

**COSMOLOGY, MAGIC AND DIVINATION :  
ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN DIVINATION  
(WEEK 3 NOTES)**

**CRYSTAL ADDEY**

*At the end of the day, the Radiant Star, the Great Light that fills the sky,  
The Lady of the Evening appears in the heavens.  
The people in all the lands lift their eyes to her.  
The men purify themselves; the women cleanse themselves.  
The ox in his yoke lows to her.  
The sheep stir up the dust in their fold.  
All the living creatures of the steppe  
The lush gardens and orchards, the green reeds and trees,  
The fish of the deep and the birds in the heavens –  
My Lady makes them all hurry to their sleeping places.  
The living creatures and all the numerous people of Sumer kneel before her.<sup>1</sup>*

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

What cosmological ideas and conceptions seem to underlie and provide the framework for Near Eastern divination? Do you think that the Mesopotamians had a concept or idea of 'fate'? In what ways do you think Greek and Roman divination and 'magical' practices are derived from or related to Near Eastern Divination? What parallels, similarities and differences are there between Near Eastern divination and Greek and Roman divination? How similar or different are the cosmological views and ideas underlying Near Eastern divination and Graeco-Roman divination?

**THEMES FOR THIS WEEK:**

- Codification of different types of divination
- Emergence of astral divination
- Distinction between provoked and unprovoked divination
- The Heavens as a system of communication between divinity and humanity
- The use of magic to engage in a dialogue with destiny

**MESOPOTAMIA: COSMOLOGY**

The earliest evidence of a tradition of astrology as a highly organized and codified system of reading meaning into the sky emerged in the river valleys of Sumer (which is now southern Iraq).<sup>2</sup> It emerged from a highly developed cosmology. All parts of the cosmos were linked to each other, so that each star or region of the sky might have a terrestrial counterpart and vice versa. Mesopotamian religious views and practices bear remarkable similarities to the later Graeco-Roman world:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Lady of the Evening*, in Samuel Noah Kramer and Diane Wolkstein, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, New York: Harper and Row, 1983, 101.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 35.

Mesopotamia was polytheistic: the gods and goddesses were seen as an integral part of the natural world in the sense that they inhabited it, occupying the same space as human beings but invisibly. Divinity was, to an extent, transcendent in that it ruled the natural world, but also immanent, in that it was inside nature and acted through it.<sup>3</sup> All things in the natural world were seen as being alive and animate. The most powerful Mesopotamian deities could be perceived through the natural environment. For example, An or Anu ruled the sky; Ea or Enki (lord of the Earth) ruled the earth and oceans and Enlil (lord of the air) ruled the wind.

Given this background, ancient Near Eastern divination and astrology does not fit neatly into modern categories such as science, religion and ‘magic.’ As Nick Campion has stated:

The distinction between science and religion as two explanatory models is one which makes sense in the modern West but, as applied to Mesopotamian astrology, it is not a matter of either/or but of both: astrology was clearly scientific in its analytical and experimental rigour. It posed hypotheses which be tested and sought to explain humanity’s relationships with the natural environment. Mesopotamian cosmology, though, differed from modern science in its purely descriptive nature. It had no need of complex explanatory models to explain the origins of the cosmos for these were provided by the cosmogony of the *Enuma Elish*, in which the gods emerged out of water, moulded human beings out of clay and obligated them to serve their creators. Astrology was religious in the sense that it involved gods and goddesses, rituals, sacrifice and worship, but these beliefs and practices were all part of the scientific model. The evidence for the gods’ existence was found in the workings of the everyday world: when the wind blew, something had to make it blow, and that thing was naturally its controlling force, the lord of the air, Enlil. And if a ritual to a god averted danger, then that was *prima facie* evidence that the ritual had worked. If it failed then, as with any good scientific practice, one had to try again or think again, refining and adjusting procedures.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Mesopotamian divination was scientific in the sense of its rigorous methods and methodology; repeated empirical observation (over hundreds, possibly thousands, of years!); experimental nature (in the sense of conducting experiments by generating a hypothesis and then performing empirical tests and observations to test that hypothesis) and abstract and conceptual thought. Mesopotamian divination was simultaneously religious (in the sense of involving ritual, worship and deities).

