
In the Path of the Moon: Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy
by Francesca Rochberg

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The Babylonian tradition related to the observation and explanation of celestial phenomena has seen varying attention over the years. These texts were among the first cuneiform documents to attract the attention of scholars at the dawn of the discipline. But the ambiguous nature of the documents, qualifying in both the modern and opposite categories of ‘astrological’ and ‘astronomical’, often embarrassed the editors of the texts and left the entire Babylonian tradition of celestial observation poised precariously between attention and neglect. While the astronomical texts and their data were a source of interest attracting scholars from other disciplines as well as independent researchers, the astrological documents were cast into the cauldron of the superstitious, together with the rest of the divinatory and magical texts. On the one hand, the astronomical knowledge and achievement of Babylonia was recognized as the precursor of the so-called Greek miracle; and, on the other, the astrological tradition was interpreted as the heavy burden of the Oriental immobility.

Francesca Rochberg has devoted her scholarly research to the study of Babylonian celestial observation as a unique and homogeneous tradition. Working on an Assyriological ground as well as in the history of astronomy and astrology, she has fixed the boundaries between the two spheres of Babylonian astronomy and astrology, domains that were separated more through modern approaches than real emic categories (that is, using terms meaningful within the domains) and has highlighted the relations with other cultures and later traditions.

The volume under review collects her most important essays as chapters arranged chronologically according to their publication

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date, from 1982 to 2010.¹ These studies deal with the main aspects of the Babylonian celestial observation, from the constitution and transmission of the corpora of divinatory texts to their relation with other traditions, focusing particularly on the history of ideas. Most of the subjects have been summarized and discussed in Rochberg's recent monograph [2004].

The book opens with a study of the concept of determination in the Akkadian sources in the light of Greek philosophy and Latin *fatum* [ch. 1: 'Fate and Divination in Mesopotamia']. The author focuses her attention on the Akkadian term 'šīmtu', for which the general translation 'fate', a term borrowed by modern European languages from Latin, is revealed to be inadequate. This topic is resumed in later chapters where she investigates the concept of causality in relation to divine will, as well as the conditional sentences which constitute the basic structure of Mesopotamian divination.² Two more studies are devoted to the socio-religious background of Mesopotamian divination. The relation of divinity to the sky and the gods conceived as celestial bodies is the main topic of 'The Heavens and the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia' [ch. 16]; while 'A Short History of the Waters above the Firmament' [ch. 17] deals with the tradition of the waters above the sky, from the well known passage of *Genesis* 1.6–8 to the Renaissance interpretation through the Medieval tradition.

The history of astrology, particularly the relation of the Babylonian tradition to others, is the core of Rochberg's researches. Various articles are devoted to this topic, which is, however, constantly present in other subject studies too. Two papers deal with the Babylonian elements in Hellenistic astrology—'New Evidence for the History of Astrology' [ch. 2] and 'Elements of the Babylonian Contribution to Hellenistic Astrology' [ch. 7], while the author discusses in three separate papers some basic astronomical concepts found in horoscopes: 'Babylonian Seasonal Hours' [ch. 8]; 'Babylonian Horoscopy: The Texts and their Relations' [ch. 9]; and 'Lunar Data in Babylonian

¹ As of 31 Dec 2011, three of the essays [chs 16, 18, and 21] are still in press.

² Cf. 'Conditionals, Inference, and Possibility in Ancient Mesopotamian Science' [ch. 19]; "'If P, then Q": Form and Reasoning in Babylonian Divination' [ch. 20]; 'Divine Causality and Babylonian Divination' [ch. 21].

Horoscopes' [ch. 13].³ The Seleucid text from Uruk, TCL 6.13, offers several considerations in light of Greek astrological doctrine. The edition of the text [ch. 5: 'TCL 6 13: Mixed Traditions in Late Babylonian Astrology'] is followed by a discussion on the term 'riksu' (Sumerian DUR: 'bond'), which in an astronomical context might be translated as 'node'.⁴ The same text offers a Babylonian parallel to the later association between planets and sections of the zodiacal signs [ch. 6 'Benefic and Malefic Planets in Babylonian Astrology']. Further parallels to Greek astrology are proposed in 'A Babylonian Rising Times Scheme in Non-Tabular Astronomical Texts' [ch. 14], where Rochberg discusses 'the concept of the rising times of the twelve consecutive 30° signs of the zodiac, the Greek ἀναφοραί'. The general question of periodicity in Babylonian theory is treated in 'Periodicities and Period Relations in Babylonian Celestial Sciences' [ch. 18]. An attempt to sound other traditions is made in 'The Babylonian Origins of the Mandaean Book of the Zodiac' [ch. 11], discussed below.

