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Mesopotamian Divination. Some Historical, Religious and Anthropological Remarks

Divination was a salient characteristic of Mesopotamian civilization. Divination was based on the idea that to some extent the future is pre-determined; but that the gods, especially Shamash and Adad (“Shamash, lord of the judgment, Adad, lord of the inspection”), have made available to man certain indications of the future (omens and portents) in the world around him, which can be interpreted (divined) by experts with specialist knowledge. Ea, along with these two gods, was credited as one of the founders of divination. The future as crystallized in the present was not considered by the Babylonians as solely a creation of the gods but as the result of a dialogue between man and god. The Mesopotamians believed that the gods wrote the future into the universe, and that this is why the world could be read by those who were wise enough (certain priests and scholars). The organic body was seen as a text. Specially prepared priests could explain the signs sent down by the gods (in Akkadian, the word *pašāru* means a multi-layered reading or decipherment of texts). Therefore, even if the gods founded divination, man played a vital role in the process and was a vital link, a near equal and irreplaceable part of the process as a whole.

Key words: divination, Mesopotamia, Enmeduranki, Shamash, Adad, Ea, anthropology

There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that portents played an important role in every area of life in the ancient world (Cic. *De Div.*²; see W.K. Pritchett 1979: 142). Divination (see Black, Green 2004: 68–69)³ is a salient characteristic of Mesopotamian civilization (Michałowski 2006: 247; Maul 2003: 45–88). Out of 3594 “Babylonian literary and scientific texts” in the library of Ashurbanipal (kept

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² All translations by W.A. Falconer (Marcus Tullius Cicero 1979).

³ On the complex subject of Mesopotamian divination, a proper place to start is A.L. Oppenheim’s *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Oppenheim 1977: 206–227). Less detailed introductory discussions are provided by J. Bottéro and M.A. Fowler (Bottéro 1992: 125–137; 2001: 170–202; Flower 2008: 104–131).

in the British Museum) 270 cannot be classified, 1085 are “archival texts” and 645 are “divination reports”. Of the remaining 1594 texts – i.e., the “library texts” – 746 are divinatory (46.8%) (Schaper 2013: 231). Divination is human observation of signs perceived to be divine and our response to them (Burkert 2005: 1). It is treated in this article as an academic issue, although for a long time it has been treated simply as superstition: trivial, out-dated and not really deserving of attention (Bottéro 1992: 126). Although the topic was treated as unworthy of serious academic research we have a lot of definitions of this term. Some of them were crystallized in antiquity and others are connected with contemporary studies.

Necessity of divination

One has to deal with different forms of divination. All of these activities are treated as irrational in today’s world, but for Mesopotamian civilization they were entirely rational (in the modern sense of the word rationality). In other words, derived omens were a sign of divinity and thus carried the guarantee of unflinching accuracy. Divination is based on the idea that to some extent the future is pre-determined; but that the gods, especially Shamash and Adad, have made certain indications of the future (omens and portents) available to man in the world around him, which can be interpreted (divined) by experts with specialist knowledge. The future as crystallized in the present was not considered by the Babylonians solely as a creation of the gods but as the result of a dialogue between man and god. It was 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 (Maul 2008: 362). Increasingly complex political structures forced the kings to submit their relationship to the gods to a form of permanent scrutiny (see Pongratz-Leisten 1999). 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 or even a whole kingdom. Until one deciphers omens, they represent unbridled forms of divine power. While their meanings and consequences are unknown they remain potentially dangerous. The act of interpreting a sign seeks to limit that power by restricting the parameters of a sign’s interpretation (Maul 2008: 364). On the one hand, divination is a form of ritual, a kind of formal procedure that trained practitioners perform in order to provide clients with advice or help in solving a problem. This ritual aspect of divination lays emphasis on the traditional nature of what the seer says and does. On the other hand, divination was not solely ritualistic; it was also a ‘pure’ performance (Fowler 2008: 189). Taking this into account, it is interesting that there was no Sumerian or Akkadian equivalent for the terms ‘oracle’ or ‘omen’ (Maul 2008: 361).

