

COMERS/ICOG Communications 2

**ALL THOSE NATIONS ...**  
**Cultural Encounters within and with the Near East**

Studies presented to Han Drijvers at the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday by colleagues and students, collected and edited by H.L.J. Vanstiphout with the assistance of W.J. van Bekkum, G.J. van Gelder and G.J. Reinink.

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## READING THE SIGNS<sup>1</sup>

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1. Everyone who is engaged in Assyriology or some other arcane business knows that ‘the future’s not ours to see’. As Head of the Department of Semitic Languages and Cultures at Groningen University, Han Drijvers has always been very much aware that all he could promise his students was his own engagement.

The *Assyrian Dream Book* might be of some help here. It says: “if a man in his dream eats an apple, he will acquire his heart’s desire”.<sup>2</sup> The dream book is just one of the countless omen collections known from Ancient Mesopotamia. Omen texts, or omen compendia, are systematic collections of individual omnia. Each omen consists of a protasis and an apodosis. The protasis is an ‘if’ sentence describing an observation. This observation may relate to the behaviour of animals, to the movements of the stars, to physical properties of humans, and to many other things. The apodosis in most cases is a sentence using the future tense, and describing something that will happen in the private sphere, or in the career of the king, or generally in the country as a whole. Omen compendia are organised by their protases. Astrological omnia are never found on the same tablet as animal behaviour omnia. Thus the first millennium series *Enūma Anu Enlil* is completely devoted to celestial omnia, and includes separate chapters for observations of the moon, the sun, meteorological phenomena, earthquakes, Jupiter, Saturn, Venus, Mercury, Mars, and the fixed stars.<sup>3</sup> One of the chapters on the sun contains the following entries:<sup>4</sup>

If the sun is surrounded by a halo and a cloud bank lies to the right, there will be catastrophe everywhere in the country.

If the sun is surrounded by a halo and a cloud bank lies to the left: Amurru (i.e. an enemy country) will be dispersed.

If the sun is surrounded by a halo and a red cloud bank lies to the right: the storm god Adad will beat down the crops of the country.

If the sun is surrounded by a halo and a red cloud bank lies to the left: Adad will beat down the crops of the enemy’s country.

This passage is followed by similar omnia concerning yellow cloud banks and flickering cloud banks. In all, the series comprises several dozens of tablets, and several thousands of individual omnia.

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is based on two lectures delivered in the spring of 1997 at the Oriental Institute at Oxford and the Dept. of Near Eastern Studies at Harvard University. I should like to thank both audiences and institutions, but in particular David Brown and Jeremy Black (Oxford), Peter Machinist, Tzvi Abusch and Piotr Steinkeller (Boston) for their stimulating remarks. The bibliographical abbreviations used here are those current in Assyriology as listed in the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 136: tablet A col. iv line x+8 (see p. 272). The text is duplicated by BM 45527 (Oppenheim 1969: text 5), rev. col. ii 4’.

<sup>3</sup> The series is described in detail in Koch-Westenholz 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Van Soldt 1995: 128f. lines iii 64–67.

**1.1.** Yet this is but one of the well-attested first millennium omen series, and not even the longest. Another well-attested series describes symptoms of a sufferer from illness. In the apodosis the illness is ascribed to a god, or the outcome of the disease is given: he will die, or he will recover. Of this series there is a catalogue text giving the total number of lines as 3000+.<sup>5</sup> In the same catalogue the diagnostic omnia are paired with the so-called physiognomic omnia. Physiognomic omnia are concerned with the characteristics of the healthy body, but they also include such things as manners of speaking, and involuntary movements, such as tics. Both the diagnostic and the physiognomic series proceed from top to toe.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the longest series, which probably had more than 120 tablets, is *Šumma ālu*.<sup>7</sup> It contains omnia drawn from a wide variety of phenomena. The omnia refer to cities, the ways in which cities are built and where they are built; houses; wells – in particular things happening during the digging of a well – ; behaviour of animals, such as cats, ants, snakes, various kinds of birds, etc.; the growth of plants, such as palm trees; human behaviour, in particular washing and sexual behaviour. *Šumma ālu* might well be called the compendium of ‘terrestrial’ omnia, since it treats only phenomena on earth, as against those in the skies. Moreover, most omnia may be regarded as chance encounters, though this does not apply to the sections on human behaviour.

