

## Abstracts

Istituto Svizzero

### **Oracular consultations in pre-Islamic South Arabia: terminology, practices and settings**

Alessio Agostini (Sapienza – Università di Roma)

The South Arabian vocabulary contains at least fifteen terms which may be connected in some way with the oracular consultation, although many of them are still rather obscure. Even so, this rich terminology indicates the importance and the complexity of this ritual within the South Arabian religious and social dimensions. Omen seeking, visions, and dream interpretation following incubation, seem to have helped to interpret the divine will and permitted to act accordingly at various levels.

The present paper aims at giving an outline of some of the key points regarding the oracular practice in ancient South Arabia, relying on some textual examples which may also clarify the context in which this ritual was performed. An analysis of this lexical material in a comparative perspective may also help to evaluate this ritual in the broader context of the Ancient Near East divination practices.

# A marriage and a curse in two new oil omen fragments held in the British Museum BM 87642 and BM 87655

Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem (SOAS, university of London)

Today, we know that lecanomancy was a type of divination practiced in ancient Iraq thanks to several types of cuneiform tablets that record a variety of text genres, from fiction to technical and scientific records. Archaeological finds and modern translators have revived the ancient voices of royal panegyrics that speak of the king's skills in oil divination, of myths that narrate how the first individual was taught this practice, and of old sayings that hint at the use of lecanomancy by most because it was affordable.

Outside of fiction and historical records, technical texts like omen lists give us details about how lecanomancy was practiced, and about the type of future that was imagined by individuals who lived nearly 4,000 years ago and hoped for a happy and stable life. For the Old Babylonian period (2004–1595 BC) few oil divination texts survive: we so far knew of eight tablets, held in the museums of Germany, Iraq, the UK, and the USA. These were studied by the Italian cuneiformist G. Pettinato and published in 1966 in two volumes that remain reference works. In 2018, a new study established that two out of the initial eight tablets were joints of the same text, and in that year, an additional oil omen fragment from the Old Babylonian period held at the British Museum emerged (BM 87635). Today, in 2020, two more oil fragments linked to BM 87635 by their purchase history have resurfaced (BM 87655 and BM 87642). Although few sentences remain on these two tablets, it is possible to read predictions about marriage and warnings about a *māmītum*-curse. Predictions about marriage are rare in the Old Babylonian corpus as a whole, but mentions of curses and sorcery are found elsewhere.

In remembrance of G. Pettinato, this talk will present these two new fragmentary tablets. I will recount the voyage that these tablets have survived, from their possible place of provenience to their purchase history, and will present the themes preserved in these texts, placing them in the larger context of omens from the same period.

## Divination at Ebla

Maria Giovanna Biga (Sapienza – Università di Roma)

Divination played an enormous role in everybody's life in the ancient Near East. The practice of divination is frequently attested in third millennium BC Syria according to the Ebla texts. The word *maš<sub>2</sub>* is used to indicate the omen, whereas *šu-du<sub>8</sub>-maš<sub>2</sub>* translates the expression "to take an omen", as recognized by A. Archi. Omina were often requested before military

expeditions, marriages, and on the occasion of a birth at the royal court. For instance, Dusigu, the mother of the last king of Ebla Ishar-damu, received a favorable omen upon the marriage of his son with Tabur-damu, who had probably been selected by herself!

Recently, M. Bonechi suggested again that the word nig<sub>2</sub>-kas<sub>4</sub> indicates a commercial expedition rather than a military expedition. Nevertheless, given the very frequent commercial expeditions of the Eblaite merchants in Syria and Mesopotamia, it seems improbable that an omen was requested on such an occasion. It is true that a commercial expedition could be dangerous too, but no commercial expedition gave a name to a year.

Several examples of omina which were requested before these expeditions will be examined. The names and the functions of the individuals who requested omina at the court of Ebla must be studied to verify who was asking for an omen.