History of divination in Mesopotamia. Third Millennium

The Mesopotamian terms for divinatory signs were as follows: *ittu* is a general word for a sign, *tamitu* can mean a question asked of the supernatural at an oracle, but also the answer – a sign. The word *têrtu* can also be translated as sign, used in a general sense and particularly during the extispicy (Beerden 2013: 110–111). Extispicy was probably known of from Sumerian times (Hutter 1996: 99). The Sumerians may have inspected livers, but as far as we know, they only did so in order to ascertain whether a candidate to cultic office was acceptable to the god, or whether the god permitted his temple to be rebuilt (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 13). Rochberg also claims that the practice of divination was known in the ED period (Rochberg 2006: 337). The first references to divination in the area of Mesopotamia are found in the written sources of the third millennium BC, which indicate a number of professional titles (Falkenstein 1966: 45–68). Throughout the third millennium, a host of literary compositions make reference to divination with varying emphasis. The most well-known extispicies among these are the two by Naram-Sin in the *Cursing of Akkade* and at least two performed by Gudea (Richardson 2010: 231 (*Cylinder A* xii 16–17; xx 5)). Among examples of celestial divination one might point to the cylinders of King Gudea, who needed an auspicious sign (*ĝiškim* in Sumerian) from the god Ningirsu, confirming his consent to build a new temple in Lagash. This evidence from the twenty-second century BC is one of the earliest that clearly attests to the idea of signs from heaven and that omens conveyed divine decisions (Rochberg 2006: 337–338, 346–347).

From Sumerian language we know of the *Hymn Shulgi B*, in which the king not only proclaims his own knowledge but also manages to deprecate his court diviners in the bargain:

I am a ritually pure diviner,
 I am Nintu of the written lists of omens!
 For the proper performance of the lustrations of the office of high priest,
 For singing the praises of the high priestess and (their) selection for (residence in)
 the *gīpar*,
 For the choosing of the Lumah and Nindingir priests by holy extispicy,
 For (decision to) attack the south or strike the north,
 For opening the storage of (battle) standards,
 For the washing of lances in the “water of battle,”
 And for making wise decisions about rebel lands,
 The (ominous) words of the gods are most precious, indeed!
 After taking a propitious omen from a white lamb – an ominous animal –
 I make ready the sheep with ritual words
 And my diviner watches in amazement like a barbarian.
 The ready sheep is placed in my hand, and I never confuse a favorable sign with an
 unfavorable one.

...

In the insides of a single sheep I, the king,
Can find the (divine) messages, for the whole universe (*Hymn Shulgi B*, ll. 131–149,
see Michałowski 2006: 247–248).

A very early piece of evidence for extispicy is the appearance of diviners in ED professional lists, in the entries (“one who reaches the hand (in)to the goat”) in Lu E from Ebla and Lu C from Fara and Abu Salabikh. Lu C, in displaying some apparent professional categories, lists the entries together with persons working with animals, not with professions more likely to have been working within a scribal or cult tradition (Richardson 2010: 227). There are some historical texts that extensively record omens or ominous happenings – the *Chronicle of Early Kings* and the *Religious Chronicle*. The material contained in the first gathers the apodoses of historical omens about the kings Sargon and Naram-Sin. This recording of bizarre phenomena, which have some similarity to omens, was a major concern for the author of the *Religious Chronicle*. This chronicle collects events observed during New Year festivals in Babylon, such as wild animals appearing in the city, moving statues and astronomical phenomena (Annus 2010: 4).

The collection of omens began in the Akkadian period (c. 2350–2193) and intensified in the OB period (Launderville 2003: 217). The Akkadian technical terminology of the craft contrasts with the information gleaned from other sources that provide ample evidence of divinatory practices in early times (Richardson 2010: 238).

The Old Babylonian period and Mari

As previously mentioned, extispicy seems to have been fully developed by the last quarter of the third millennium. We know of a nocturnal ritual, during which an animal is sacrificed and its entrails removed and studied for their visual appearance. Specific questions could be asked before the sacrifice (Bahrani 2008: 84). The divinatory literature arose in the OB period, but this idea does not preclude the aforementioned possibility or even probability, for some scholars, that the OB texts drew an earlier traditions or an oral background (Richardson 2010: 225). The last known sheep omen year-name is for Damiq-iligu’s (year 4, 1812 BC); the earliest exemplars of technical literature probably date to nineteenth century Mari; the earliest securely datable technical document for liver divination is now the omen for the accession of Dadusha of Eshnunna, c. 1800 BC (Richardson 2010: 229).

