

Recent Research on Mesopotamian Divination

I. Šumma izbu

Šumma izbu “If a malformed birth” is the name of an ancient Mesopotamian divinatory composition dealing with malformed human and animal births, as well as with behavioural peculiarities among specific animals. Like other omen compositions of Mesopotamian origin, Š. i. consists of sequences of conditional clauses whose protases or antecedents describe a sign, in this case malformed births, and whose apodoses or consequents give the pertinent prediction. The first full edition of this text is by E. Leichty (TCS 4, 1970). A new commented edition by the present author is forthcoming (*La serie teratomantica Šumma izbu: testo, tradizione, orizzonti culturali* (HANE/M XV), Padova (SARGON) 2014, 2 vol., i-ix, 949pp., i-xv). The text originally contained some 2800 omens, of which this edition has been able to reconstruct some 2350 – an increase of nearly a fifth of the total over the first edition.

History of the text

Second millennium material = ‘snapshots’ of a range of teratomantic traditions only some of which are reflected in Šumma izbu

Mesopotamia

- Southern Babylonia (3 texts; OB): nucleus of what was to become Tablets 5 through 7 of Š. i.
- Sealand (1; late OB): based on material that has found an echo also in Š. i., but the editing process was different
- MB Babylonia (7) and MA Assyria (2): advanced stage of textual stabilization in the final centuries of the Late Bronze age (cf. also Ugur and Emar, 13th-12th c.), but no evidence for the existence of the series as such

First millennium = the process of canonization and serialization that led to Š. i. probably came to an end in the final centuries of the second millennium BC or at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. Direct evidence, however, is only available from the 8th century onwards

Assyria (8th-7th c. B.C.; Nineveh, Assur, Kalḫu, Ḫuzirina)

- stable textual tradition (significant variants are only found in Tablets 1, 2 and 5) documented by the manuscripts from Nineveh; the evidence from the other Assyrian cities (3 texts) is more problematic
- excerpts (*nishū*) from Š. i.
- sequences of *aḫū* omens
- extract containing material pertaining to the series Šumma ālu together with teratomantic material that may or may not be from Š. i.
- commentaries (14)

‘Periphery’

- Tiguṇānum (13; late OB): an isolated school of teratomancy (?)
- Hattuša: Akkadian material (11) is probably based on Babylonian forerunners from early post-OB; the texts in Hittite (17) are probably based on later material (15th-14th c.)
- Susa (2; late OB/MB): based on material that has found an echo also in Š. i., but the editing process was different
- Ugurī (5; MB) and Emar (10; MB): local copies of Babylonian originals; close parallels with Š. i. (cf. MB Babylonia and MA Assyria)

Babylonia (‘long 6th’ – 1st c. B.C.; Uruk, Sippar, Babylonia, Borsippa)

- the text is stable (but major differences between Assyrian and Babylonian manuscripts are to be found in Tablets 5, 17-18, 22)
- commentaries (8)
- evidence for a serialized and stable collection of *aḫū* omens related to Š. i.
- evidence for the use of other media than the clay tablet (leather scrolls) for the documentation of Š. i. and its diffusion (→ legacy)

Sitz im Leben

The institutional setting of teratomancy can be described on the basis of evidence from Old Babylonian Mari (< letters) and the Assyrian court of the Iron Age (< letters and omen reports). A palatial context for teratomancy is assured also for the collection of divinatory material originating in the palace *scriptorium* of Tunip-Teššup, king of Tiguṇānum in Northern Mesopotamia. On the other hand, the setting of the OB teratomantic compendia from Babylonia is still a matter of debate. For the Late Bronze age the scarcity of the documentation, with the partial exception of the Syrian periphery, does not allow placing the references to teratomancy into a well-circumscribed context.