### **Thoughts on the relationship between medical and physiognomic omens**

Barbara Böck (CSIC Madrid)

The present paper focuses on the 11th century BCE Babylonian scholar Esagil-kin-apli who was active at the court of king Adad-apla-iddina (1067–1046 BCE). In a unique cuneiform text the wise man claims to have organized the divinatory manuals, viz. the handbook of diagnostic and prognostic omens *Sakikkû* as well as the one of physiognomic omens *Alamdimmû*. The text, preserved in two copies that date to the first millennium BCE, is often quoted in the relevant specialist literature because it provides precious information about the inner structure and arrangement of content of both manuals. However, the classification Esagil-kin-apli gives of both handbooks, namely that they are “twins” has scarcely found attention. The aim of my contribution is to throw light on the possible motivations for his statement.

### **Divination in Egypt from Sobek to Saint Colluthus.**

#### **Aspects of continuity of some the oracular practices**

Paola Buzi (Sapienza – Università di Roma)

The practice of divination crossed the entire Egyptian religious history, from the Dynastic period to the Late Antiquity. It bears reminding that ancient Egyptian divination is to be understood as *divinatio naturalis*, i.e. the result of direct inspiration from the deity.

The main focus of the presentation will lie neither in the analysis of the many religious centers where divination was practiced nor in the contents of the several mantic texts that have been the object of recent important studies. The paper will rather explore the phenomenon of the

oracular practice in its *continuum*, aiming at demonstrating that Late Antiquity has inherited – and sometimes emphasized – many aspects of ancient Egyptian divination.

### **Divination in Third Millennium BCE (?)**

Franco D'Agostino (Sapienza – Università di Roma)

& Armando Bramanti (CSIC Madrid / ISR)

After administrative texts, divinatory and mantic texts constitute one of the best represented cuneiform textual corpora in the entire ancient Near East. Future-telling practices involving, among others, the observation of animal behavior and incubation are attested since the earliest moments of Mesopotamian history. Nevertheless, most of the sources for the study of Mesopotamian divination are written in Akkadian and date to the second and first millennium BCE. Only a limited number of documents can help the modern reader to shed light on divinatory practices in the third millennium Sumerian world.

In this paper the authors will reassess the evidence coming from lexical, administrative, and literary sources in an attempt to unveil part of the mystery surrounding divination at the beginning of Mesopotamian history.

### **Written on the Lungs:**

#### **On the Reconstruction and Interpretation of *Šumma hašû***

Nicla de Zorzi (Universität Wien)

*Šumma hašû* is an ancient Mesopotamian divinatory composition that deals with the peculiarities of the lungs of a sacrificial sheep. This composition represents the ninth chapter of a divinatory series concerning either various parts of the entrails or specific ominous features observed on the exta which became known in the first millennium BCE as *bārûtu* (“Art of the Seer”). The first part of my talk will focus on the technical terminology used by ancient diviners to describe the various parts and features of the lungs. In the second part of my talk I will give an overview on the current state of reconstruction and interpretation of *Šumma hašû*.

### **Human Behavioral Omens of *Šumma Alu*: Paradox or Paradigm Shift?**

Ann Guinan (University of Pennsylvania)

The series *Šumma Alu* opens with a contradiction of cultural logic. If a city is situated on an elevation, the mood of its inhabitants will be depressed. If a city is situated in a depression the mood of its inhabitants will be elevated. The reversal of cultural norms represents a major thematic pattern that can be traced from the initial two

omens to the human behavioral omens at the end of the series where the contradictions are more marked and more problematic.

The human behavioral corpus consists of six complete tablets and fragments of four more.

The topics include the sleep habits, non-sexual behavior of a couple in bed, unconscious mannerisms tripping in the street, cultic mishaps, sexual behavior, marital abuse, divorce, levirate marriage, and family quarrels. An extraordinary feature of the omens is the inclusion of omens from behavior which is both conscious and voluntary and, in some cases, fly in the face of legal norms (Guinan, 2014).

The corpus has remarkable parallels to the behaviors Freud studied in his early work on the dynamic unconscious and considered rational psychology. In addition, a number of the sleep omens are derived from what today are scientifically studied sleep disorders (Guinan, 1990; 2009). The idea that a man's behavior impacts his future resonates for modern reader, but how are we to understand the behavior in Mesopotamian terms within a divinatory framework?