There was the extensive network of diviners employed by the Mari kings. More than forty-five diviners are known by name from the court of Zimri-Lim alone, posted in more than two dozen foreign palaces, fortresses, and towns. In the Kingdom of Babylon, diviners are also primarily seen to be engaged in state business having to do with diplomacy and military matters, this picture derived not only

from the technical literature, but also from letters and administrative texts. One may summarize the functional role of diviners in the vast majority of texts as being in service to the king in a variety of ways related to intelligence – as diplomats and spies in foreign courts, on the march with armies, in private council to kings, in charge of fortresses (Richardson 2010: 250). In the OB period we find a different kind of divination: extispicy (*bārûtu*), physiognomy (*alamdimmû*), and malformed births (*izbu*). It is worth noting the absence of *Enuma Anu Enlil* in this period, a series of tablets interpreting observations of the stars, planets, weather and natural occurrences. The best preserved of the OB celestial omens (BM 22696 and BM 86381) deal with lunar eclipses (Rochberg 2006: 340–341). The OB diviner seems to have been an independent specialist employed by the king rather than an individual who held the office. Some diviners were priests; in any case, a diviner had to have close associations with the temple cult since his service could not have been conducted without animal sacrifice. The OB diviner had to swear loyalty in his service to the king (Launderville 2003: 215; cf. Pongratz-Leisten 1999: 150–153, 201).

Especially during the Mari period a lot of oracles remained⁴. This is an example of some texts found in Mari and Eshnunna (Roberts 2002: 157–253; Nissinen 2003: 13–95; see Charpin 2013: 78–79).

This is what I (Adad [Addu] lord of Aleppo)
d[esire] from you.
When you go out on campaign.
Do not go without an oracle,
You will go out on a campaign.
If I do not
You will [not] g[o] out the gate (2.A.15 = AEM 1/1, 233, 11³–17³; Roberts 2003: 169).

It is worth to compare this passage with the story of Naram-Sin:
“Tie up your weapons and puts (them) into the corners!
Guard your courage! Take heed of your own person!
Let him roam through your land and do not go out to him!” (Westenholz 1997a: 330)

Divination as the divine gift. Enmeduranki tradition

In Mesopotamia divination was treated as a secret of the gods (*niširti bārûti*). The Assyrian gods Shamash and Adad revealed the *barû*-lore to Enmeduranki⁵, “the Tablet of the Gods, the liver, a secret of heaven and the netherworld,” and he passed it on to citizens of Nippur, Sippar and Babylon (Lambert 1998: 141).

⁴ Prophecy and other forms of divination were used in foreign politics as well as in interior politics, see: (Stöckl 2010).

⁵ More about this tradition, see: (Rochberg 2004: 183; Lambert 1967: 126–138; 2007: 4; Bahrani 2008: 82).

All the diviners of Mesopotamian extispicy and lecanomancy (observation of oil poured in water) were ideologically descendants of this king (Winitzer 2010: 185). Enmeduranki reigned over the city of Sippar for 54 600 years (Veldhuis 2010: 79) and received not only the secret of 'the Heavens and the Earth,' but also instructions about how to conduct the craft of various arts of divination and determine who might be their respective practitioners:

Shamash in the Ebabbara [appointed] Enmeduranki, [King of Sippar], the beloved of Anu, Enlil, [and Ea]. Shamash and Adad [brought him in] to their assembly, Samas and Adad [honored him], Shamash and Adad [seated him] before [them] on a golden throne. They showed him how to observe oil in water, a mystery of Anu [Enlil and Ea]. [Th]ey gave him the Tablet of the Gods, the *liver*, a secret of Heaven and the Netherworld, they put the cedar in his hands, beloved by the great gods. And he, [in accordance with] their [command], brought into his presence the citizens of Nippur, Sippar, and Babylon, and honored them, he seated them before him on thrones, he showed them how to observe oil in water, a mystery of Anu, Enlil, and Ea, he gave them the Tablet of the Gods, the liver, a secret of Heaven and the Netherworld, he put the cedar in their hand, beloved by the great gods, the Tablet of the Gods, the liver, a mystery of Heaven and the Netherworld... (Winitzer 2010: 181; Lambert 1998: 152; Lenzi 2008: 125–127).