Three essays are devoted to the constitution of the astrological written tradition, and are now classics in the study of Mesopotamian celestial observation and divination. In 'Canonicity in Cuneiform Texts' [ch. 3], the author delineates the traits of authorship and composition of the so-called canonical Series (*iškāru*) in opposition to the *ahû* tradition. These topics are treated in depth in two successive studies. In 'The Assumed 29th Aḥû Tablet of Enūma Anu Enlil' [ch. 4], the edition of a text belonging to the *ahû* tradition is an occasion to discuss the origin and nature of the exegetical literature and its relation with the canonical Series. The divine authorship and the literary origin attributed to the Series are discussed in 'Continuity and Change in Omen Literature' [ch. 10].

In a further study, the author goes back to the origin of this written tradition. In 'Old Babylonian Celestial Divination' [ch. 15], Rochberg gives a first glimpse on the Old Babylonian astrological texts and offers some general considerations in the light of other contemporary corpora, i.e., the hepatoscopic series. This constitutes the first step of a desirable study, whose interest the author has already declared in earlier works [71].

³ See also Rochberg 1998, and Beaulieu and Rochberg 1996.

⁴ The topic has been recently discussed by Ross [2008], who proposes a parallel with the Demotic 'twr'.

These 21 essays testify to the efforts and achievements of Rochberg's research in Babylonian knowledge and interpretation of celestial phenomena. In the field of Assyriology, she has promoted the study and understanding of Mesopotamian divination, a topic that the experts of the discipline are often unable to contextualize;⁵ with her critiques of methodology and approach, she has highlighted the position and relevance of Babylonian divination in the history of science [cf. 2004, chs 1–2]. It is impossible to offer a homogenous review of all the topics treated by the Rochberg in less than 30 years. Furthermore, such a review would have the uncomfortable duty of evaluating indirectly her entire career as a scholar. So instead I will propose few observations suggested by her studies.

Several references support the conclusion made by Goody and Watt [1975, 68] that writing is 'an addition, not an alternative, to oral transmission'. In the study of the Mesopotamian civilizations, the written documents are the only witnesses to a culture in which the oral communication represented the main stream of tradition. Traces of orality appear like the tip of the iceberg in the written sources and, in some cases, they highlight the preeminence of the oral medium. In the Sumerian tradition, the sphere of knowledge is clearly related to orality. The organ of perception related to wisdom is *par excellence* the ear, not the eye. The term for knowledge, and relative verbs, is 'ġeštu', which means 'ear' too. The expression 'big/wide ear' (ġeštu-dagal) might be translated as 'wide understanding' and used as a title for a 'wise man'. This view is strictly related to the divine election and submission of the worshipper, i.e., the wise man is the one who understands and obeys the gods' orders as manifested through signs. This appears different when compared to later Mesopotamian cultures in which written media are preeminent; but still in the first millennium BC, the expression 'ša pî ummâni' ('according to/from the mouth of the master'), used to name works of exegesis, highlights the importance of oral transmission. So too the Report of Bēl-aḥḥē-erība, who adds to a quoted omen 'I have heard (that) [from the mouth] of my father' [SAA 8.454]. This passage parallels *Enūma eliš* 7.147, 'A father should repeat them and teach them to his son' (*li-šá-an-ni-ma a-bu ma-ri li-šá-hi-iz*), where the term for teaching means literally 'to make someone to memorize' (*aḥāzu*). Listening and memorizing

⁵ For example, see Bottéro 1982.

are the core of the learning process and the correct way to wisdom. *The Epic of Erra* emphasizes it in the closing verses:

The scribe who will memorize it, shall be spared in the enemy country and honored in his land, in the chapel of the masters (*ummânū*)—where they constantly invoke my name, I shall grant them understanding. [*Epic of Erra* 5.55–56]

In the last sentence, the expression ‘I shall grant them understanding’ means literally ‘I will open their ears’ and this takes us back to the concept of knowledge as enlightenment by the god through orality. Consequently, it is not surprising that the major achievement is not considered as the product of personal experience but as divine revelation. This is the origin of most of the Series and literary works in Mesopotamia as well as in other cultures [74].

The passages mentioned above underline the direct relation of the pupil to his master as the source of knowledge. This finds an echo in the complaint of a scholar (Tabnî) to the Assyrian crown prince:

Moreover, (whereas) [Aplāj]a and Nāširu have kept [in] their [hands] non-ca[nonical] tablets and [...] of every possible kind, I have learned (my craft) from my (own) father. [SAA 10.182: r. 24ff.]

