
Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World edited
by Amar Annus

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This collection of essays has its origin in the Fifth Annual University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminar, ‘Science and Superstition: Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World’ (6–7 Mar 2009). The deliberately provocative colloquium title has been toned down for publication to reflect the focus of the volume, which is primarily on the interpretation of divinatory signs (omens, extispicy, and prophecy) and not on semiotics more broadly defined. As such, the volume is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of literature devoted to divination in the ancient Near East; and some of the contributors here will be familiar names to researchers in this field.¹ However, scholars new to the field will be advised to read [Manetti 1993](#), 1–13 for a brief but thorough introduction to divination in ancient Mesopotamia.

Although the collection is adorned with an image of the Etruscan bronze model of a sheep’s liver from Piacenza, the locus of the collection is securely in the ancient Near East. Only two papers in the book deal directly with Greek and Roman signs (Allen and Jacobs). None attempt to survey signs in Etruscan society and culture. One wonders why the editor did not choose a Mesopotamian illustration, such as the Old Babylonian clay liver in the British Museum, London,² to avoid charges of misapplied symbolism.

¹ The following are useful starting points: [Bottéro 1974](#) and [1992](#), [Manetti 1993](#), [Koch-Westenholz 1995](#), [Guinan 1996](#), [Freedman 1998](#), [Veldhuis 1999](#), [Koch-Westenholz 2000](#), [Nissinen 2000](#), [Rochberg 2006](#), and [Veldhuis 2006](#).

² Western Asia Collection #ME92688.

The collection has three sections:

- (1) Theories of Divination and Signs,³
- (2) Hermeneutics of Sign Interpretation,⁴ and
- (3) History of Sign Interpretation⁵

bookended by an introduction⁶ and a response.⁷ The overall and internal principles of organization seem relatively arbitrary. It might have made more sense to have grouped the articles synchronically or diachronically by subject matter.

One of the most significant themes running through the volume is that the ways in which the omen catalogues were composed cannot be divorced from the circumstances of their composition. This is a common issue for ancient historians concerned, for example, with the psychological pressures that might lead to an increase in the number

³ Francesca Rochberg, “If P, then Q”: Form and Reasoning in Babylonian Divination’ [19–27]; James Allen, ‘Greek Philosophy and Signs’ [29–42]; Ulla Susanne Koch, ‘Three Strikes and You’re Out! A View of Cognitive Theory and the First Millennium Extispicy Ritual’ [43–60]; Edward L. Shaughnessy, ‘Arousing Images: The Poetry of Divination and the Divination of Poetry’ [61–76]; Niek Veldhuis, ‘The Theory of Knowledge and the Practice of Celestial Divination’ [77–91].

⁴ Eckart Frahm, ‘Reading the Tablet, the Exta, and the Body: The Hermeneutics of Cuneiform Signs in Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries and Divinatory Texts’ [93–142]; Scott B. Noegel, “Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign”: Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East’ [143–162]; Nils P. Heeßel, ‘The Calculation of the Stipulated Term in Extispicy’ [163–176]; Abraham Winitzer, ‘The Divine Presence and Its Interpretation in Early Mesopotamian Divination’ [177–198]; Barbara Böck, ‘Physiognomy in Ancient Mesopotamia and Beyond: From Practice to Handbook’ [199–224].

⁵ Seth F. C. Richardson, ‘On Seeing and Believing: Liver Divination and the Era of Warring States (II)’ [225–266]; Cynthia Jean, ‘Divination and Oracles at the Neo-Assyrian Palace: The Importance of Signs in Royal Ideology’ [267–276]; JoAnn Scurlock, ‘Prophecy as a Form of Divination: Divination as a Form of Prophecy’ [277–316]; John Jacobs, ‘Traces of the Omen Series *Šumma izbu* in Cicero, *De divinatione*’ [317–339].

⁶ Amar Annus, ‘On the Beginnings and Continuities of Omen Sciences in the Ancient World’ [1–18].

⁷ Martti Nissinen, ‘Prophecy and Omen Divination: Two Sides of the Same Coin’ [341–351].

of prodigy reports in periods of crisis or with the considerations at work in the use of divination to promote or hinder political ambitions.⁸

Several articles remark on the derivation of the omens' authority from the gods (ultimately from Ea himself) and report that their contents were only to be seen by a select few who saw themselves as guardians of knowledge. For example, Veldhuis suggests that the commentary of Summa Sin Ina on *Enuma Anu Enlil* (the text authored by Ea) provided an extra textual layer negotiating between the authoritative word of Ea and the actual practice of the diviner at the royal court.