The claim of antiquity was advanced for the first and only time in a text from Ashurbanipal's seventh-century BC library, that the antediluvian king Enmeduranki was taught the art by the god Shamash, the king then passing his knowledge on to wise scholars. 'Enmeduranki' seems to be a slight corruption of the Enmeduranna known from the *Sumerian King List* (see Jacobsen 1979). Yet though the *Sumerian King List* dates to at least the twenty-first century BC, it mentions no wisdom traditions of any kind – only that Enmeduranna was a king ruling at Sippar for 21 000 years. A third and final reference to Enmeduranna is in the *King List* compiled by Berossus in the third century BC, but here again one finds no reference to liver divination (Richardson 2010: 237)⁶.

The role of the gods Shamash and Adad

The Enmeduranki tradition attributes liver and oil divination, but also astrological omens to the gods Shamash and Adad (Richardson 2010: 237; Böck 2010: 214; Stainkeller 2005: 11–47). The connection between judgments and divine oracles is apparent from the use of the words *dīnu* 'verdict' and *dajānu* 'judge' in legal texts as well as in reference to gods and divination (Rochberg 2009: 79–80). Shamash is the patron of divination and is called the master of decisions (*bêl purrussī*) (Charpin 2013: 71). Shamash is associated with divination by extispicy and is

⁶ In the *Sumerian Kings-List* he is called En-men-durAnna of Sippar, in the list of Berossos – Eudeorankhos of Pautibiblon, see: (Verbrugghe, Wickersham 2001: 19, 70).

called DI.KU5/*sēru* ‘supreme judge’ and *pāris pursussē ilāni rabūti* “decider of decisions of the great gods” (Rochberg 2004: 192; Jeyes 1991–1992: 23–41; Charpin 2013: 68). Divination and justice went hand in hand for the Babylonian: in both cases, it was the fairness of the judgment that was important, whether it was a decision in the heavens or on earth (Charpin 2013: 68, 74; Beerden 2013: 34). The judicial role of the sun god was very important and, probably because of this, there are only a few known references to the sun god during the annihilation of enemies in times of war (Frahm 2013: 101). A NA hymn to Shamash⁷, as a god of divination, is known of called *barû ša mati* “Divine seer of the land” (Bahrani 2008: 81):

“O radiance of the great gods, light of the earth
 Illuminator of the world regions
 Lofty judge, creator of heaven and earth
 O Shamash, by your light you scan the totality of lands as if they were cuneiforms signs
 You never weary of divination” (Falkenstein, Soden 1953: 247–248).

Code of Hammurapi ends with a curse being placed upon and against an evil king. In this case Shamash has the power to confuse the path of such a king and undermine the morale of his army during the procedure of divination. The god can send him an inauspicious omen portending his defeat and final collapse of his kingdom (Roth 1995: 137–138, ll. 14–40).

In many sources, Adad⁸ is mentioned as the god of thunder and the giver of oracles, extispicy and signs (Annus 2006: 9). To explain Adad’s rather unexpected role in oracular divination, Schwemer offers two suggestions. First, Adad “was a celestial god who... had power over numerous ominous phenomena and dwelled in immediate proximity to the celestial sun-god.” Secondly, he “was lord of the winds, which were seen in Mesopotamia as divine carriers,” perhaps thereby providing the means to communicate the extispicy verdict to the human diviner (Schwemer 2007: 150). Steinkeller sought to understand the place of Shamash, the sun god, Adad, the weather god – respectively the *bēl dīnim* ‘lord of judgment’ and the *bēl bīriml/bēl ikribī u bīrim* ‘lord of (extispicy) inspection/petitions and inspection’ (Starr 1983: 30–44; Kang 1989: 43; Beerden 2013: 115) – as well as the so-called Gods of the Night⁹ in the Mesopotamian conception of the divinatory

⁷ It is worth to mention that the similar words are addressed to Marduk (Bēl):

The wide heavens are the whole of your liver

Bēl, with your eyes you see all

With your omens, you verify your omens

With your glance, you give the decrees (see Feuerherm 2011: 90).