This issue has also been affected by modern notions of the nature, history and evolution of ‘science’ and ‘scientific method.’ From the eighteenth century until very recently, the origins of science were associated with works from Classical Greece and (more generally) Graeco-Roman Antiquity, especially the ‘exact’ or mathematical sciences, such as astronomy and optics, and the pure mathematical fields of geometry, arithmetic and trigonometry. However, the decipherment of cuneiform at the end of the last century yielded an unexpected mass of texts dealing with mathematics as well as observational astronomy, medicine and various types of divination relating to

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<sup>3</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 40-41. Note the similarities between Mesopotamian cosmology and the Neoplatonist worldview, at least as it was expressed and explained by the philosopher Iamblichus, who argued that the gods and goddesses are simultaneously transcendent and immanent: they are transcendent causally and ontologically but they are immanent since they work through and affect nature, the natural world and the whole physical cosmos.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 46-47.

a wide range of natural phenomena.<sup>5</sup> As Francesca Rochberg has pointed out, this Near Eastern material places the history of science on a very different foundation, which fundamentally changes (and challenges) our old definitions of science and our understanding of its development.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile continuities stretching from Antiquity to the European Renaissance in the history of astronomy (and, by implication, astrology – they were often seen as the same phenomenon until the Enlightenment period) in particular are now known to reach back to the Near East.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, it is also important to be aware of modern prejudices and biases involved in conceptualizing the nature and origins of ‘science’ and the impact that these biases and ideological distortions have had (and continue to have) on Near Eastern studies. Francesca Rochberg comments on the fact that modern scientific disciplines have perpetuated the idea that the Greeks really gave birth to science and that Near Eastern science is merely technical and thus bears no relation to the development of modern science: “To view this material in terms of technical feats that had no impact on the kind of “thought” associated with science in the West is an ideological distortion not only of ancient Near Eastern science, but of science as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> As Rochberg states, “general historians of science have almost invariably compared the ancient Near Eastern achievements unfavorably to Greek developments, which constituted ‘real’ science.”<sup>9</sup> The Historiography of science has generally assumed that progress is a characteristic of science and objectivity characterizes its own historians. Yet, as Francesca Rochberg points out, “despite the viewpoints reflected in the three-way mirror representing the philosophy, history and anthropology of science, the orientation that David Pingree calls “Hellenophilia” perpetuates inductivist and continuist historical methods that proceed from a definition of science as ‘that which scientists happen to be doing now, following a method or methods adumbrated by the Greeks, but never fully understood or utilized by them.’”<sup>10</sup>

We have so far explored notions of ‘magic’ and ‘religion’ in relation to Greek and Roman divination and ritual practices. Near Eastern divination also challenges modern notions of the nature and origins of ‘science.’ The idea that science and religion can be indistinguishable and operate within a single cosmology, worldview and praxis challenges our modern (especially Western) ideas of what ‘science’ and ‘religion’ are, as well as challenging the limits and boundaries which we apply to the notion of ‘rationality’.

Later in the course, when we explore Neoplatonist philosophy and theurgy (a kind of ritual practised by Neoplatonist philosophers), we will again see the idea that science and religion can co-exist and be indistinguishable in certain cosmological and philosophical systems. Neoplatonism also challenges our ideas of ‘rationality’ and ‘abstraction’ (abstract thought) as they relate to ideas of ‘science,’ ‘magic’ and ‘religion’, for these philosophers saw rationality itself as a gift given to humans by the gods (thus rationality itself comes from the divine realm) as a tool to lead and draw

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<sup>5</sup> Francesca Rochberg, “Introduction,” *Isis* (The History of Science Society) 83.4 (1992), 547-48.

<sup>6</sup> Francesca Rochberg, “Introduction,” *Isis* (The History of Science Society) 83.4 (1992), 548-49: “A consequence of the consideration of ancient Near Eastern cultures as an integral part of the origins of science is a kind of “decolonization” of the history of ancient science...” (549).

<sup>7</sup> <sup>7</sup> Francesca Rochberg, “Introduction,” *Isis* (The History of Science Society) 83.4 (1992), 548.

<sup>8</sup> Francesca Rochberg, “Introduction,” *Isis* (The History of Science Society) 83.4 (1992), 551.