The omens stand at the end of the first millennium omen series *Šumma Alu* and at the end of a long divinatory tradition. At the same time, the texts are contextually related to the rest of *Šumma Alu* and to the rest of the divinatory genre in general, but they defy everything we know about omens and we are left with nowhere to situate them.

The line of reasoning that results from reading behaviour as a sign contradicts the line of reasoning that results from the interpretation of the omen. According to the logic of the protasis, human sexual behavior can be read as a divinatory sign, but once the meaning of behavior is known to the inquirer, it can no longer be an omen. Thus, the entire omen becomes a paradox.

“Paradoxes invariably arise where the logical consistency of a reality construction has reached its limits and begins to lead itself *ad absurdum*...it is an epistemological warning light.”<sup>1</sup> This presentation will argue that the paradoxical structure of the human behavioral omens shows one process of Mesopotamian divinatory reasoning coming to end and, further, embedded within the corpus are indications of inquiry to come.

## Hidden Perfection. The Sign and the Prediction in Babylonian Commentaries

Enrique Jimenez (LMU München)

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<sup>1</sup> Watzlawick, P. (1984). “The Fly in the Bottle”, In *The Invented Reality: How Do We Know What We Believe We Know? Contributions to Constructivism* (P. Watzlawick, ed). London and New York: W.W. Norton, 251.

Mesopotamian divination was a hermeneutical act. When confronted with certain features or occurrences, the diviner had an array of rules at his disposal to interpret them and infer their meaning. These rules are today only imperfectly known, so the rationale for connecting a sign and a prediction is, in most cases, obscure to modern scholars.

In the first millennium BCE, the rationale was equally obscure, and scholars started to investigate the motivation of their predecessors for connecting signs and prognoses. Rather than criticize them or find faults in their work, they endeavored to demonstrate that in traditional divination treatises the meaning or prognosis is *always* derived from the observed sign, even if in most cases the connection between the two is not evident. By means of ingenious explanations, which often resort to obscure philological, mathematical, and even astronomical elaborations, first-millennium scholars demonstrated that the work of their illustrious predecessors was flawless, and the tradition they nurtured was still meaningful in their very different times.

### **Sleep omens in *šumma ālu***

*Rachel Lerculeur (Université de Genève)*

In this paper I will present some preliminary results of my doctoral research project at the University of Geneva within the *šumma ālu* Project (P.I. Prof. Catherine Mittermayer). My main focus lies on the 84th tablet of the Akkadian omen series *šumma ālu*. This tablet concerns the observation of the behavior of a person during their sleep.

I will take the opportunity to present the progress done in the field since the first studies, also introducing to the audience some recently found joins and manuscripts. The evidence resulting from my work will be discussed in the light of our improved knowledge of the whole series.

### **Anatomical Clay Representations of the Sheep Intestines for Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia: A Typology**

*Ignacio Márquez Rowe (CSIC Madrid)*

Babylonian and Assyrian diviners made and used clay representations of the sheep entrails for instruction, illustration, and reporting. Unlike models of the liver and the lungs, the clay artefacts representing the coils of the intestines of the sacrificial lamb show a varied and particular typology. Here I shall present for the first time a brief overview as an advanced token of my forthcoming book *Anatomical Clay Representations of the Sheep Intestines for Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia* co-authored with Barbara Böck.

## Divination in Hittite Anatolia

Patrick M. Michel (Université de Lausanne / AMA ISR)

In Hittite Anatolia, divination occurred mainly to understand the anger of the gods. We propose in this contribution to present the different practices of divination among the Hittites. Divine anger had harmful effects on humans: illness, defeat or even death. In order to get out of such a delicate situation, it was necessary to question the wrathful god on the origin of his anger. The god's answer was obtained through divination and was given in the form of an oracle. We still keep many copies of oracular reports in Hittite cuneiform today. We therefore know that oracles given had to be confirmed: an unambiguous answer had to be obtained and the procedure for correcting the mistake had to be asked as well. Unlike other divination practices in the Middle East, the Hittites developed a singular and binary approach. In addition to the precise question asked, the master of the ritual (e.g. the diviner), included a hypothetical answer which was oriented according to the favorable or unfavorable character of the conditions described in the question, for example :

“If this or that behaves like this or that, then the oracular request will be unfavorable (or favorable)”.

