PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David

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DIVINATION IN EGYPT AND THE NEAR EAST

DR DORIAN GIESELER GREENBAUM

Image from Chester Beatty Papyrus III, a book on dream interpretation (19th Dynasty). British Museum

Worldviews and Cultural Parameters

- The ancient world is full of gods
- There is a connection between gods and humans
- The world is the manifestation of divine activity
- But there is a world beyond human reality
- Importance of worship of gods
- How can we communicate with the gods?

What is Divination? (1)

- Divination aims to answer the questions: what do the gods want of us, and how can we achieve it?
- Signs and interpretation are key features of divination
- Links between past, present and future
- Erasure of time and space boundaries
- Operating on a level outside of our perception of physical reality, although using the material of the physical world

What is Divination? (2)

Terms

- Greek *mantikē* and *theiasmos*
- Latin *divinatio*
- In Egypt, no word corresponds to these
- In Mesopotamia, no equivalent for 'oracle' or 'omen'
  - Each category of a divinatory practice was given its own word, based on the formula 'if x, then y' (protasis and apodosis)

What is Divination? (3)

- Primary purpose: to know divine will
  - Seeing the future in service of that
  - Accessing the past
  - Communicating with the divine
- Knowing the future insofar as knowing what we can change and what we cannot change
- Corollary in Egyptian and Near Eastern divination, especially: the gods are able to change what happens if we supplicate them; apotropaic rituals can prevent unpleasant events
- The ritual of divination (of whatever kind) can be a powerful experience of divine concern for humans

Categories of Divination

- Categories of Divination:
  - Natural (inspired, intuitive): e.g. direct contact initiated by gods; visions, dreams, prophecies
  - Artificial (inductive): diviner makes a deliberate action to seek answers to questions; using an instrument to create an interpreted omen
  - Unprovoked
  - Provoked or Evoked

Types of Divination

- Examples of Natural Divination: Dreams, celestial portents like a comet or eclipse
- Examples of Artificial and/or Evoked Divination
  - Extispicy (liver or entrail divination) (Piacenza Liver)

  - Augury (originally divination from the sky and by birds)
  - Oracles
  - Kleromancy (divination by lot)
  - Lekanomancy (bowl divination)
  - Kledonomancy (the first sentence heard after the ritual is the omen to be interpreted)
  - Astrology (interpreting the patterns in the heavens)

Cosmology and Divination

- Links between cosmology and divination
- Cosmology: literally, ordered ways of looking at the heavens; arrangement of the heavens
- Looking at celestial patterns as a means of communication with the divine
- Systems of discovering regular patterns in the sky and the means of predicting them (astronomy)
- Related to astrology in that astrology uses cosmology (of a particular culture) in its practice, and in that astrology is historically considered as a form of divination

Ancient Cosmology

- Mesopotamian
- Egyptian
- Greek
- (These are not mutually exclusive, especially in the Hellenistic, Greco-Roman and Late Antique periods!)
- Astrology combines all three cultures in its practice

Divination in Egypt

- Remember: No word for divination, unlike Greece (*mantikē*) and Rome (*divinatio*)
- Oracles *(bi3y.t)*
- Dream Interpretation
- Time divination (days and months)
- Astral Divination

Divination in Egypt: Oracles (1)

- On the difference between an oracle and an omen:

  oracle is from human> god> human: a question and an answer (interpretation)

  omen is from god> signs> humans (interpretation)*
- Oracles were often found in processionals honouring the god (statue, often on a barque)
- People ask questions of a public image
- Most prominent is Amun, called 'lord of gods' (*Nb-nṯrw*)

* von Lieven 1999, 78

Divination in Egypt: Oracles (2)

- First secure attestation in reign of Hatshepsut (ca. 1479-1457 BCE): she asks the 'lord of gods' the best way to go to Punt
- Thutmose III chosen by the god in his bark, who 'perambulated' and 'settled' in front of the prince (stela from Karnak describes this) [Redford 2002, 299]
- Oracles described on stelae and papyri
- Oracular Amuletic Decrees, protective in a medical context (Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt)

Divination in Egypt: Oracles (3)

Hatshepsut and Thutmosis III following the bark of Amun. Red Chapel, Karnak

Divination in Egypt: Dreams (1)