The collection of dream omnia comprises 11 tablets, and there are at least 24 tablets of omnia concerning monstrous births, both human and animal.<sup>8</sup> Last but not least there are omnia drawn from sacrificial animals. After the animal was killed, it was cut open by an expert diviner who would ‘read’ the entrails. The most important organ was the liver. Every irregularity in the appearance of the liver was of significance. The omen series concerning the liver and other organs of the sacrificial animals form a huge corpus: in the Neo-Assyrian period it consisted of more than 88 tablets, divided into ten chapters.<sup>9</sup>

**1.2.** The corpus of omen compendia described here in brief outline<sup>10</sup> has engendered numerous other texts and textual types. Mesopotamian astronomy developed as a by-product of celestial divination. It follows that the corpus of astronomical diaries, of star tables and procedure texts, of lists of eclipses etc. is somehow related to the omen compendia.<sup>11</sup> In the widely used handbook *MUL.APIN* we find a combination of both tables and omnia.<sup>12</sup> There is a huge corpus of letters and reports written by scholars in royal service to inform the king about ominous events.<sup>13</sup> In most cases the events reported relate to the celestial omen series: eclipses, risings of stars, meteorological phenomena etc. Also there are numerous rituals to be performed in the case of an

<sup>5</sup> Finkel 1988: 148 line A 50 // B 17'. The Nimrud catalogue discussed in Finkel's article has now been republished as *CTN IV*, no. 71.

<sup>6</sup> For the arrangement, see Finkel 1988: 148f, line B 25' and p. 151 A 77 // B 45'. On physiognomic omnia see Reiner 1982 with references to earlier literature by Kraus and others.

<sup>7</sup> The contents of the series have been described by Moren 1978; see now Freedman 1998: 1–23.

<sup>8</sup> Edited in Leichty 1969.

<sup>9</sup> See Jeyes 1989: 10–11.

<sup>10</sup> Cryer 1994 is a discussion of the corpus.

<sup>11</sup> See Koch-Westenholz 1995 for the various text types.

<sup>12</sup> Hunger & Pingree 1989.

<sup>13</sup> Hunger 1992 and Parpola 1993a.

unfavourable omen.<sup>14</sup> Some of the omen compendia were provided with commentary texts, explaining difficult or unusual words.

In sum, the importance of the omen collections in Mesopotamian culture is not only indicated by the extant number of such collections, but also by their potency to create new texts of various types.

2. In most cases Mesopotamian omen collections are not really difficult to read or translate. Their interpretation, however, raises a number of important and complicated questions. On the one hand, omina have been dismissed as mere superstition. Neugebauer, one of the towering figures in the study of Babylonian astronomy, could not bring himself to accept that astronomy and astrology were basically two sides of the same coin.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, omen texts have also been described as a kind of empirical science.<sup>16</sup> The detailed observation of the heavens, of animal behaviour or of the human body that is found in the omen protases, were regarded as forerunners of the kind of empiricism that defines modern science. Advocates of the latter view maintain that divination actually started with and from observation. The observation of some irregularity on the liver of a sacrificial animal happened to coincide with an important event. And since the Mesopotamians had no concept of coincidence, the two were seen as having an intrinsic, perhaps even causal relation. In the empiricist view omen collections started as collections of this kind of accidental observations. It will soon become evident why I cannot agree.

2.1. A basic problem with the interpretation of omen texts lies in the issue of contradiction. Physiognomic omina interpret every single mark on the human body. An examination of the whole body could perhaps yield twenty, thirty or even a hundred predictions, with inevitably contradictory results. On a wider scale, the corpus of omen texts is so huge, and the possibilities to interpret whatever phenomenon so varied, that every minute must yield a large number of relevant signs, each with a prediction of the future.