If the oracular answer coincided with the result hypothetically given, then the hypothetical circumstances were confirmed by the god.<sup>2</sup>

The several answers were obtained one after the other in order to have an increasingly precise understanding, but also to obtain a counter-examination for confirmation. In addition, the Hittites could also mix different oracular techniques and these could be combined in order to verify the results of the alternative techniques. These different steps were therefore aimed solely at the accuracy and reliability of the answers obtained.

### Signs of Sickness on Earth. Reading *Šumma ālu* from a Medico-Historical Perspective

Francesca Minen (Università di Udine)

The study of the rich Mesopotamian medical corpus is crucial to the reconstruction of Babylonian scientific and intellectual history. Nevertheless, if considered alone, these sources do not allow us to understand various aspects of medical rationale. For this reason, scholars have been interested also in sources outside the medical corpus.

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<sup>2</sup> Schwemer, D. (2002). “Leberschau, Losorakel, Vogelflug und Traumgesicht: Formen und Funktionen der Vorzeichendeutung”, in *Die Hethiter. Begleitband zur Ausstellung der Kunsthalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Bonn, 140–145.

The proposed communication aims at presenting the preliminary results of a pilot research project, conducted at the Warburg Institute, School of Advanced Study, University of London (January–April 2019). The project consisted of a first survey of all medical-related information comprised in the first half of the divination series *Šumma aīlu* (tablets 1-63), capitalizing on its recent edition (2017). The aim of the project was to verify if the label of *Šumma ālu* as a veritable encyclopedia for every aspect of ancient Mesopotamian everyday life was also valid from a medico-historical viewpoint.

After a brief contextualization of the pilot project, the communication will present some of its preliminary results and its possible, future developments.

## **Do the Senses Make Sense? Sensory Phenomena and Mesopotamian Divination**

Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel (Université de Strasbourg)

The color of the moon, the thunder in the clouds, an animal crossing the road in front of the royal army, the smell of a house, or the creaking of wooden furniture... the Mesopotamian divinatory treatises are full of a wide range of sensory phenomena that were analyzed by the diviners. Prominence was given to the visual register, but other forms of perception were also explored to identify ominous signs and to interpret them, regarding the future of the individual, of the household, of the king or of the whole country. Recent works on Mesopotamian divinatory treatises (Winitzer 2017, Glassner 2019 among others) show that – and especially for the 1st millennium BC – omens are not necessarily based on the empirical experience of the diviner himself. They must be considered in their relationship to the other omens of the same list, or to referents from various domains which the diviner mastered, such as literature, sound, language or cuneiform writing. What role can Sensoriality play in this approach of the ominous sign which seems to stand out from the empirical observation and the individual experience itself? To answer this question, the present paper will investigate several divinatory treaties of the 1st millennium BC. I will highlight the relationships between sensory perception and the elaboration of omen lists, focusing on a shared sensory memory which shape and give sense to the divinatory knowledge.

## **Animal agency in ancient Mesopotamia divination**

Lorenzo Verderame (Sapienza – Università di Roma)

Animals play a major role in ancient Mesopotamian divination. The main mantic practice concerns the examination of sacrificial animal entrails. Twenty out of the twenty-four tablets



that constitute the teratological series (*Šumma izbu*) regard animal ominous birth. In these cases, however, animals play a passive role, since it is their anomalous features what becomes the subject of examination. In this paper I discuss those cases where animals play an active role instead. Omens forecasted from animal behavior will be analyzed taking examples from mantic and ritual texts. Finally, I draw conclusions on the status animals have and the frame their actions are inscribed in within the religious sphere and discuss the question of consecration.