⁸ He was, of course, also a warrior god, who already in the times of the kings of Mari guaranteed victory, see: (Green 2003: 87).

⁹ The Gods of the Night, according to Steinkeller, are the self-same deities named in many extispicy reports – including Ishtar (in her various guises), Shulpae, Ninurta, Sin, and so on – that are also to be equated with the night’s stars (thus Ishtar = Venus, Shulpae = Jupiter, Ninurta = Sirius, Sin = Moon, etc.). For a given extispicy one of these functions as the *bēl tērtim*, or the deity responsible for that extispicy, perhaps in accordance with personal proclivity or with astronomical and/or meteorological

universe. In particular, it is the pairing of the former two that appears in many of extant prayers and prayer rituals of the OB divination (including *ikribu-* and *tamitu-*prayers, and other related material). As Steinkeller explains it, this Shamash-Adad duo operates in tandem – with Adad providing for Samash to enable the cosmic process. That divination takes place at night is a result of the belief that at this time Shamash traverses the Netherworld's horizon, a mirror image of the one visible in daytime. At this time, when earthly judgment ceases, the interest of the cosmic judge turns to divinatory matters, the heavenly counterpart of legal verdicts (Winitzer 2010: 178–179).

The moon god Sin plays an important role in divination as the eclipses played an essential role in this process (Charpin 2013: 8; Lambert 1997: 85–98). On the margin it is worth mentioning one more deity connected with divination, the goddess Ninsianna (Charpin 2013: 80).

In the Neo-Assyrian period the extispicy took place at dawn in a propitious day¹⁰. According to an Assyrian hemerology, neither the *barû* priest nor the medical expert *asû* were supposed to perform their art on the 1st, 7th, 9th, 14th, 19th, 21st, 28th, 29th, and 30th of the month of Nisan, whereas on the 17th it was only medical experts who were allowed to practice. These days are associated with the stages of the lunar cycle (Koch 2013: 133–134). Divination is performed at special places, such as the edge of a village, which symbolize a transition from one sphere to another (Koch 2013: 134). The diviner would begin with a prayer addressed to “Shamash, lord of judgment, and Adad, lord of the extispicy ritual and divination.”¹¹ The diviner then whispered the words of the query, which were addressed to “Shamash, great lord,” into the ears of the sacrificial victim (almost always a sheep). Beginning with the liver, which received special attention, the entire exta of the sheep came under scrutiny according to a fixed sequence. The preparations for the extispicy ritual seem to have been quite extensive, and that may explain why they took place only once a day by the NA period. Cloudy weather during the performance of the ritual, hiding the face of Shamash from the diviner, was probably interpreted as a bad omen (SAA 4, 23; see Flower 2008: 161). Questions had to be formulated in all the relevant detail. The result of the extispicy, whether the god's answer was ‘yes’ or ‘no’, was arrived at by calculating the sum of positive and negative, favourable and unfavourable, omens from the various organs (Oppenheim 1977: 206–227; Flower 2008: 161). The final answer was not simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’. After summing the signs, the reports were either very favourable, favourable,

realities (Steinkeller 2005: 41–42; see Lenzi 2011: 71–83, 157–167). More about the Gods of the Night: (Gössmann 1950; Hunger, Pingree 1989; Reiner, Pingree 1981: 10–16; Dossin 1935: 179–187; Oppenheim 1959: 282–301; Reiner 1995: 68; Fincke 2009: 519–558).

¹⁰ There is only one attestation of an extispicy performed on the unsuitable date of the 28th but since the text is broken, there is still the possibility that a collation may redeem the diviners, see: (Starr 1990: no. 5).

¹¹ The Sargonid queries invariably begin with the line: “[Šamaš, great lord], give me a firm positive ans[wer to what I am asking you]!” (see SAA 4, 16).

unfavourable or very unfavourable (Kang 1989: 43). What is important is that the queries never ask for a favourable “fate”, merely for favourable decisions (*purussû*), a “firm yes” (*annu kīnu*), justice (*kittu*), or fair judgment (*dīnu*). What the divination produces is not knowledge of “fate” but an instruction (*têrtu*). There is a place for choice (Koch 2013: 140).