In Tabnî’s statement, the written documents are clearly undervalued as a source of learning. In this case, Tabnî compares his learning (*lamādu*) from his father’s hand, i.e., from observing his father’s work, to that of his colleagues who have kept tablets in their own hand—tablets which were non-canonical too! The text opposes a correct way of learning and transmitting the knowledge, that is, directly, to an incorrect one, that is, indirectly through the written medium which substitutes for the master. The established place for learning and transmitting knowledge is within the family. Ašarēdu the Younger affirms, in fact, that ‘The scribal art is not heard about in the market place’ [SAA 8.338: 7–r.1], a clear *querelle* against the selling and diffusion of knowledge out of the established contexts. Moreover, the denunciation to the king of the activities of the goldsmith Parruṭu show the strict control over this matter:

Parruṭu, a goldsmith of the household of the queen, has, like the king and the crown prince, bought a Babylonian, and settled him in his own house. He has taught exorcistic literature to his son; extispicy omens have been explained to him,

(and) he has even studied gleanings from *Enūma Anu Enlil*,
and this right before the king, my lord! [SAA 16.65]

In ‘Scribes and Scholars: The *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*’ [ch. 12], Rochberg analyzes the figure of the ‘scribe of the *Enūma Anu Enlil*’, the canonical Series of celestial omens [cf. 2004, ch. 6]. She tries to define the role and relative competences of this figure through the analysis of sources from the first millennium BC, focusing on the Neo-Babylonian and later periods.

The first point to discuss concerns terminology and relates to the use of the terms ‘title’ and ‘profession’ as they serve in the context of ancient cultures. In general—and uncritically—‘title’ is used to indicate functions of variable duration that are attributed by superior authorities; ‘profession’, on the contrary, seems to refer to the basic processes of production and their representatives. This is not the place to discuss this matter in depth. To discuss the term ‘profession’ in Mesopotamian contexts, especially those related to the scribal sphere, we may consider the curriculum or apprenticeship of the professional, on the one hand, and the professional’s activity itself along with its sphere of competences, on the other [see Verderame 2008]. An analysis of the Neo-Assyrian sources, which offer a wide range of different types of documents, shows how the boundaries among professions are fictions. The long scholarly discussion on the *āšīpu* (exorcist) and the *asû* (doctor, physician, herbalist) is a clear example. Part of this confusion of professions might be explained by the breakup of the traditional direct transmission of knowledge within families due to the increased reliance on writing. In the Assyrian royal court, parvenus and isolated scholars appeared alongside such traditional scribal families as that of Nabû-zuqup-kēnu [Verderame 2008]. One observation is that the apprenticeship, competences, and activity of these ‘professions’ were anything but fixed. The reconstruction of the curriculum of the members of the Nabû-zuqup-kēnu family, made possible through the colophons of the tablets that they copied in the successive phases of their learning process, shows a wide range of competences going far beyond those specific to their discipline. The same is true of the curriculum of the 20 scholars introduced to the Assyrian king by Marduk-šapik-zēri [SAA 10.160]. The Neo-Assyrian sources document an intense activity of celestial observation in form of letters and reports sent to the king. The authors of these documents belong to different disciplines and professions.

Among them, the *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil* or the *ṭupšarru*, if we accept the latter as an abbreviation of the former, are few. In the light of the sources, ‘ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil’ appears to be a later title, more than an independent consolidated ‘profession’, as the *bārû*, for example [Parpola 1993; Pearce-Doty 2000; Verderame 2004, 7–9].

Rochberg has constantly paid attention to the transmission of Mesopotamian knowledge and the relation with later traditions, particularly in the Hellenistic world. She has devoted a single article to other Near Eastern traditions, i.e., the Mandaean. These traditions, however, constitute a field of research yet unsounded which will yield interesting results in the future.⁶ The Aramaic world has been the direct heir of the Babylonian knowledge and the vector through which this has been transmitted, on the one hand, to the Western world, on the other hand, within the Ancient Near East. Traces are scattered among earlier documents [Greenfield-Sokoloff 1989], but they can be detected in later traditions, for example, in the Syriac literature. It is hard not to relate the Syriac treatises of the Vatican library discussed by G. Furlani [1948] to the lunar eclipse section of *Enūma Anu Enlil* [Rochberg-Halton 1988], of which the former resumes the structure and the same content.

When the collected works of a scholar are published as a book, the first question that arises is why? Often the most representative articles are collected as a tribute to their career. The case of Francesca Rochberg is rather different. The collected essays in this volume, successive steps in an ordered path, constitute an invaluable contribution to a better understanding of Babylonian divination.

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⁶ G. Furlani dedicated part of his researches to divination in Babylonia and later Semitic traditions; a complete list of his works is collected in S. Furlani 1957.

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