What is more, the omen collections contain quite a significant number of protases with 'observations' that are highly unlikely or completely impossible. There are many examples to be found among the birth omina. This collection, called *Šumma izbu* after its opening line, devotes tablet 11 to the abnormalities of the ears of a new-born child.<sup>17</sup> Its opening entry reads: "if an *izbu* (a new-born child with abnormalities) has no right ear: the reign of the king will come to an end". Predictably, if it has no left ear we have a favourable apodosis: "the god has heard the prayer of the king". Both anomalies are conceivable. Somewhat further on we find a set of omina for the case that the ear of the *izbu* is found in the wrong place, for instance near its cheek, or on its forehead. One need not be an expert in teratology to see that this is already pretty far-fetched. However, we have at this point not even reached the half-way mark of the tablet. There follow omina for when the ears happen to grow out of the child's buttocks; or when it has two normal

<sup>14</sup> These rituals have been edited in Maul 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Rochberg 1993: 38; Parpola 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Bottéro 1974; summarised in Bottéro 1992, chapter 8.

<sup>17</sup> See Leichty 1969: 130-43

ears and an additional one on its back; or when it has two additional ears behind its left ear. Totally in style the tablet ends with the entry: “if an *izbu* is covered with ears, there will be a(nother) king as powerful as the (present) king”.

Now it is perhaps possible to conceive the most horrible malformations in a series devoted to monstrous births; but impossible protases are equally attested in the astronomical omen collections. These expert observers of the nightly skies undoubtedly knew very well that eclipses never take place on the twenty-first day of a lunar month. Similarly, it cannot have escaped them that Venus and the sun are never in opposition. But that did not prevent them from composing omina for just such events.<sup>18</sup>

**2.2.** Another bothersome problem arises with the omina taken from human voluntary behaviour. In *Šumma ālu* there is a tablet on washing; it contains entries like: “if someone washes his hands in the doorway ...”, or “if someone washes his hands at noon ...”, etc.<sup>19</sup> Other tablets of the same series deal with sexual behaviour.<sup>20</sup> Birth omina, or celestial portents, can be regarded as signs from the gods, in that they can conceivably be presumed to manifest themselves because the gods want to communicate something. But how must we understand the omina derived from types of behaviour that is within control of the human will?

**3.** Interesting and important though they are, I shall not attempt to answer these questions at length. I will merely suggest a specific approach, which is historical and intertextual, to provide a framework which may be conducive to a better understanding of the textual format of the omen collections, and of the uses of this format. This approach is very restricted; it does not address the political or religious aspects of the divination procedure. But I hope to demonstrate that it is a *useful* approach in that, at the very least, it may prevent us from asking the wrong questions.

**3.1.** From a few scattered references we know that divination existed in Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium; and it may well be much older.<sup>21</sup> Early references point to its use for the selection of candidates for important positions, in particular priests. In this early period divination was performed without the assistance of written texts. In the Old Babylonian period, on which period I will concentrate here, divination gradually moves from the official to the private domain.<sup>22</sup> And it is only at that point in time that its technique is at least partially put in writing. We are best informed about extispicy, the examination (for divinatory purposes) of the entrails of an animal. The animal to be examined was always an animal slaughtered in a sacrificial ceremony. Therefrom we may conclude that Old Babylonian divination clearly has a religious setting. In the ritual accompanying the divination procedure the gods are explicitly asked to write a reliable message on the entrails.

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<sup>18</sup> These examples are taken from David Brown’s insightful unpublished dissertation on the development of Babylonian and Assyrian astronomy and astrology. I should like to thank David Brown for allowing me access to the results of his investigations prior to publication.

<sup>19</sup> Farber 1989.

<sup>20</sup> See Guinan 1990.

<sup>21</sup> Falkenstein 1966.

<sup>22</sup> See Meyer 1987: 266–71.

