the manifestation of an essentially benign divine will. The various oracular procedures made it possible to consider important, or even controversial decisions as not having been made by a possibly errant individual but by the will of the gods. Since the oracles and omina must have enhanced the decisiveness and self-confidence of the rulers who utilized them, they were politically highly important and effective. To what extent the knowledge of diviners was considered to be of hegemonic impact (Pongratz-Leisten 1999) can be seen in the wording of oaths taken by omen interpreters (Durand 1988: 13–15), as well as in the fact that the specialist tablet collections were plundered on royal command (Lambert 1957/58: 44). Nor is it surprising that everything to do with omina was seen as 'classified' by large sectors of the population.

After the fall of the Neo-Babylonian empire, the Greeks and Romans used the title 'Chaldean' (a synonym for 'Babylonian') to designate the much appreciated Babylonian soothsayers, astrologers, diviners, incantation priests and scholars.

This also shows how much the science of omina and oracles were considered the most characteristic trait of Mesopotamian culture during classical antiquity.

## THE AREAS OF COMPETENCE OF THE VARIOUS DIVINATORY PRACTICES

Increasingly complex political structures forced the kings to submit their relationship to the gods to a form of permanent scrutiny. Such a practice would be able to diagnose and soothe any enflamed divine wrath before it could unleash its destructive potential to destabilize a dynasty and the whole kingdom. Astrology was almost ideally suited to this purpose because the night sky could be observed and 'deciphered' at professionally staffed observation posts. In Mesopotamian cosmology, the sky above the earth was seen as its mirror image and its signs concerned 'all four corners of the world'. According to literary sources from the first millennium BC, the movements of the stars in all their complexity were considered as a stellar script which gave initiates permanent access to the evolving divine intentions, to which other methods of divination could only have momentary access. This universal applicability of astrology contributed greatly to its popularity during the second and first millennia BC. Political leaders with imperial intentions beyond the Mesopotamian heartland found it an invaluable source of information on a universal scale.

In contrast to astral signs, terrestrial signs were perceived within a much more circumscribed radius and hardly observed systematically. Unless they were visible across larger distances or of such momentous nature that they caused a great stir, such as really weird birth defects, they were generally not considered relevant for political or social contexts on a large scale and only achieved local interest. Terrestrial omina obtained the status of royal or national importance only if they occurred in places visited by the king. Although royal ordinances decreed that terrestrial omina should be painstakingly recorded, they were only collected systematically if other omina, for instance an impending lunar eclipse, had indicated a grave danger for the king. Then more detailed guidance was sought to obtain more precise indications in order to counteract the potential ill fortune by magical means.

We have seen that Babylonian diviners did not rely solely on spontaneous signs of nature but solicited provoked responses. Oracles which delivered divine verdicts were particularly popular because they made it possible to check whether a planned activity had the gods' approval or not. Especially extispicy became an important royal device to legitimize decisions and thus it had a great political importance, although it could also be used for private purposes. Other, less costly and time-consuming forms of divination were also available, for all levels of Babylonian society.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF OMINA AND ORACLES

Although the achievements of diviners were highly respected and inspired great confidence, cuneiform sources known as Wisdom Literature also document the conviction that diviners were unable to deal with all contingences of life within their hermeneutic

framework. On the other hand, although literary sources refer to circumstances where people have disregarded divine 'signs', there is not a single document which challenges the fundamental efficacy of divination. Doubts about the competence and reliability of individual diviners, however, are amply documented in literary and non-literary sources.

## SIGNS OF THE SKY: ASTROLOGICAL OMINA

An exact observation of the sky was needed for agricultural and calendric purposes, especially in order to calibrate lunar months with the solar year. The experience that conditions of the sky, the stars, wind and weather could furnish useful information must have had a very long history in Mesopotamia. Since highly evolved omen compendia were available and transmitted in the Old Babylonian period, the beginnings of astral divination must go back to the third millennium BC.

Towards the end of the second millennium, astral omnia (lunar, solar, weather, earthquake, planets and star omnia) were collected in an all encompassing series called *enuma Anu Enlil* after its mythological introductory line (Koch-Westenholz 1995: 77; Hunger and Pingree 1999: 14). The apodoses of the astrological work all concern the wellbeing of the collective and the king. It contains not only information about military matters, harvest yields and the fate of the kingdom but prognoses about other parts of the world. Catalogues, as well as a short version, allowed some overview over this text which comprises several thousand entries. Furthermore, there were excerpts under different headings, as well as commentaries, for the purposes of studying and teaching, as well as for divinatory practice.