Lambert states that the queries to Shamash share much phraseology and general style with *tamītus*, including the use of the word *tamītu* for ‘oracle questions,’ they have one major difference, that they are addressed to Shamash alone: “Shamash, great lord, whom I am asking, answer me with a reliable ‘Yes!’” (Lambert 2007: 8).

The royal inscriptions of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon refer to the king’s taking advice from divination through Shamash and Adad, but the inscriptions of Ashurbanipal, despite their extent, allude to such divination less frequently, and the present writer has noted one such mention of Shamash and Adad and one of Shamash alone, but followed by mention of Sin with the same function (Lambert 2007: 8–9). The parallel between lists of omens and earlier collections of legal precedents of their ‘judgments’ or ‘verdicts’ is suggestive and compelling in light of prayers and incantations referring to the gods (to Sin or Sin and Shamash together) as ‘deciders of decisions’ (Rochberg 2004: 194).

The god Ea

Despite the fact that Shamash and Adad are the divinities typically associated with divination and the successful performance of an extispicy, it is Ea, the god of wisdom, who is explicitly credited for its origination (Rochberg 2004: 182). We are told that diviners transmitted knowledge “from the mouth of the god Ea” (Michałowski 1996: 186). What is very important is that we probably have two different ideas about the origin of divination in Mesopotamia (SAA 19, 82–83). Ea is often treated as the only suitable divine benefactor of a secret corpus of knowledge (SAA 19, 104). He was the god associated with knowledge and wisdom; as creator and ally of humankind he was willing to divulge his secrets in the form of magic to human beings (Bottéro 1992: 235). With evidence that reaches into the third millennium, Nisaba not Ea may have a claim to being the original patron of those who observe the stars. Nevertheless, in the NA period, and in catalog *EAE*, Ea is credited with one of the main works associated with the astrologer’s craft (SAA 19, 101). According to the Enmeduranki texts, the art of divination was revealed to Enmeduranki by Shamash and Adad; according to *nisirti bārūti* texts and the *Rituals* the source was Ea: the secret of extispicy which Ea proclaimed. An Assyrian scholar, Balasi, stresses in a letter to the king the role of Ea as both sender of omens and author of apotropaic rituals: “Ea has done, Ea has undone. He who caused the earthquake has also created the apotropaic ritual against it”, in brief the *nisirti bārūti* text states that: “the learned diviner as a father shall teach

his favorite son the secret of extispicy which Ea revealed/created” (Parpola 1993: 56ff.; Koch 2005: 58–59).

One such example is the text of *Sargon’s Eight Campaign*:

In the month of Du’uzu, which establishes the decision of the peoples, the month of the mighty one, the heir, the foremost one of Enlil, the overpowering one of the gods, Ninurta, in the month about which Ninšiku (i.e. Ea), the lord of wisdom, wrote on an ancient tablet (that it is favorable) for the gathering of armies (and) the making ready of camps (SAA 19, 102).

The scholarly tradition presents itself as derived from Ea and the primordial sages were actively used by specialists who were in service of the crown. Several hundred letters and reports sent by those specialists to the kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal reveal that it is of relevance for understanding the complexity of the written scholarly corpus and the way that corpus was used in the NA period¹².

The transmission between god(s) and humanity

The diviners may have manipulated some of the results of the extispicies, but not the fact stated in the queries placed before the god of justice (SAA 4, 14). A divine sign must be interpreted infallibly. Seen in this way, the act of interpretation – like the act of naming – constitutes a performative act of power; hence the importance of well-trained professionals and of secrecy in the transmission of texts of ritual power (Noegel 2010: 147). Divination is a means of access to divine knowledge and the decisions of the gods. There are only one or two examples of public revelations of divine will¹³. The gods clearly preferred to take a single intermediary, a ‘medium’ to communicate their secrets. This is mantic, direct discourse – from ‘mouth to ear’ – an inspired divination. The second way, an indirect deductive divination, was based on the model of written discourse, the gods coded graphically (Bottéro 1992: 106).