Other types of divination from this period confirm the religious context. There are omens about the appearance and behaviour of the animal to be sacrificed. Other omen collections interpret the form of smoke, or the patterns made by oil on water. Both smoke and oil probably had a function in sacrifice. Even the physiognomic omens, for which there is at present at least one Old Babylonian witness, may have had a background in the physical condition necessary to qualify as a priest.<sup>23</sup> And it is probable that celestial divination must also be seen in a religious context.<sup>24</sup>

There are also administrative texts recording the delivery of animals to a diviner. The animals used in extispicy are primarily sheep, but birds also occur.<sup>25</sup> After the animal had been killed the diviner systematically examined the liver, lungs, heart and colon, in this sequence. The most important organ was the liver. This was divided into about ten zones, with suggestive names such as 'Welfare', 'Palace Gate', 'Strength' and 'Path'. All these zones have been defined anatomically.<sup>26</sup> It seems that the examination of the liver proceeded anti-clockwise, and in a truly systematic manner. On each zone all kinds of marks, such as lines, holes, (dis)coloured spots etc. could be found, and all of these were deemed significant. We possess about one hundred Old Babylonian extispicy compendia;<sup>27</sup> in these compendia, one tablet usually treats one zone. It is striking that these compendia are always in Babylonian. Sumerian, the learned language of the scribes, is never used for omen texts.<sup>28</sup>

**3.1.** The example which follows is taken from a compendium treating the lungs. In the entries translated here there appears a special mark, called *kakku*, a Babylonian word meaning 'weapon' or 'mace'. It is a protruding piece of tissue which may appear on the liver as well as on the lung.<sup>29</sup> On liver models the presence of a *kakku* is indicated by an arrow-like drawing (resembling → or ←), which may be pointing in various directions.<sup>30</sup> In the diction of omen literature this weapon mark is then said to 'look' in a given direction.

1. If there is a weapon mark in front of the middle finger of the lung, and it looks towards its head: [     ].
2. if there is a weapon mark at the base of the middle finger of the lung, and it looks towards its head: this is the weapon mark of rebellion.
4. If there is a weapon mark behind the middle finger of the lung, and it looks towards

<sup>23</sup> Exceptions are the Old Babylonian examples of *Šumma izbu* (Leichty 1969: 201ff.) and *Šumma ālu* (Weisberg 1970; Joannès 1994), which do not seem to have a cultic connection.

<sup>24</sup> Few Old Babylonian celestial omens have been published so far. See Rochberg-Halton 1988: 19 and Dietrich 1996. A comprehensive treatment of published and unpublished examples is being prepared by F. Rochberg-Halton. The religious aspect of celestial divination was stressed by Reiner 1995.

<sup>25</sup> The evidence for extispicy on birds is collected in Tsukimoto 1982: 108f; see further ARM 26/1:38 and Durand 1997.

<sup>26</sup> See most recently Leiderer 1990.

<sup>27</sup> See Jeyes 1989, with a list of previously published texts on pp. 7f.

<sup>28</sup> There are a few apparent exceptions; but these are all post Old-Babylonian, and probably translations from Babylonian originals. The earliest example known to me is an unpublished two-line exercise tablet from Nippur in the Kassite period. UM 29-13-542 reads: *t u k u m - b i d a g a l - [ g u b <sub>3</sub> š u - s i ... ] / l u <sub>2</sub> - b i s i n u - s a <sub>2</sub> [     ]* "if the space [to the left of the 'finger' (of the liver) ...], the client will not be well [     ]". For the reconstruction of line 1, see Nougayrol 1967: 225 note 49 and Kraus 1985: 181f.

<sup>29</sup> See Richter 1994: 212.

<sup>30</sup> See Meyer 1987: 218-20.

its head: someone without sense will seize the throne.