Winitzer also considers the relationship between theory and practice. Despite the authority of the gods, there is relative silence in the texts regarding divinities. He suggests that, while there was an interest in the divine presence, the growth of writing and the need to interpret the words themselves led to less emphasis on the divine presence; in turn commentaries were required to explain revelation which itself was also relegated.

In a slightly different vein, Richardson argues against the 'autogenetic' nature of human enquiry and maintains that the second millennium texts do not presume a continuous scholarly tradition. He suggests that there was an extispical oral tradition in Old Sumerian temple-cities in the south. It was not until the 19th–18th centuries BC that the north appropriated this knowledge in deliberately crafting omen compendia and deploying liver models, all within the context of the Mesopotamian state struggles of this period. Finally, in the late Old Babylonian and Kassite period, extispicy became more widely available through school texts and in reports for individual clients. Tied into Richardson's analysis is the need for kings to utilize forms of power that they could trust. Diviners operated in the secular world, which made them ideal for circumventing the inherited power structures within the royal court whilst acting as trusted advisors at the highest levels of power. The context of the 19th- to 18th-century power struggles invites comparison to the last years of the Roman Republic, where one may view military dynasts such as Marius, Sulla, and eventually Augustus, turning to diviners who had no

⁸ See, for example, [Liebeschuetz 1979](#), 7–17.

allegiance to the traditional priesthods (*pontifices*, *augures*, *XVviri sacris faciundis*) to foster their political ambitions.⁹

The application of modern terminology to ancient systems of thought and belief is fraught with danger. This is especially the case with terms such as ‘science’, ‘superstition’, or ‘magic’. Nonetheless, Jean argues that the ways in which divination was supported psychologically, socially, and politically in the Neo-Assyrian world implies that it was indeed a ‘science’ in its broadest sense. She suggests too that there was a process of negotiation that involved the king and his advisors and concerned the validity of a particular sign, which indicates a desire to come to a well-assessed conclusion and is akin to the enquiries of modern-day scientists. Similarities in this regard may be drawn with the Roman Senate’s desire on occasion to request a second opinion regarding a prodigy, as in the case of the rise of water at the Alban Lake in 396 BC (*haruspex* and Delphi), or the cooperation of *pontifices*, *XVviri*, and *haruspices* in 207 BC.¹⁰ Of course, for a Greek or Roman audience the application of the terms ‘ars’ (‘skill’) and ‘scientia’ (‘knowledge’) to divination posed no such difficulties. It was just another method by which the mysteries of the universe could be unveiled.¹¹

The notion of divination as a ‘science’ is also broached by Rochberg. She argues that the ‘tight, logical structure’ of the omen lists with their protases and apodoses (if *x*, then *y*) is no less scientific than modern definitions of the term because they provide essential clues to the worldview of the Babylonian and Assyrian scribes, and

⁹ On Marius and Martha, the Syrian prophetess, see Plutarch, *Mar.* 42. On Marius’ use of a *haruspex*, see Sallust, *Iug.* 63–64. On Sulla’s use of Chaldaeans, see Plutarch, *Sulla* 37 [cf. 5]; Velleius Paterculus, *Res gestae* 2.24.3. On Sulla and the *haruspex* Postumius, see Cicero, *De div.* 1.72 [cf. Appianus, *Bell. civ.* 1.50]; Plutarch *Sulla* 9; Cicero, *De div.* 2.65, Augustine, *De civ. dei* 2.24; Valerius Maximus, *Mem.* 1.6.4. For an overview of Augustus and divination, see [Nice 2000](#), 88–97.

¹⁰ On the Alban Lake, see Livy, *Ab urbe* 5.15.1–16.1, 16.8–17.4, 18.11–19.2, 23.1; and [Engels 2007](#), 365 §52 with relevant bibliography. For 207 BC, see Livy, *Ab urbe* 27.37. Again there is copious literature on the subject: [Engels 2007](#), 470 §127. For a well-balanced discussion, refer to [Champeaux 1996](#).

¹¹ See, e.g., [Pease 1920–1923](#), [Krostenko 2000](#), and [Wardle 2006](#) on Cicero’s *De div.* for the importance of divination as a subject for serious philosophical enquiry.

to what their concept of knowledge, reasoning, and even ‘truth’ was. Further on, Frahm argues how the inherent polysemy and polyphony would imbue the omen texts with additional layers of meaning. Other contributions suggest more thoroughly that omen compendia should be read as texts in their own right.