- Egyptian word for dream is *rst* ‘wakefulness’, but a different state than being awake
- Earlier, restricted to royalty: Gods come to the king in dreams: premonitions, revelations to king
- Later, Dream Books for commoners exist

Divination in Egypt: Dreams (2)

- An example of an interpretation in a dream book:

'If she gives birth to a cat, she will have many children

If she gives birth to a dog, she will have a boy

If she gives birth to an ass, she will have an idiot child

If she gives birth to a crocodile, she will have many children'

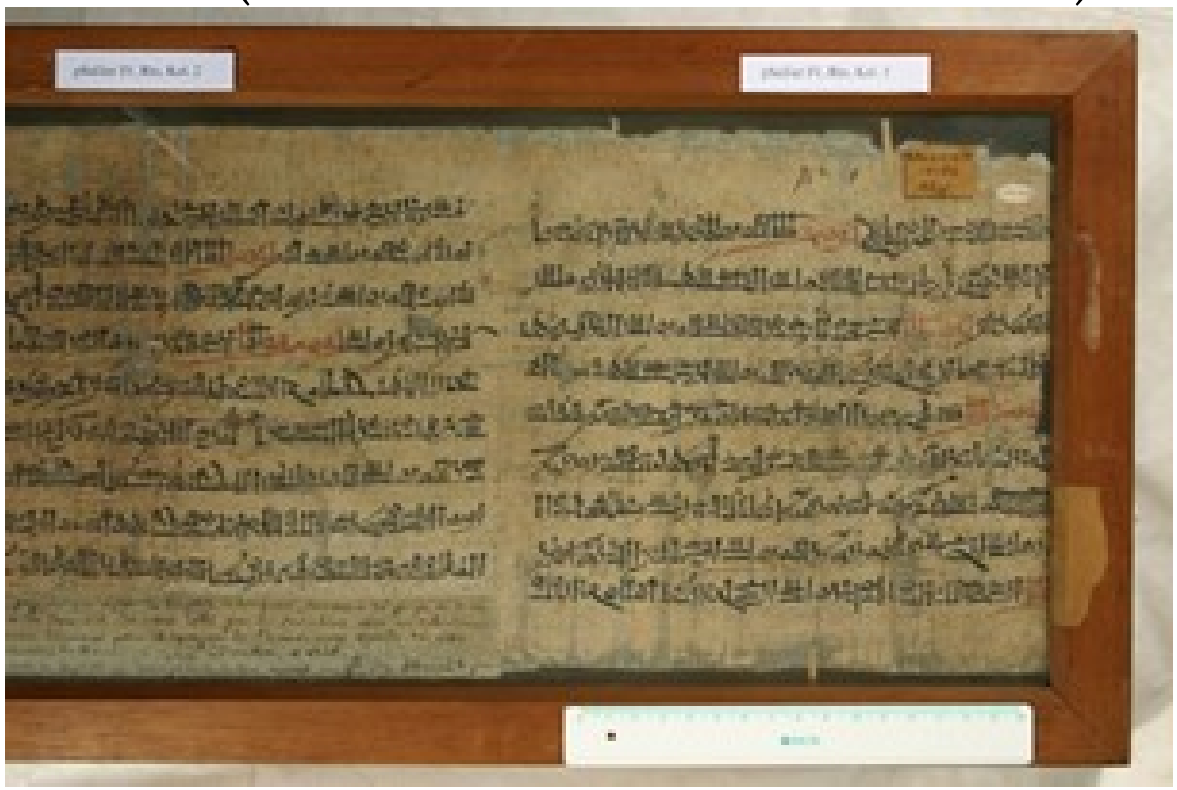
[Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004, p. 135; trans. based on S. Sauneron, *Les songes et leur interprétation* (Paris, 1959), p. 37]

Divination in Egypt: Dreams (3)

- Dreams can be unprovoked and provoked
- Dream books explain naturally occurring dreams
- Dreams can also be induced or requested (e.g. incubation)
- Provoked dreams more like the practice of oracles

Divination in Egypt: Time

- Hemerology: classifying days as good or bad
- Herodotus: 'The Egyptians, too, found out to which god every month and day belongs, and to tell by the day of a man's birth what fortune he will have, when he will die and what manner of man he is.' (*Histories* II, 82.1, trans. Carter)
- Calendars of lucky and unlucky days in Egypt (P. Cairo 86637, P. Sallier IV, recto; P. BM 10474)