3. If the lung has two middle fingers, and the regular one is normal, and the second one sits upside down on top of the first, and looks towards the throat: a man of the king will seize the throne.
5. If the lung has two middle fingers, and the regular one is normal, and the second one stretches towards the right: the army will profit; its vanguard will be strong.
6. If the lung has two middle fingers, and the regular one is normal, and the second one stretches towards the left: [the prince] will go into exile.<sup>31</sup>

This example illustrates many characteristics of the omen compendium. The collections are systematic: we find three omnia concerning the weapon mark: in front, at the base, or behind the ‘middle finger’. Then there are three omnia about a double ‘middle finger’, differentiated as to the direction where the additional ‘finger’ is pointing. The translation inverts the third and fourth omen, since it is certain that the cuneiform text is in error and the items should be placed in the order as presented here. Furthermore, the apodoses, or interpretations, relate to the protases, or descriptions of features, by some simple rules. In general, left is negative, right is positive. Therefore the ‘second finger’ pointing left has a negative interpretation: the prince will go into exile. The same ‘finger’ pointing right predicts good fortune for the army. Lastly, the weapon mark by itself is often connected with war and destruction by a somewhat transparent symbolism.

**3.2.** Another text type related to Old Babylonian extispicy is the model. A model is a clay object that illustrates an anomaly on the liver, lung or colon. These models were probably used for the education of diviners.<sup>32</sup> An interesting example, now kept in the British Museum, is a lentil-shaped tablet which on one side shows a line drawing of a scorpion. The other side is unfortunately badly broken, but it quotes the omen for the case where the colon of the (sacrificial) sheep looks like a scorpion.<sup>33</sup> What this model illustrates in a particularly expressive way is the *theoretical* nature of much of the omen literature. To find a sheep with a colon in this shape is highly unlikely, if not downright impossible.

**4.** This brings us to the next question. How were these well-organised compendia used? What was their precise function in the divination process? The answer can be short and clear: none. These handbooks were not meant for the practice of the diviner. A diviner who examined the entrails of a sheep did not carry with him a box of clay tablets. He did not go home to consult his library, even if he should happen to have one.

**4.1.** The actual practice of Old Babylonian divination is best known to us through a corpus of texts known as extispicy reports.<sup>34</sup> These have the appearance of administrative

<sup>31</sup> Text published in Goetze 1947 as no. 39.

<sup>32</sup> On models and their use see now the extensive study by Meyer 1987.

<sup>33</sup> BM 97877, published in photograph in Nougayrol 1972: 141. Unfortunately the protasis is broken. That the line figure represents a colon follows from the similarity in style (line drawing using a double line) with other colon models. Moreover, omnia concerning the colon in the form of a scorpion are known from the omen compendia, as quoted by Nougayrol in the article cited.

<sup>34</sup> Literature on Old Babylonian extispicy reports is collected in Jeyes 1989: 190 note 51 (unpublished examples on p. 187 note 6). See further Tsukimoto 1982, Kraus 1985, and Mayer 1987.

tablets. The first few lines identify the god to whom the animal was offered, and record the question which was asked. A broad variety of gods is involved. Marduk is mentioned often, but lesser gods are also attested, and in an unpublished exemplar in the British Museum a lamb is slaughtered for Šu-<sup>d</sup>Sîn, a king of Ur who by the time to which the text is dated had been dead for almost half a millennium.<sup>35</sup>

The question may be general or specific. The general question seeks information about the well-being of the client. In one piece it even specifies “for the well-being for one year”.<sup>36</sup> The specific type has a more precise, sometimes even a fairly complex, question. Thus we have now three extispicy reports related to a merchant named Kurû who lived in Babylon in the late Old Babylonian period.<sup>37</sup> All these reports concern business matters. In one of them the question reads as follows:

One bird (concerning the matter of) giving within this month the money to Kurû and Tamḥur-Martu, and of undertaking a journey to return the money as soon as they have confirmed themselves by divination.<sup>38</sup>

As I understand this question, the client has some money which belongs to Kurû and Tamḥur-Martu. His first question is: ‘Should I repay the money within this month?’. Apparently debtor and creditor do not live in the same town, and in order to return the money a journey is necessary. Thus the second question is: ‘If yes, should I undertake this journey?’. Most peculiar is the fact that the timing of the journey depends on the result of the extispicy by the other partner in the transaction! Travelling with sums of money may have been a dangerous undertaking, and here it is surrounded with supernatural security measures.