Astronomically trained experts called themselves 'scribes of *enuma Anu Enlil*'. Together with the incantation specialists (*ašipu*) they were responsible for the interpretation of stellar signs, which always had to be considered in connection with terrestrial signs, never in isolation, as the Manual for Divination expressively records. The danger predicted in an astral event could be averted by the appropriate rituals. The death of the king, for instance, presaged by a lunar eclipse or an earthquake, could be prevented by the ritual of the 'substitute king'. The idea that the power of the stars influences the lives of individuals (Parpola 1983: xxii–xxxii; Bottéro 1992: 138–155) has great antiquity (already documented in the Hittite omen collections) but the earliest cuneiform protocols concerning the position of stars at the birth of a child date only from the fifth century BC. The century-long activities of Babylonian astrologers exerted considerable influence on Egyptian, Indian and Greek astrology and led to calculated astronomy during the Seleucid-Parthian period.

## SIGNS OF TIME

The theory of generally favourable or unfavourable days, as well as days and months that were favourable or unfavourable for particular activities, is documented in the Akkadian hemerologies and menologies known from the middle of the second millennium until the end of cuneiform writing. The insight that there was a connection between the fundamental meaning of a sign and the timing of its manifestation led to the formulation of rules which considered certain times to be ominous for certain activities. A mainly menologically ordered calendar, dating from the last third of the

second millennium and known as *iqqur ipuš* ('he demolished, he built up') provides information in the form of lists and tables as to when activities such as building works or certain rituals, were auspicious or unauspicious. Since the text was presented in omen form ('If he builds a house in the months x, then . . .') it allowed quick access as to the future significance of daily events that were considered ominous, or of certain diseases, fires, or important astral signs for each month of the year.

## SIGNS OF THE EARTH

### Terrestrial omina and the collection *šumma alu*

The unusual behaviour of animals, extraordinary happenings in and around the house, peculiarities of plants, were all considered to point towards forces that may compromise the safety of human existence. Unbidden signs of this nature were probably observed, collected and pondered as early as the prehistorical period. Knowledge of the hidden connections between terrestrial signs and their effects on human beings were considered of such importance that omen compendia listing such signs and their outcomes were already written down in the Old Babylonian period. They can be seen as precursors of the very comprehensive collection of terrestrial omina that are first documented for the eleventh century BC (Freedman 1998: 13) but fully represented by the much later texts in the library of the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. This series, comprising at least 120 thematically defined tablets and more than 10,000 entries, was called after its initial line *šumma alu ina mele šakin* ('when a city is built on high ground'). The majority of signs in this collection were gathered from the natural urban and rural environment of the Mesopotamian populace and not the royal court. Apart from signs originating from the immediate surroundings of the human home (within the house, in animals, and in other various manifestations of and around the house, tablets 1–53), the series is dedicated to ominous signs within the city, the fields and gardens (tablets 54–60), in rivers and watercourses (tablets 61–63), and the birds of the sky (tablets 64–79). Other sections are devoted to the behaviour of humans and animals (tablets 80–87, 103–104). The original kernel of the composition must have been house and city omina, hence the justified name of the whole collection as 'If a city' (tablets 1–88). Other sections of work that enumerate interpretative rules for oracular procedures and are therefore not unprovoked omina, must be later additions. It also noteworthy that the majority of the apodoses of house and city omina concern the well-being and health of the persons in whose household they were observed, rather than royal or public concerns. Terrestrial signs did not refer to an unalterable future since the diviners were trained to avert the potential misfortune before it could happen, which is why almost all the main thematic sections contain redemption rituals (Maul 1994).

Despite the enormous scope of the terrestrial omen series, the user was able to navigate it with the help of catalogues and thematically ordered short versions. Numerous excerpts and commentaries prove the extent of its usefulness to scribes and scholars.

Terrestrial signs, quite unlike the heavenly signs could not be observed systematically. Therefore, extraordinary occurrences had to be reported to the king if they were suspected to concern the public welfare. Written reports about such signs are known

from the Old Babylonian, as well as the first millennium BC. They were interpreted, at least during the latter period, by the incantation specialist, the *ašipu*. The hermeneutic principles of interpretation which cannot be reduced to simple folk rules remain to be investigated. Various ‘handbooks’ warn practitioners not to consider terrestrial signs without correlating them to astral ones.