P. Sallier IV, recto; British Museum (= BM 10184)

Divination in Egypt: Celestial (1)

- No distinction made between astronomy and astrology, even if astrology proper is only attested at the end of the Ptolemaic period
- Stars were manifestations of gods; representations of constellations on astronomical ceilings of New Kingdom royal tombs
- Astral divination: reading the will of the gods from observation of the stars

Divination in Egypt: Celestial (2)

- Concern with stars as early as the Pyramid Texts (Old Kingdom) – rising, setting, 'imperishable' (circumpolar stars that do not ever set)
- Decans also an early concern, dating from the 9th-10th dynasties (ca. 2100 BCE), continuing up into Late Antiquity (observed at rising and culminating)
- Decans are deities
- Decans combined with the zodiac ca. 250 BCE

Divination in Egypt: Celestial (3)

Rising and Transit Decans

- Rising decans begin in 9th Dyn. (2100 BCE)
- Transit decans begin in *Book of Nut* (a.k.a. *Fundamentals of the Courses of the Stars* (1270 BCE)

Transit Decans in Tomb of Rameses IV

Rising Decans from Sarcophagus of Idy

Divination in Egypt: Celestial (4)

- Eclipses of heavenly bodies also used in divination (Osorkon Chronicle, 23rd Dynasty, 8th cent. BCE); later texts on eclipse omina
- Combination of zodiac with rising of Sothis (Sirius) – P. Cairo 31222: 'If it rises when Mars is in the sign of Gemini: some people in the land of Syria will rebel [against the King of] Egypt.'
- Egyptian astrology (2nd c. BCE onwards)

Divination in Mesopotamia: Conceptual frameworks

- As in Egypt, Ancient Near Eastern divination and astrology does not fit neatly into modern categories such as science, religion and 'magic.'
- Mesopotamian divination was scientific, yet simultaneously religious (in the sense of involving ritual, worship and deities)
- Scientific nature: repeated empirical observation, generating hypotheses and testing them, abstract and conceptual thought

Divination in Mesopotamia

- No word corresponding to oracle or omen
- Protasis and apodosis
  - Used in other settings, such as judicial
- Rational in the modern sense
- A dialogue between gods and humans The world is a system of signs, written to be interpreted
- Different types of divination could be related: e.g. extispicy and astrology

Types of Divination in Mesopotamia

- Extispicy (the reading of animal entrails)
- Libanomancy, i.e. prognostics derived from the configurations of the smoke of a censer.
- Lecanomancy, i.e. divination from the shape taken by drops of oil in a basin of water.
- Dream incubation
- Augury using the flight of birds
- Hemerologies and menologies (*adannu*/UD.DA.KAM)
- Oracles were used within the Assyrian period, after the eighth century BCE. Oracular questions were most often directed to the sun god Shamash, who was also the god of oracles
- Astrology

Mesopotamian Divination

Timeline

Gudea
ca. 2100 BCE

Star names
ca. 1800 BCE

Extispicy and
Celestial omens
ca. 1780 BCE

Astral omen
texts
ca. 1650 BCE
(*Enuma Anu Enlil*)

Diviner's manual
9th - 7th c. BCE

MUL.APIN
oldest version
687 BCE

Earliest
cuneiform
birthchart
410 BCE

Divination in Mesopotamia: Extispicy (1)

- Examining a liver (*exta* are entrails)
- Developed by last quarter of the 3rd millennium BCE and continued throughout Mesopotamian history
- Very important kind of divination
- Provided rulers ultimate legitimacy for actions (political, military, religious, personal)
- Entrails of the animal frequently called a 'tablet' inscribed by the gods, just as the sky was inscribed
- A Sumerian king's hymn on extispicy:

Model of sheep's liver, used for extispicy, prob. fr. Sippur, southern Iraq, 1900-1600 BCE. British Museum

Divination in Mesopotamia: Extispicy (2)

I am a ritually pure diviner,

I am Nintu of the written lists of omens!

…

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 favourable sign with an unfavourable 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 ff.