After the statement of the question, the extispicy reports continue to list the results of the examination of the exta, in terms such as: “the Welfare is there; the Palace Gate is loose” etc. In many cases a second omen report follows before the final verdict is given in the simple terms ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable’. The relevant features of the exta are briefly described in technical language. The terminology corresponds to that of the omen compendia. The zones of the liver and lung are described one by one, in a rigidly fixed order. The report proper always ends with the number of convolutions of the colon. As a rule the interpretations which make the omen compendia so colourful are not included.<sup>39</sup> The diviner took each feature as either favourable or unfavourable. The system was thus basically binary. The outcome was then decided on the basis of a one-feature-one-vote principle. The principles by which a diviner could decide whether

<sup>35</sup> BM 97433, dated Ammišaduqa, year 13. It is a pleasure to acknowledge here the help I received from Dr. Rosel Pientka (Marburg) in reading this tablet.

<sup>36</sup> VAT 13158, published by Klengel 1984: 100f.

<sup>37</sup> In texts from Babylon from the period of Samsuditana two persons by the name of Kurû are found. The references in administrative texts are collected in Pientka 1998: 285. See Wilcke 1990: 302–04 for two extispicy reports concerning Kurû. Note that the report VAT 13158 (see previous note) comes from the same ‘archive’ as one of the two Kurû extispicy reports (VAT 13451 = VS 22: 81). See Pedersén 1998: 335 and 336–7 on the role of Kurû in this particular archive.

<sup>38</sup> This is the only extispicy report known to me which concerns a bird. It has been published by Tsukimoto (1982). Read *ku-ru-u* in line 2; *na-da<sup>1</sup>-nim-ma* in line 4, and *a-la-ki* in line 7. As I understand the introduction to this report, both questions are introduced by a temporal clause (*ina libbi arḫi annî* and *ina ûmi*), and a verb in the infinitive in the genitive case (*nadânimma* and *alâki*). The text badly needs collating.

<sup>39</sup> The one exception is VS 24: no. 116, edited by Mayer (1987).

a feature was favourable or unfavourable were simple and few. Right is favourable, left is unfavourable; light is favourable, dark is unfavourable; normal is favourable, abnormal is unfavourable. An unfavourable dark spot on the unfavourable left side of a liver zone adds up to a favourable result, etc. No one ever took the trouble to write down these principles, but they can be reconstructed from the reports, the extispicy prayers, the models, and the compendia.<sup>40</sup>

4.2. While the diviner was on duty, the omen collections were sitting idly on their shelves. What was their function? They employ a number of associative principles to connect a feature to an interpretation. The weapon mark, as has been noted above, is usually associated with armed violence, or warfare. There are also etymological, or pseudo-etymological relations between protasis and apodosis. Relative length of some part on the exta predicts a long life for the king, etc. Or the association may be rather on the level of semantics, such as the double occurrence of some mark meaning that a man will have a rival in his love affairs.<sup>41</sup> These associations, however, do not *in themselves* establish the meaning of the omen. The meaning of the observed features is laid down in the few binary rules explained above. The positive or negative value of a feature is a given. What the apodosis does, is providing a theoretical justification for this value by giving an interpretation based on association.

Old Babylonian omen compendia are not the reference books in which a diviner would look up the meaning of a feature encountered on the exta of his sacrificial animal. The compendia form a body of theoretical and speculative literature in which the simple binary oppositions of divinatory practice are used, expanded, and justified. It has long been recognised that omen compendia are very close in their format to lexical lists. The lexical list is one of the most persistent textual types in cuneiform. It is attested almost from the birth of writing in the late fourth millennium until well into the Hellenistic period. There are several types of lexical lists, the most important being word lists and sign lists.<sup>42</sup> A *word list* is typically a list of Sumerian words. It may or may not be accompanied by glosses indicating the reading of the Sumerian signs and a translation into Babylonian. *Sign lists* explain the uses of signs or sign complexes. Most signs in cuneiform may be read in a variety of ways; the signs are polyvalent. A sign list enumerates the values a sign may take in Sumerian writing. In many cases different values of one sign correspond to different Sumerian words. In some examples this is illustrated by providing Babylonian translations. The point of departure of the Old Babylonian lexical corpus is Sumerian, the language of the scribes, and hence the language of tradition.