The late period, from the sixth century onwards, attests to the continuing interest in teratomancy in a priestly setting. The overall character of Mesopotamian erudition underwent important developments in this period with a gradually diminishing interest in the traditional disciplines of divination, especially terrestrial divination including extispicy (and teratomancy), and an increasing involvement of Babylonian scholars in astronomy and astrology. While traditional texts, including Š. i., were still being copied and collected in scholarly tablet collections even in the final centuries of the first millennium, they were read in an entirely new interpretative key (< Diaries; ‘esoteric commentary’)

Structure and Interpretation of the text

Macro-structure of the series

- Tablets 1-4: omens from malformed human births (series Šumma sinništu arātma “If a woman is pregnant”)
- Tablet 5: Šumma laḫru neša ālīd, “if a ewe gives birth to a lion”
- Tablets 6-17: omens from malformed animal births (series Šumma izbu “If a malformed foetus”)
- Tablets 18-24: omens from odd births and behavioural peculiarities among specific animals (sheep and goats (18), cattle and donkeys (19), horses (20-21), pigs (22), dogs (23), wild animals (24))

Tablets 1-4: 1 (encyclopedic overview over malformed and anomalous births), 2-4 (malformations *a capite ad calcem*)
 Tablet 5: malformations *a capite ad calcem*
 Tablets 6-17 mirror, in an amplified manner, the basic structure of Tablets 1-4

Man
 The king (lion = king)
 The animal world

Categories of malformations (→ technical terminology; ‘variation-reducing’ categories)

- malformations resembling animal features (zoomorphism)
- absence of body parts
- deformed and/or incomplete body parts
- misplacement of body parts
- presence of excess body parts

Organizational principles

- Binary opposition (right/left, front/back, above/below, male/female, white/black etc.)
- Complex gradation of the agglutinative and paradigmatic type

Public apodoses

- the king*
- the nature of royal rule
 - life and death
 - the succession to the throne
 - rebellion and disobedience
 - war
- the land*
- relation to the king
 - internal state
 - concrete events of a socio-economic, ecological or demographic nature
 - devastation, abandonment and famine
 - relation to the divine sphere

Private apodoses

- the individual*
- life and death
 - health issues
 - general condition
 - relation to the divine sphere
 - social relationships
 - family matters
 - prosperity and wellbeing

‘Standard apodoses’

S. a. are very common and general apodoses whose positive or negative predictions depend on the protasis, but whose wording stands in no close relation to the latter. The huge number of s. a., a typical feature of the first millennium series, can be interpreted as a result of the expansion of the text, which is achieved principally along its vertical (paradigmatic) axis, by variation of the protases. The increasing complexity and interconnection of the protases is not, and cannot be, mirrored by the apodoses: the hermeneutic code is not sufficiently differentiated. This leads to a relative impoverishment of the apodoses in general in comparison to those of the Old Babylonian compendia and to a proliferation of s. a.

Protasis

Apodosis

Binary logic: in Š. i. a malformation on the right side (the *pars familiaris*) is generally considered negative for the ‘ego’, a malformation on the left (the *pars hostilis*), positive (or negative for the ‘ego’s enemy)

- Double malformations on the right → positive, on the left → negative. Triple malformations on the right → negative, on the left → positive.
- Polar pairs mentioned in a single protasis → the relationship between the two parts is decisive for the outcome; when malformations on the left and right (or front/back, etc.) are in symmetrical positions, the predictions reflect the resulting ambiguity by being positive overall while still referring to a negative scenario or to elements extraneous to the ‘ego’.
- Triads (“right” – “left” – “on both sides,” etc.) → the third omen develops the theme of the first omen by giving the prediction a greater degree of emphasis or a wider import.

• Longer sequences display authorial intent in that the apodoses are not only semantically coordinated but also ‘graded’ according to the import of the prediction, with a climax in the final omen. Occasionally, it is possible to observe also the ‘stratification’ of such sequences.

Symbolic associations

- *Signs of type A:* body parts object of malformations → extended metaphor in which the body of the malformed births is taken to be an image of those sectors and aspects of the real world for which divination was sought (i.e., head = the king and royal power)
- *Signs of type B:* categories of malformations → reflect the underlying concept of the ideal aspect and functionality of body parts that gave rise to the technical terminology of the series (i.e., ‘solid’ neck → positive, ‘solid’ mouth → negative). Associations attached to these malformations can be conventional (crookedness → death; new-born looking like a donkey → illegitimate appropriation of means and rights); a larger group of intuitive analogies is based on the visual image of the deformation (i.e., compression → reduction of space, loss of control). (Note: analogy plays an important role also in the interpretation of behavioural omens).