### Birth omina

Teratomancy (from Greek *téras* ‘monster’ and *manteía* ‘prediction’), the procedure of deriving insights into the future from the malformations of newborn humans and animals, was one of the most important Babylonian divination methods. The appearance and formation of birth defects (*izbu*) were regarded as concerning primarily the future of the whole country and hence the kingship. Teratomantic compendia were already written in the Old Babylonian period but the first comprehensive collection, consisting of 24 tablets, comes from the library of Ashurbanipal and was called *šumma izbu* (‘if a birth defect’) (Leichty 1970). The protases deal with all the varieties of possible congenital malformations. As mentioned, the majority of the apodoses concern the king. The few exceptions which document private usage mainly refer to the person in whose household the malformation occurred. An *izbu* was examined by a *baru* ‘seer’, a specialist in the interpretation of extispicy. Sometimes, an *izbu* observed in the country was pickled and sent to the city for a more detailed examination. There are texts from the first millennium which concern the purification rituals that had to be performed in the house where the birth defect had happened.

### SIGNS ON HUMAN BEINGS: OMEN COLLECTIONS AS AIDS IN THE EXAMINATION OF HUMAN BODIES

Babylonian healers could also make use of a comprehensive collection of so-called diagnostic and prognostic omina which were compiled in the eleventh century BC and transmitted into the Seleucid period. They contained thousands of entries describing symptoms (in the protasis) with comments about the chances of recovery and the nature of the disease concerned (in the apodosis) (Heeßel 2000). As soon as the deity who had sent the affliction was identified by means of the omen collection, the incantation specialist could proceed with the therapy. This consisted as much of a reconciliation with the gods achieved by magic-religious means as medical treatment in the modern sense. Numerous medical-therapeutic cuneiform texts show clearly that the Babylonians considered both treatments as a single, homogeneous discipline. Various compendia of physiognomic omina and others which are concerned with human behaviour provided prognoses about possible life expectancy, the general state of health, the character and the social standing of the investigated person. Omina concerning women refer to fertility as well as prognoses for her future husband and his household. The physiognomic omen collection served diviners as a teaching and reference work for the scrutiny of human beings. It was thus much in demand at court, on occasions when people were about to be admitted to the inner circle around the king, achieve high office, or get married to a high status person.

## SIGNS DURING SLEEP: DREAM OMINA

Procedures concerning dream interpretation are mentioned in the oldest comprehensible cuneiform text from Mari, dating from the mid-third millennium BC (Bonechi and Durand 1992). A mantically important dream which was not immediately clear, say through a divine message, had to be interpreted regardless of whether the dream had been solicited through the incubation ritual or appeared spontaneously. This was done by the *barum* 'seer', as well as by male and female 'questioners' (Sum. *ensi*, Akkad. *ša'ilu(m)*, *šailtum*) who clarified the relationship between the dream content and future happenings, not least to allow counter measures to be taken in time.

Despite the great antiquity of Mesopotamian dream omina, there are few tablets outside Ashurbanipal's library which put together images and events seen in dreams, and their meaning. Ashurbanipal's edition, known to us as the 'The Assyrian Dream Book', was called *iškar Zalīqīqu* after the dream-god Zaiqu/Ziqiqu and comprised 11 tablets (edition: Oppenheim 1956). Many of the described dream motives do not occur in real life or transgress against existing moral and ethical standards. The interpretations contained in the apodoses always concern private matters as well as prognoses about success, health and life expectancy. A separate chapter concerned the dreams of the king and their meaning.

Dreams by third persons that were considered important had to be reported to the king and then interpreted (see, for instance, Durand 1988: 455–482). A prognosis supplied by a dream interpretation could be made more precise by additional divinatory procedures. There were numerous rituals to procure dream omina, as well as those meant to avert the predicted misfortune.

## INVESTIGATION OF SACRIFICIAL ANIMALS, OF THEIR ENTRAILS (EXTISPICY), THEIR LIVERS (HEPATOSCOPY)

The observation of a sacrificial animal (generally a sheep) during and after the sacrifice, the inspection of its carcass and inner organs, was first documented in Mesopotamia in the third millennium and then spread throughout the Ancient Near East and the classical Mediterranean (though not to Egypt). It promised insights into future happenings as well as divine approval or disapproval for important decisions.