In the list format one sign or one Sumerian word is connected to a reading or to a Babylonian translation. Similarly in the omen texts a sign found on the liver or another part of the exta is connected to an interpretation. Both text types follow a number of fairly simple sequential rules. And perhaps most importantly, both utilise a certain degree of speculation. Lexical lists contain words which are rarely or never used outside the lexical corpus. Sign lists include values which are artificial, or belong to a much

<sup>40</sup> For the reconstruction of these principles, see Starr 1983, chapter 2 (working from the extispicy prayers), and Meyer 1987 (working from the liver models; see particularly the summary on pp. 249–64).

<sup>41</sup> See Starr 1983: 9–12.

<sup>42</sup> For a general introduction see Civil 1995.

earlier phase of the writing system. Both lexical lists and omen compendia demonstrate an interest in systematisation and speculation which goes well beyond, and is perhaps not even related to, any practical application.

5. Extispicy belonged to the domain of religion. Old Babylonian religious practitioners made no systematic use of writing for laying down their rituals, songs and prayers. There is perhaps a gradual increase in the recording of such texts towards the end of the Old Babylonian period.<sup>43</sup> In earlier times the few rituals and incantations we have seem to be mere accidental recordings. Likewise the practice of extispicy depended upon the memory of the diviner. He knew the rules for evaluating the features as positive or negative. For some reason, however, the impetus was felt to write down this theoretical and speculative part of divination. And this was done in a way that is clearly reminiscent of the venerable lexical tradition. To me this seems to be an appropriation of the intellectual prestige of the lexical lists on the part of the diviners.

5.1. Old Babylonian extispicy texts do not predict the future. They contain speculative knowledge of a binary kind. And they are an extension of the textual type established by the lexical tradition. The textual type that was thus developed proved to be productive. It could be used, and was in fact used, to record speculative knowledge of a broad nature. This may be seen to its full extent in the canon of texts established in the first millennium libraries. Thus it is used to describe the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ signs in the skies. These were collected in the astronomical series which triggered so much literary activity in Sargonid Assyria. This knowledge may also be used to classify people by ‘good’ or ‘bad’ marks on their bodies. There is no sign that physiognomic omnia were ever used in divinatory practice.<sup>44</sup> One of these texts<sup>45</sup> explains that when a man has a narrow face, he will increase his possessions. If he has a broad face, he will always speak indecently. If he has hair on his hands, he will get a wife, a male and a female slave. If he has short fingers, he will have a good heir. While one can look at the skies and observe a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ sign, one can report this to the king, but there is little one can do with one’s knowledge of facial or other bodily features. What we can learn from such ‘omnia’ is that hairy hands were regarded as being manly, as something desirable, and that a broad face was associated with coarse behaviour. It has been demonstrated that *Šumma ālu* contains moral judgments, and judgments about the relations between the sexes.<sup>46</sup> The sexual omnia paint a picture of how the male was supposed to behave sexually. All positions in which the female (of any species) takes the initiative have a negative apodosis. Omnia describing homosexual relations also demonstrate that the one who is in control and takes the initiative is valued positively. The very first lines of *Šumma ālu* say:

If a city is situated on a hill, the inhabitants of that city will be depressed.  
If a city is situated in a valley, that city will be elevated.

<sup>43</sup> This was argued by Michalowski 1995. See however the three Old Babylonian rituals published in Cavigneaux 1996: no’s 122–124.

<sup>44</sup> But these texts, or rather the knowledge they contain, may have been used for the selection of candidates for important religious positions.

<sup>45</sup> Kraus 1935: 62f lines 17–18 and rev. 2–3.

<sup>46</sup> Guinan 1989 and 1990.