As stated previously, the Mesopotamians tended to view all aspects of the world as potential signs of divine activity or as signs conveying significant information about the future. The diviners in Mesopotamia viewed themselves as integral links in a chain of transmission going back to the gods. A privileged place for the occurrence of such signs was the entrails and livers of sacrificial animals, for it was believed that the gods placed such signs there. This knowledge about the will of the gods was believed to be gained by consulting a diviner (*bārûm*) (Laun-

¹² Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal’s military synergy with the gods – and thereby the legitimation of his wars – is established in a number of other ways, primarily divination and prophecy. See *Divination and prophecy of Esarhaddon 8.2.1.2* (pp. 134–137), and of *Assurbanipal 8.3.1.1* (pp. 141–142) in: (Crouch 2009).

¹³ Once to the army, see: (Streck 1916: 48f., 95ff).

derville 2003: 214, 216). In Mesopotamia the people believed in fate (*šimtu*) (see Lawson 1994) meaning “that which is determined by (divine) decree” (Rochberg 2004: 196). *Tupšarrû* and *bārû* mediated the will of the gods to the king and made judgments about the congruity between the divine will and the king’s plans (SAA 19, 77). The diviner is depicted enthroned in the presence of divinity ready to pronounce the verdict (SAA 19, 57; see Zimmern 1901: 105, no. 1–20, ll. 122–125). The predictions given for signs were even sometimes termed *purussû* ‘divine decisions’ (Rochberg 2004: 59). Not only a cosmological cable (*i.e. markasu*) and temple, but first of all writing was a linking device that permitted the diviner to connect and communicate with the gods (Noegel 2010: 144). We know from Mari, OB and NA sources that kings consulted the omens, especially via extispicy, before making important decisions (SAA 19, 41). In everyday life and for (inter)national issues as well, the NA kings were eager to hear or read their scholars’ reports and interpretations of omens. The royal letters and archives found at Nineveh give an idea about the Sargonid rulers’ need to look for signs and understand their interpretations about matters of great importance (Jean 2010: 267). Divination is not so much a shared characteristic of the royal secret council and the divine assembly as it is point of contact for the two bodies via the person of the diviner, for within the personnel of the royal council, only the diviner had the authority to set the king’s plans before the gods via an extispicy and to read the judgment of the gods from the liver and other exta of the animal:

Being (now) clean, to the assembly of the gods I shall draw near for judgment.
 O Shamash, lord of judgment! O Adad, lord of ritual acts and of divination!
 In the ritual act I prepare, in the extispicy I perform put your truth! (SAA 19, 55)

The belief that disaster falls upon those who ignore omens goes back at least to the Babylonian epic *Naram-Sin and the Enemy Hordes*, in which Naram-Sin, king of Akkade, decides to attack the enemy hordes. He inquires gods by means of extispicy, but when the omens were unfavourable, he decides to ignore them and attacks which bring the disastrous results (Westenholz 1997b: 317). This legend “was the classic propagator of extispicy, which it presented as an infallible means of studying the divine will, and as a necessary prerequisite for any important undertaking” (Flower 2008: 120). Even in the Hebrew *Bible*, King Saul is defeated and killed because he joins battle with the Philistines without favourable omens, being unable to obtain them through any of the means available to him: dreams, the Urim (a type of dice), prophets (Noort 1999: 109–116)¹⁴ or even necromancy (1 Sm 28–31).

¹⁴ An interesting parallel between the Assyrian and Hebrew tradition, see: (Horowitz, Hurowitz 1992: 95–115).

Conclusion

It is quite clear that divination played a decisive role in Mesopotamian history, from the beginnings to the fall of the Mesopotamian civilization. The transmission of divine knowledge was of most importance for people who wanted to live in accordance with divine rules. The legend of Enmendranki is one of the most well-known examples of such communication. This legend is, from a historical point of view, unjustified, but what seems to be important for the Mesopotamians is human access to divine knowledge and the groups of specialists who were the only human depositary of those secrets. The second interesting point for discussion is which of the gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon were responsible for divination. It seems justifiable to claim that the god Shamash was the most important figure. Anyway, such a polyphonic religion also offers us different solutions and other gods. These facts are not contradictory but rather complementary and understandable.

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