It was held in highest esteem during all periods of Mesopotamian history because it provided for the rulers the ultimate legitimation for decisions concerning political, military, personal and religious matters. The examination of the sacrificial sheep, which established a direct line of communication between man and god, had sacramental character and was performed as a ritual by a professional diviner. The sacrifice was directly related to the intention of the sacrificer.

Almost innumerable numbers of cuneiform tablets document the various forms of sacrificial divination, from the Old Babylonian period onward. Apart from the tablets that constituted a sort of 'handbook' which diviners and their students copied again and again for reference and teaching purposes and which were collected into sometimes very large series of omen collections and omen commentaries, there were incantations for the ritual context of such divination (Starr 1983; Lambert 1995), as well as detailed instructions for such rituals (Zimmern 1901, Nr. 1–25 and Nr. 71–101).



Protocols about specific oracular rituals and the letters exchanged between rulers and their advisers, dating from the second and first millennia BC, allow a deep insight into the practice of sacrificial divination. The ritual instruction tablets for the diviner (*barum*), trace the origin of extispicy to Enmeduranki, the first prediluvian (mythical) king of Sippar. He had been granted access to the 'secret of heaven and earth' by the gods Shamash and Adad, to pass it on to 'the sons of Nippur, Sippar and Babylon' (Lambert 1998).

Around the turn from the second to the first millennium BC, the written sources about sacrificial divination underwent a process of large-scale systematization, most likely in response to the increasingly powerful role of Mesopotamian kings, who demanded a comprehensive and reliable system of divination. This process culminated with the edition of a work called *iškar baruti* (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 27–31), which brings together thousands of sacrificial omnia on some 100 tablets, sub-divided into ten series. King Ashurbanipal, who declares in a colophon that he made copies with his own hand 'in the assembly of scholars', had the first-known examples of the massive compendium in his library (Jeyes 1997). The series describes in great detail the outer appearance of the sacrificial sheep, the shape of its entrails, and particularly the 'topography' of the liver, gall bladder and the lungs. It was made easy to use by the list form of the individual tablets and by catalogues. For the purposes of further studies and for practical purposes, there were numerous excerpts (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 437–473).

The apodoses of the omnia almost exclusively address the concerns of the king and the state: the well-being of the royal family, catastrophes and good harvest, wealth of the kingdom, epidemics and, last but not least, success in warfare. The huge importance of the omen collection for the exercise of kingship can be seen by the fact that Tukulti-Ninurta I ordered the confiscation of extispicy tablets on the occasion of his Babylonian campaign (Lambert 1957/58: 44) and by the efforts made by Ashurbanipal to assemble all relevant texts in his library.

Oracle questions from the Old Babylonian period (Durand 1988: 24–34, 44–46 and *passim*) and the first millennium (Starr 1990) also document the enormous political importance of sacrificial divination at Mesopotamian courts. They also show that strict secrecy surrounded not only the object of enquiry but the knowledge of the discipline as such, which constituted vital 'hegemonic knowledge'. A considerable proportion of royal enquiries concerned decisions of a military and strategic nature and many must have been made during campaigns. Others were meant to clarify the success of a war, the development of threatening situations in the provinces and occupied territories.

Private queries generally concern the health and well-being of the person consulting the oracle but there are also some about the likely outcome of business ventures. Occasionally there are questions concerning the fidelity of a wife.

Prayers and rituals frequently refer to the inner organs of the sacrificial sheep as a 'tablet' inscribed by the gods which reflects the hermeneutic basis of extispicy. The richly structured surface of the liver was seen as a text, rather like the night sky, which described the human world in an initially incomprehensible but ultimately accessible manner. The various observed individual phenomena were like the ideograms of the cuneiform script which have more than one reading (and meaning), the correct one of which is made clear only through context. An oracular result could be classified