(in Ulanowski 2014, 15-16)

Mesopotamian Divination: Cosmology

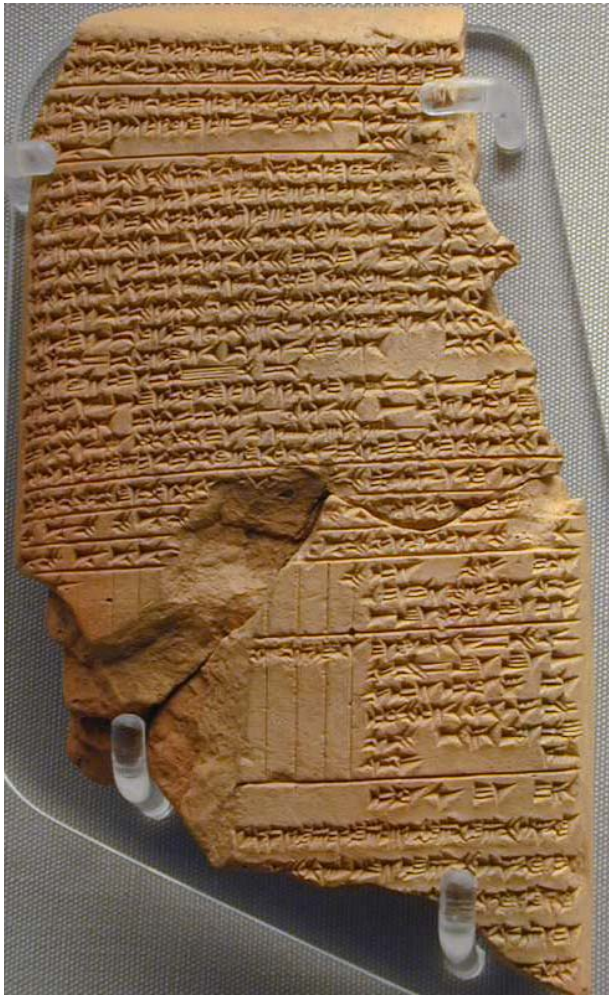
- Near Eastern divination has a highly developed cosmology. All parts of the cosmos were linked to each other, so that each star or region of the sky might have a terrestrial counterpart and vice versa.
- Mesopotamia was polytheistic: the gods and goddesses were seen as an integral part of the 'natural' world in the sense that they inhabited it.
- 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.
- All things in the phenomenal 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.

Mesopotamian Divination: Sky and Earth

Diviner's Manual (9th-7th C. BCE)

'The signs on earth together with those of the sky give us signals. Sky and earth both bring us portents, each separately but not different, since sky and earth are interconnected.'

(lines 36-40, trans. Koch-Westenholz 1995, p. 138, modified)



K. 2847r. British Museum, London

Mesopotamian Divination: Astral Omens to Astrology (1)

- Astral omina collected near the end of the 2nd millennium BCE (lunar, solar, weather, earthquakes, planets and stars)
- Celestial omen texts start in the Late Old Babylonian Period; copies made later
- Two major collections:
- *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.

BM 86378

Mesopotamian Divination: Astral Omens to Astrology (2)

- Enuma Anu Enlil – named 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.
- Most evidence for actual use of astrology dates from the 8th – 7th centuries B.C.E.

Mesopotamian Divination: Astral Omens to Astrology (3)

An example of an astral omen text:

- **A Venus omen from a Planetary Omen text:** [VAT 10218, line 36]

'If Venus comes near the Moon: eclipse, the king of Akkad will die.'

- **Venus tablet of Ammisaduqa, *EAE* omen 63**

(Neo-Assyrian, ca. 911-612 BCE)

Venus Tablet of Ammisaduqa, British Museum

Mesopotamian Divination: Astral Omens to Astrology (4)

AO 17649,
Oldest extant Babylonian chart, 410 BCE

In Rochberg 1998, pp. 51-55

From Near Eastern divination and magic to Greek divination and magic

- While Graeco-Roman texts do not document any transfer of magical culture from the Near East to Greece, this is not to say that no such transfer occurred.
- It is a cornerstone assumption of many scholars that it did, either during the Mycenean period (ca. 1500-1000 B.C.E.) or, as most prefer, the so-called Orientalizing period (8th century B.C.E.).
- It has become commonplace to adduce Assyrian-Babylonian evidence from around the time of the Orientalizing period in discussions of early Greek magic.
- The transfer is held to have occurred primarily through the medium of itinerant religious technicians.

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