

SCIENCE AND SUPERSTITION: INTERPRETATION OF SIGNS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

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On March 6 and 7, 2009, sixteen scholars from around the world gathered in Breasted Hall of the Oriental Institute to discuss the complexities of ancient divination texts. While the main emphasis of the seminar was on interpretation of the omen texts from ancient Mesopotamia, many attending scholars brought interdisciplinary perspectives to the discussion. During these two days, the phenomena related to ancient divination were approached from a rich variety of angles.

Despite the large size of the Mesopotamian divination corpus, the omen texts have been more often neglected than seriously studied. Due to the relative youth of Assyriology as a scientific discipline, the cuneiform omen texts have been studied mostly from a lexical or linguistic point of view. However, during the past twenty years the study of Babylonian divination has grown into a discipline in its own right. New studies and text editions have considerably added to the awareness of the importance that the study of divine signs had for the ancient Mesopotamians. As the best-documented archaic civilization, ancient Mesopotamia has the potential to provide the scholarly world the earliest model of the psychological, social, and political aspects divination has in a pre-modern society.



Symposium participants, from left to right: Front row: John Jacobs, Amar Annus, JoAnn Scurlock, Ulla Koch, Martti Nissinen, Ann Guinan, Francesca Rochberg, James Allen. Back row: Edward Shaughnessy, Nils Heeßel, Eckart Frahm, Seth Richardson, Scott Noegel, Clifford Ando, Abraham Winitzer, Robert Biggs. Photo by Kaye Oberhausen

The first session of the seminar opened with “Theory of Signs in the Ancient World.” The first speaker, Francesca Rochberg, made an inquiry into the nature of Babylonian omens as conditionals, representing statements of material implication “P implies Q.” The validity and truth functionality inherent in conditional statements themselves demonstrate that omen divination is independent from empiricism. James Allen in his lecture gave an outline of ancient Greek conceptions of evidence and inference. After the coffee break, Ulla Susanne Koch, from Copenhagen, spoke about Mesopotamian divination from a cognitive point of view. According to her, cognitive theory has the advantage of providing a way of getting past the sometimes more confusing than enlightening discussions of definitions. The difficulties of capturing ancient notions in modern terminology were emphasized by many speakers, both during the conference and in private discussions. The last speaker of this session, Edward Shaughnessy, talked about the relationship between poetry and divination in early China, how poetical images as means of divination formed correspondences between the natural world and the human realm in classical Chinese literature.

The afternoon session on Friday was entitled “Hermeneutics of Signs in the Ancient World.” Eckart Frahm gave a presentation on the hermeneutics of cuneiform signs in divination and text commentaries. His paper investigated various examples of the way in which Babylonian and Assyrian scholars interpreted cuneiform signs by means of both etymology and “etymography.” The related issue of the generative role that scripts and writing systems play in ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the divine sign was studied in the next paper by Scott Noegel. The process of interpretation, he argued, can be understood as a performative act that empowers the interpreter, while simultaneously promoting the cosmological system upon which mantic exegesis is based. The next paper, delivered by Nils Heeßel, pointed out how difficult it is for modern scholars to understand the deeper layers of Babylonian extispicy. The Babylonian diviners, in his words, “put layer on layer of interpretation and the implications of each layer need to be assessed for their impact on the preceding layers of interpretation.” Heeßel’s discussion of the group of texts called “calculation of the stipulated term” brought forward a new discovery that has finally settled the issue of how the temporal validity of an extispicy was calculated. This discovery is based on the new join of Nineveh tablets K 4061 and K 10344 in the British Museum, which will be published in the forthcoming seminar proceedings.

The last two papers of the session dealt with divine presences in divination and ancient cults. Abraham Winitzer addressed the topic of the divine presence and its interpretation in early Mesopotamian divination. He pointed out the relative silence concerning the presence of deities in the omen collections from ancient Mesopotamia and provided an explanation for this near absence. The final paper, from Clifford Ando, treated a number of Roman rituals, similar in form, in which the presence of the gods was ritually marked, but enacted in several different ways.

After the reception in the Oriental Institute Museum and dinner on Friday night, the final session on Saturday looked at the historical aspects of divination, entitled “History of Sign Interpretation in the Ancient World.” Seth Richardson’s paper dealt with the historical discrepancy that the first written samples of liver omens in list format are attested only from the Old Babylonian period onward, while the divination in oral form must be much older. Richardson explained that a possible reason why we see the corpora of liver omen texts rapidly growing in the Old Babylonian period were the political struggles for power between warring territorial states and their several needs to restructure intelligence through new networks and a new authoritative language. The next paper of the session, from Cynthia Jean, studied the divination practices at the Neo-Assyrian palace, which is perhaps the most famous and best-known case in ancient history, where we can see the minutiae of everyday politics and divination closely interacting. JoAnn

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Scurlock's comparative paper on the Old Testament and Akkadian prophetic texts raised the question of a relationship between ominous historical events assuming the predictive capacity on the one hand, and a prophecy or divination on the other hand. After a coffee break, John Jacobs gave an overview of the traces of the Mesopotamian birth omen series *Shumma izbu* found in Cicero's tract *De divinatione* (*On Divination*). This paper was the only one in the seminar that studied the afterlife of the Mesopotamian omens through a cultural transmission.

After the end of the third session, the podium was given to two respondents. Ann Guinan gave a response from the point of view of the specialist in cuneiform omen literature. Her talk included an amusing story of her brother, who once asked her the portent implication of an owl turned upside-down in his bedroom. Having commented on the papers given at the conference, Ann Guinan concluded that the event announced an auspicious moment in the study of cuneiform omens. The final speaker was Martti Nissinen, who compared biblical prophecy to Mesopotamian divination. According to his view, when a prophecy is written down, it becomes a document available to scholarly application and this is the point where the difference between prophecy and omen divination begins to shrink. The canonization of prophesies resulted in an authoritative set of texts that were acknowledged as such and used as a basis for elaborate exegesis, comparable to different kinds of sign divination in ancient Mesopotamia.

In summary, the conference was very successful and intellectually stimulating. The book containing the symposium papers and a few contributions from other scholars, who were invited but could not participate, will hopefully be available in early 2010. The title of the book will be slightly different from that of the actual seminar. I am grateful to Gil Stein, who initiated this remarkable postdoctoral program, and to the Arthur and Lee Herbst Research and Education Fund for its generous funding, which helped make this gathering a pleasant reality. I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Mariana Perlinac, Kaye Oberhausen, and Christopher Woods for all they have done to help me organize this event. I also thank Andrea Seri and Robert Biggs for their chairmanship.

The year in Chicago was also rewarding for me from the point of view of my personal research. The Oriental Institute provided me with a safe haven in the midst of the economically collapsing world, and here I met outstanding working conditions unprecedented in my previous academic career. While it was very exciting to work in and for its community, there was also a consciousness in my mind to use the time here as profitably as possible for my other publications. I was able to write two papers during my stay at the Oriental Institute. One of them, a review article, is already published in the *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 9/1, pp. 87–99. The second paper is in an advanced stage of preparation and is the size of a short monograph. My predisposition to work has sometimes led me to keep a lower profile in regard to socializing. While admitting that this may be a deficiency, I would like to stress the potential that liberal scholarship has in itself, indeed capable in my mind of changing the world for the better. The year in Chicago has really been enjoyable, and I am thankful to all the staff in the Oriental Institute for having shared it with me.