This can easily be dismissed as nonsense, since most cities in the Ancient Near East *were* situated on a hill. But the lines may well be understood as a moral maxim concerning pride and modesty.<sup>47</sup> There is a famous literary text, known as *Advice to a Prince*<sup>48</sup> which uses the omen format to list a number of instances of princely behaviour to be approved or censured. If the king does not heed justice, his people will become confused, and the country will be destroyed. If he does not heed his magnates, his own days will be shortened. If he does not heed his counsellors, the country will revolt against him, etc. The text differs from the omen collections proper by a few formal features. The most important of these is that the sentences do not begin with *šumma* ‘if’, even though these ‘ifs’ must be supplied to make the text intelligible. *Advice to a Prince* is a literary composition, and does not belong to the inner core of the omen compendia. Yet given its contents the omen format is understandable.

Also, the physiognomic omen series contain explicit sections which are not concerned with the body, but with characterial features:<sup>49</sup>

If he thinks “I am a hero,” he will be embarrassed.  
If he thinks “I can do it,” he will be insignificant.  
If he thinks “I am feeble,” he will be in power.  
If he thinks “I am miserable,” he will be rich.

Here speculative thinking has turned into the production of paradoxes.

**5.2.** The Old Babylonian extispicy compendia elaborated in a speculative way the knowledge of the diviners. This was a knowledge that hardly depended on written texts. This speculative character of the omen compendia is also present in the first millennium texts. However, the first millennium uses of literacy are quite different from those in the Old Babylonian period. It is clear that in the Sargonid period some omen series, and particularly the astrological ones, were actually consulted, since there are references to this effect in letters and reports. This reflects a change in the way the written word was used and regarded. Colophons and editorial remarks on first millennium tablets show that now it was deemed important that a text be transmitted as faithfully as possible. Colophons not only mention the name of the copyist, but often also the provenance of the original from which the copy was made, such as “an old tablet from Babylon”. We may further be informed that the tablet is “finished and collated”. In the body of the text a sentence may suddenly break off, the break being followed by the remark *hepi* ‘broken’. This indicates that the original was damaged at this point, and could therefore not be copied. Such paratextual features are corollaries of the gradual standardisation which affected almost every area of the Mesopotamian written tradition. The importance of a correct and reliable transmission is put in explicit terms in the omen catalogue edited by Finkel (1988). Backed by an extensive legitimisation, including ancestry and function, the scribe Esagil-kīn-apli declares having produced an authoritative version of the diagnostic omen series *SA.GIG*. The state the series was in before his own work, he describes as “twisted threads for which no duplicates were

<sup>47</sup> See Guinan 1989.

<sup>48</sup> Most recent edition in Cole 1996: 268–74.

<sup>49</sup> Kraus 1936: 98f. lines 8–11.

available”.<sup>50</sup> Exaggerating for clarity’s sake one might say that Old Babylonian texts are the products of authoritative *scholars*, while first millennium *texts* are *themselves* the authoritative sources and bearers of knowledge. In cases of ominous phenomena of difficult interpretation, the omen compendia could be consulted in libraries. Yet the meaning of the presence of these compendia in the first millennium tablet collections is hardly exhausted by these consultations. Like their Old Babylonian predecessors, the omen compendia are primarily collections of speculative knowledge. The speculative character of this knowledge is even enhanced by the dynamics of system-building. Once one has started to describe anomalies with ears in odd places, it is hard to stop.

6. Omen collections may not be dismissed as mere superstition, nor may they be regarded as early precursors of empirical science. They do represent a kind of scholarship perhaps comparable to scholastic theology, or at least the somewhat caricatural ‘scholasticism’ discussing the number of angels that can sit on the point of a needle. Much like present-day Assyriology, this kind of scholarship has little relevance for the necessities of daily life. And apparently our scholars knew this very well. Line 70 of *Šumma Ālu* tablet 1 reads:

If a city is full of fools, that city will be happy.  
If a city is full of intellectuals, abandonment of the city.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Finkel 1988: 148f.

<sup>51</sup> Freedman 1998: 32; 87 and 90.

*Niek Veldhuis*

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