<sup>9</sup> Francesca Rochberg, “Introduction,” *Isis* (The History of Science Society) 83.4 (1992), 551, citing Saloman Bochner, *The Role of Mathematics in the Rise of Science*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966. For illustrations of historians’ tendencies to valorize Greek achievements see Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Fabric of the Heavens: The Development of Astronomy and Dynamics*, New York: Harper, 1961; F. Sherwood Taylor, *A Short History of Science and Scientific Thought*, New York: Norton, 1963, 2-3. For further examples see Francesca Rochberg, “Introduction,” *Isis* 83.4 (1992), 551 n.9.

<sup>10</sup> Francesca Rochberg, “Introduction,” *Isis* (The History of Science Society) 83.4 (1992), 551

human beings into supra-rational states (above rationality yet encompassing it rather than merely been ‘irrational’) where divine vision and insight are attainable. The wider concept of rationality expressed here may well also be apparent in Near Eastern divination practices; at the very least, religion and rationality were not seen as mutually exclusive, in fact quite the opposite, as Nick Campion emphasizes:

The Mesopotamian political project was profoundly religious but also rational. Having produced a reasonable explanatory version of their universe, the state’s philosophers set out to turn it to practical advantage through a perfectly logical procedure, to negotiate with their political lords. There was no problem with the notion of being deeply religious and highly rational. The idea that these two are opposites is a by-product of modern secularism which obscured the manner in which religion can function as an ordering principle which emerges logically out of a reasonable worldview.<sup>11</sup>

### **MESOPOTAMIA: THE EMERGENCE OF ASTRAL DIVINATION AND OTHER TYPES OF DIVINATION**

The earliest evidence of a tradition of astrology as a highly organized and codified system of reading meaning into the sky emerged in the river valleys of Sumer (which is now southern Iraq).<sup>12</sup> We must be aware of the problems of sources and evidence when examining the earliest manifestations of divination in Mesopotamia: firstly, Mesopotamian culture probably underwent many changes over the hundreds of years to which the surviving evidence relates; many of these changes remain obscure to us due to lack of evidence. Secondly, there are obviously problems with the ways in which we interpret the surviving evidence: for example, we often don’t know which stars are referred to in the main texts that we have.<sup>13</sup> Thirdly, it is debatable as to whether the mass of surviving tablets which date from the Assyrian period in the ninth-seventh centuries B.C. can be used as evidence to infer calendar ceremonies, astronomical rituals and astrological and divinatory practices from earlier periods. These issues all affect our interpretation of Near Eastern divination.

Within Mesopotamia, astrology seems to have emerged directly from the central priority of the cosmic state: the need to maintain a harmonious relationship between the heavens and the earth, to please the gods and goddesses, to observe the seasons and to maintain political and economic stability and prosperity. In this sense, in Mesopotamian society politics and religion were seen as interdependent and connected spheres of activity. The sacred calendar regulated divine and human relations, the associated rituals being seen as both an individual and a national (or collective) duty.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the terrestrial, physical and human worlds were seen as being so closely connected to the divine, invisible and celestial realms so as to constitute a single entity.

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<sup>11</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 36; W.G. Lambert, “Babylonian Astrological Omens and their Stars,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107.1 (1987), 93-96.

<sup>14</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 36-38: “Mesopotamian astronomy possessed one overarching function: the improvement and eventual perfection of astrology’s role in managing the state; astrology’s grand narrative was the preservation of stability and order” (37-38).

We know that astrology had evolved into a systematized science – in the sense of an elaborate rule-based system with its own internal logic – by about 1000 B.C. By then it covered nearly all observable celestial phenomena, giving detailed and elaborate answers to precise questions.<sup>15</sup> While it is clear that accumulated empirical observations, matching political events to astronomical patterns were significant in compiling the omen literature, an anti-empirical trend is also evident in the omen literature. For example, we have examples of predictions for events which could never have been observed – such as for eclipses on the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> days of the month, which in a lunar calendar are impossible. A lunar eclipse has to occur on the full moon, which would usually be the 14<sup>th</sup> day. As Nick Campion asserts, “if we assume that the omens were not mistakes, but represent a coherent pattern of thought, then it is likely that observation was thought to reveal only part of the divine will. Abstract systematization, based on the assumption that there was an ideal way for the world to operate, might reveal every possibility, every single conceivable event, whether an eclipse on the ‘wrong’ day or an animal with multiple gall bladders.”<sup>16</sup> This theory, in which almost the entire celestial divinatory corpus was constructed by working by analogies on the basis of theoretical models has been developed by David Brown, who has named it the ‘EAE Paradigm’ (after the Assyrian omen collection known as the *Enuma Anu Enlil*). According to this theory, Mesopotamian astrology dealt less with what is, than with what ought to be, projecting theoretical frameworks onto the heavens.<sup>17</sup> For the sake of comparison, David Brown contrasts the EAE Paradigm with the Prediction of Celestial Phenomenon (PCP) Paradigm, which prioritized the prediction and observation of actual celestial positions, especially from the seventh century BC onwards. As Nick Campion notes, Brown’s hypothesis should not rule out the possibility that theoretical assumptions were not supported by centuries of empirical observations.