The final meaning of an omen usually results from the combination of the meaning attributed to the sign A and its specific malformation (sign B). Associations based on assonance and puns on the phonetic or graphic level are numerous. Given the ambiguous and polysemic nature of the hermeneutic code, it is the wider context in which a given omen is to appear (i.e., as part of a binary pair or of an extended vertical sequence created by gradation) that in the course of omen generation is crucial for the choice of the particular association to be employed.

II. Šumma ḫašū

Šumma ḫašū is an ancient Mesopotamian divinatory composition dealing with the peculiarities of the lungs of a sacrificial sheep. It represents the 9th chapter of the first millennium extispicy series *bārūtu*, which consists of about one hundred tablets, sub-divided into ten chapters or subseries, each of them concerning either various parts of the entrails or specific ominous features observed on the exta. The reconstruction and edition of the standard version of Šumma ḫašū (originally consisting of over 1000 omens) is currently being undertaken by the present author within the framework of a M4Human Marie Curie Fellowship funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation and the European Commission (“Mesopotamian Lung Omens: The Chapter Šumma ḫašū of the Extispicy Series *Bārūtu*”).

Sources

Assyria (8th-7th c. B.C.; Nineveh, Assur)

- 26 tablets and fragments assigned to one of the 14 Tablets of Š. ḫ.
- 10 unassigned tablets and fragments containing lung omens
- 8 unassigned tablets and fragments mentioning the “Middle Finger of the Lungs”
- 15 small fragments mentioning various parts of the lungs
- 21 uncertain fragments (extispicy)

Babylonia (‘long 6th’ – 1st c. B.C.; Sippar, Babylon and Borsippa)

- 4 tablets assigned to one of the 14 Tablets of Š. ḫ.
- 5 unassigned tablets and fragments containing lung omens

Second millennium sources

- 7 OB compendia dealing with the ominous features of the lungs
- 1 late OB lung omen text from the Sealand
- 1 late OB lung omen text from Northern Mesopotamia (Tiguṇānum)
- 15 lung omen texts from Assur (4 MB, 11 MA)
- 2 MB lung omens texts from Late Kassite Babylon

Related material

- Models of the lungs and “orientation tablets”
- Reports on acts of extispicy
- Commentaries
- *Multābiltu* and *Niširti bārūti* texts
- Other (stone fragment inscribed with several lung omens in Neo-Babylonian lapidary script)

Current state of reconstruction of Šumma ḫašū

- Tablet 1: beginning and end preserved, 27 omens concerning the general aspect of the lungs and changes in the “Rear of the Lungs”
- Tablet 2: end preserved; 9 omens concerning the “Uvula” and the “Secret of the Lungs”
- Tablet 3: 61 omens preserved; changes in the “Donkey” (1-45), the “Narrow Place” (46-52), and the “Hard Part of the Lungs” (53-56)
- Tablet 4: beginning and end preserved, 13 omens concerning changes in the “Cap of the Lungs”
- Tablet 5: ca. 74 omens preserved; changes in the “Promotion of the Lungs”
- Tablet 6: ca. 50 omens dealing with the “Watch” and the “Secret of the Lungs”
- Tablet 7: beginning preserved, 23 omens concerning the occurrence of a “Weapon-mark” in the “Promotion of the Lungs”
- Tablet 8: almost completely preserved; the reconstructed omens (ca. 150) concern changes in various parts of the Lungs
- Tablet 9: almost completely preserved; changes in the “Outer Finger of the Lungs”
- Tablet 10: beginning and end preserved, 16 omens concerning various parts of the Lungs
- Tablet 11: beginning and end preserved, 26 omens concerning the displacement of the “Middle Finger of the Lungs” and the presence of two “Middle Fingers”
- Tablet 12: end preserved, 8 omens concerning changes in the “Handle of the Middle Finger of the Lungs”; some 28 omens, which possibly belong here as well, concern the presence of two “Middle Fingers” and changes in the “Top of the Palace” and the “Handle of the Middle Finger of the Lungs”
- Tablet 13: beginning and end preserved, ca. 27 omens concerning changes in the “Middle Finger of the Lungs”
- Tablet 14: no tablet has been assigned so far to this section