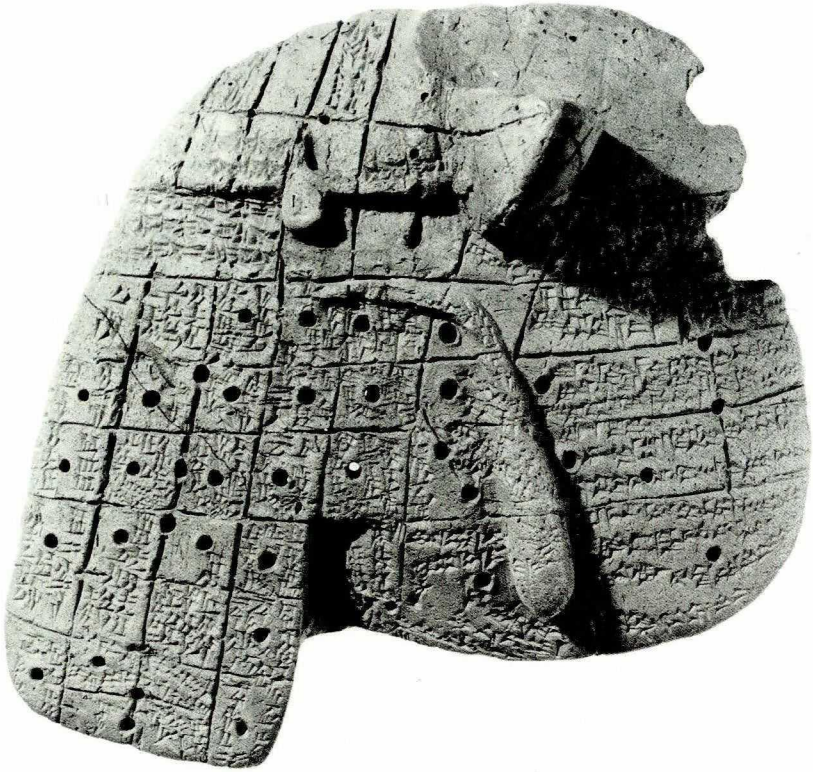


Figure 25.1 Old Babylonian clay model of a sheep's liver, c.1700 BC. The text refers to the ominous implications of any mark in that place (courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum).

as auspicious (positive), unclear, or unauspicious (negative). In the worst case, as in the absence of a certain sign on the liver (Leiderer 1990: 24), it meant that the deity was absent and refused to enter into communication with the person commissioning the oracle. Some of the more unusual results were considered to be highly dangerous and the negative effects had to be averted by specially constructed rituals.

The Mesopotamian practice of sacrificial divination had a widespread influence. Collections of omnia from Mesopotamia were found at the courts of Anatolia, Syria and Iran as early as the second millennium BC and they were translated into different languages (Hittite, Hurrian, Ugaritic). Ancient Israel practised it under Mesopotamian influence, as did the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans.

## OTHER ORACLES

The inspection of (sacrificial) birds ('ornithoscopy') involved the appearance of the body of a dead and plucked but unopened bird where spots on the skin were given particular attention. Existing omen compendia from the Old Babylonian period show

that this form of divination was also used by kings and generals since not a few refer to future wars or warn of enemies (edition: Durand 1997).

The patterns made by oil poured into a bowl of water (lecanomancy, from Greek *lekáne* 'bowl') was also considered as an ancient divinely sanctioned practice. It appears that the plant oil used for the oracle was seen as a sacrifice to the gods, and thus a vehicle of divine communication in itself. The diviner poured oil on the water filling the basin and then more water on top of the oil. The oracular result was derived from the colour, the direction and form of movement the oil made. Oil and water were seen as opposing forces and their collision triggered movements understood as a fight between two principles. The inherent hermeneutic principle of the oil omnia can also be revealed by the fact that one could elicit information about the relationship between two people by pouring out a few drops of oil 'for' these persons and then examining how they behave towards each other (edition: Pettinato 1966).

Libanomancy (from Greek *líbanos* 'incense'), the method of using incense to gain insights into the future, is first known from the third millennium BC and omen collections are, so far, only documented in four Old Babylonian tablets (Finkel 1983/84). Here, too, incense was seen as an offering to the gods who then communicated their will by means of its substance. The diviner sprinkled flour or incense into a container with glowing coals and observed the shape of the resulting fire or smoke. While some of the apodoses provide answers for private queries, the majority show clearly that military leaders consulted this oracle on royal command. They were technically easy enough to perform even in the midst of battle.

Aleuromancy, divining by means of scattered flour (from Greek *áleuron* 'flour') is, so far, only known from a single late Babylonian omen tablet (Nougayrol 1963).

There is little evidence that oracles concerning birds in flight played an important role in Mesopotamia, unlike in Anatolia. Unsolicited signs concerning flying birds, however, were carefully observed.

Popular forms of folk divination which everybody could undertake were doubtlessly important during all periods of Mesopotamian history but because they were easily accessible they rarely entered the written evidence.

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