During the Old Babylonian period, other types of divination were used: for example, Libanomancy, i.e. prognostics derived from the configurations of the smoke of a censer, and lecanomancy, i.e. divination from the shape taken by drops of oil in a basin of water, are attested in this period. Extispicy (the reading of animal entrails) was prevalent, and there is some evidence that dream incubation (undertaking rituals and then sleeping in a sacred place in the hopes of receiving a divinatory dream) was also practiced. Augury using the flight of birds also seems to be attested.<sup>18</sup> Oracles were used within the Assyrian period, after the eighth century B.C. Oracular questions were most often directed to the sun god Shamash, who was also the god of oracles.

#### **MESOPOTAMIA: CODIFICATION OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF DIVINATION DISTINCTION BETWEEN PROVOKED AND UNPROVOKED DIVINATION**

Modern scholars have retrospectively divided Babylonian divination into two forms, known respectively as intuitive, natural, unprovoked or inspired on the one hand; and inductive, artificial, operational, deductive or provoked on the other.<sup>19</sup> The former type (intuitive, natural, unprovoked,

<sup>15</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 48.

<sup>17</sup> David Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology*, Groningen: Styx Publications, 2000, 105-12; 285.

<sup>18</sup> See Erica Reiner, “Fortune Telling in Mesopotamia,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 19.1 (1960), 23-35, which contains examples of these types of divination from the Old Babylonian period.

<sup>19</sup> C.J. Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient East*, Schweich Lectures of the British Academy, 1945, Munich: Kraus Reprint 1980, 51; Jean Bottero, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning and the Gods*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992, 125; Ulla Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology: An Introduction to Babylonian and Assyrian Celestial Divination*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 1995, 9-10; Hermann Hunger and David Pingree, *Astral Sciences in Mesopotamia*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, 5; Oppenheim, Leo A.,

inspired) relies on spontaneous messages from the gods, as in dreams, while the latter type (inductive, artificial, operational, deductive, provoked) uses specific techniques to solicit an answer, as in extispicy, the casting of lots or the pouring of oil into water. Astrology seems to cross the boundaries between the two. It was unprovoked in the sense that the astrologers had to wait for the gods to send omens, and if the omen did not come there was nothing the astrologer could say, but it developed an interpretative procedure as complex as extispicy and, eventually, even more so.<sup>20</sup>

## THE HEAVENS AS A SYSTEM OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN DIVINITY AND HUMANITY

Mesopotamian astrology comprises a complex system by which divine language, as spoken through the environment, the sky and divinities, might be decoded and acted upon. In this sense, astrology had a linguistic nature. “Its political purposes could not be achieved unless a two-way communication could be maintained with the divine council in heaven. The movement of the stars was understood as the writing of heaven.”<sup>21</sup> From this point of view, the world and the heavens are inscribed with hidden meaning. There are patterns in the universe which may not be immediately apparent but are nevertheless systematic and accessible to human scrutiny.

## THE USE OF MAGIC TO ENGAGE IN A DIALOGUE WITH DESTINY

Within the context of Mesopotamian divination, divinatory procedures, particularly those of an astrological nature, involved a process of participation (especially ritual participation) on the part of humans. Nick Campion sheds further light on this idea, “There is one further consequence of the reciprocal relationship between heaven and earth: if the celestial deities could influence the earth then humans might, with sufficient skill, influence these deities.”<sup>22</sup> Yet the picture of participation is further complicated by Mesopotamian cosmology, for if the gods and goddesses were thought to operate through all natural phenomena (possible including human beings), then is the process of participation pointing to ‘influence’ or alignment with the divine realm? Questions of agency come into play here – if the divine, human and natural are conceptualised as being inextricably linked and connected, can we talk of divine and human action entirely separately? This is a complex issue relating to modern notions and concepts of ‘magic’ and ‘religion.’

Yet Mesopotamian divination clearly involved a process of participation, which Nick Campion divides into three phases: the first is the measurement or observation of celestial phenomena, the second is their interpretation or diagnosis. The third is the consequent action or prescription, “for there is no point in predicting the future unless it can be changed.” These prophylactic rituals were called *namburbi* (meaning ‘loosing’). In one surviving example from the Assyrian period, the astrologer Munnabitu wrote to the emperor that:

If on the 16<sup>th</sup> day the moon and sun are seen together: one king will send messages of hostility to another; the king will be shut up in the palace for the length [of a

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*Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilisation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, 208; Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 47-48.

<sup>20</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 47-48.

<sup>21</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 47-48; Erica Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995, 9; C.J. Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient East*, Munich: Kraus Reprint, 1980, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 49.

month]...The [ki]ng must not become negligent about these observations of the Mo[on]; let the king perform either a namburbi or [so]me ritual which is pertinent to it.<sup>23</sup>

The aim was to match each omen prediction with a possible action which would enhance desirable outcomes and avoid undesirable ones. Ritual was thus a response to omen texts in order to achieve favourable outcomes. An omen is a sign that stands as a warning of something that is latent and in the process of coming into being. Because the outcome predicted did not fully exist, it was not considered inevitable, and therefore steps could be taken to avoid it.

Did the Mesopotamians possess a theoretical concept of fate? The standard scholarly view is expressed by Francesca Rochberg, who argues that the very existence of the namburbi tradition indicates that there was no concept of fate.<sup>24</sup> However, Nick Campion points out that negotiation of the future does not necessarily deny concepts of either fate or causality; “if there is to be a dialogue with destiny, there has to be a destiny with which one can engage.”<sup>25</sup> This is clearly a complex issue with no simple answers – for if the Mesopotamians did possess a concept of fate, then it must have been a subtle and complex one, which is little understood.

## THE ASSYRIANS AND PERSIANS

Most of our surviving evidence for the actual use of astrology date from the rise of the Assyrians in the eighth to the seventh centuries B.C. The Assyrians acquired a large empire: Emperor Ashurbanipal’s order to his scholars to collect existing astrological omens resulted in the *Enuma Anu Enlil* which provides us with much of our surviving evidence of divinatory practices. By the late first millennium scribes were at work compiling two major collections of astronomical and astrological material, both of which survive in versions dating to the eighth century:

The *Mul Apin*: contained some astrological information but was mainly devoted to setting out the astronomical framework, such as the 36 stars and 18 lunar constellations, within which divination might take place. The astrological statements in this work are few, and tend to be confined to simple statements about politics or the weather.

The *Enuma Anu Enlil* – names after the opening words of the collection, ‘When the gods Anu and Enlil...’ includes the Venus Tablet of Ammisaduqa as well as around 54 other tablets containing up to 7000 omens, a vast collection designed to cover every possible eventuality.

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<sup>23</sup> Hermann Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1992, 180-181 (report 320).

<sup>24</sup> Francesca Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enuma Anu Enlil*, Horn: Ferdinand Berger and Sohne, 1988, 15

<sup>25</sup> Nick Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology: The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London: Continuum, 2008, 64-5.

**WEEK 3 BIBLIOGRAPHY**  
**ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN DIVINATION**

**Required Reading**

Campion, Nicholas, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology*, Vol. 1, The Ancient and Classical Worlds, London: Continuum, 2008: Chapters 3 and 4: Mesopotamian cosmology and astrology; Chapter 5: The Assyrians and Persians; Chapters 6 and 7: Egyptian astrology.

Reiner, E., 'Fortune-Telling in Mesopotamia', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 19.1 (1960), 23-35: **Available on JSTOR.**

Rochberg, F., 'Introduction: The Cultures of Ancient Science: Some Historical Reflections', *Isis* 83.4 (1992), 547-53: **Available on JSTOR.**

**Additional Reading (available online)**

Faraone, C., 'Molten Wax, Spilt Wine and Mutilated Animals: Sympathetic Magic in near Eastern and Early Greek Oath Ceremonies', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies (JHS)* 113 (1993), 60-80: **Available on JSTOR.**

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