Classical scholars familiar with the pronouncements of the *haruspices* (who ‘sing’ their pronouncements)¹² or the *vates* of the Augustan age, will not be surprised to discover on reading Shaughnessy’s chapter that there are similarities in ancient China between divination (the *I Ching* or *Zhou yi*) and poetry (the *Shi Jing*). Nor will it be a total surprise to learn that the divinatory texts use association, analogy, and wordplay; and that, although thorough analyses of these terms exist for the Sibylline oracles,¹³ much more can still be unveiled in this respect *vis à vis* the worlds of Etruria and Rome.

The act of writing and standardization may have assisted in the preservation of ancient forms of knowledge but those same texts were then subject to scholarly interpretation and rationalization, as Böck points out [209]. Her thorough analysis of the physiognomic texts—the one form of divination in which signs are seen from the client’s point of view rather than the interpreter’s—may well offer further clues to its practice in the Greek and Roman worlds.¹⁴

Students of Greek and Roman divination should be interested in the significance attached to extispicy in ancient Mesopotamia. Koch tests the ground between divination and magic to consider whether extispicy might be countered by apotropaic rituals. Since, she argues, extispicy covered both information gathering and aversive rituals, there was no need for further apotropaic measures. As at Rome, sacrifice could be repeated and there was an emphasis on correct observance rather than on the person of the diviner.

Heeßel demonstrates that extispicy also had a stipulated time frame of efficacy (one year). Like Koch he notes that extispicy functions in both directions and so proffers ‘real communication’ with

¹² See Torelli 1975 and Hano 1986.

¹³ See Parke and Wormell 1956, and Fontenrose 1978.

¹⁴ Barton 1995 argues that physiognomy and rhetoric had much in common. Both emphasize the presentation of character (ethos) through antiquity’s cultural categories and oppositions (man, not woman; citizen, not foreigner; man, not animal).

the gods. Scholars will be confused to learn that this makes it ‘unlike other forms of divination’ [163]. In fact, this makes it very *like* other forms of divination such as augury, sortition, oracular divination, even the Etruscan fulgural discipline. These all offer a two-way process in which the human world asks the gods a question and they respond with a sign written *via* the birds, the oracular lot, the Sibyl’s prophecy, or a specific answer to the question ‘what if it thunders on such-and-such a day?’¹⁵ The answer is not always ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but it is certainly two-way communication.

Scholars conversant with Cicero might be surprised to read in the introduction that ‘prophecy and divination are historically related to each other more closely than is generally assumed’ [12]. Classical philosophy had regarded prophecy as ‘natural’ divination whereas practices such as extispicy properly belonged to the sphere of ‘artificial’ divination, that is, divination by skill or art. Prophecy features in Noegel’s comparative approach to the divinatory systems of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel. He argues that the relevant texts, their language and images, allow for a fuller understanding of the performative power of divination and its effects on the promotion of certain ideological and cosmological concepts. Of the three societies, he notes the greater emphasis on orality in the Israelite tradition as the prophets themselves become signs.

The point is then taken up more wholeheartedly in the article by Scurlock and in Nissinen’s response. The former argues that the Uruk and Dynastic Prophecies are prophetic texts in the same way as Nahum and Isaiah 36–37, but lack the universal appeal of the biblical narratives. The latter agrees that prophecy and omen divination belong to the same symbolic universe but argues that a distinction should be made between prophecy and omen divination. The starting point for this assertion is that ‘most prophets probably had nothing to do with livers of sacrificial animals or with the observation of the movements of the stars’ [343]. In other words, they were not concerned with artificial divination, only with natural divination. Nonetheless in other societies, for example, Greece and Rome, diviners often operated across categories. The blind prophet Teiresias was famed not only for

¹⁵ On augury, see [Linderski 1986](#). On sortition, see [Champeaux 1986](#) and [1990](#). On oracles, see [Parke and Wormell 1956](#), [Fontenrose 1978](#), [Parke 1988](#), and [Stoneman 2011](#). On fulgural lore, see [Thulin 1905–1909](#), 1.1–128.

offering spontaneous prophecies but also for his ability to interpret the will of the gods through augury and extispicy. Alexander the Great's seer, Aristander of Telmessus, had competencies in extispicy, prodigies, auspicy, and the interpretation of dreams.¹⁶ At Rome we can point to the *gens Marcia*, whose members are not only conspicuous as priests but are also implicated in a prophetic tradition which allowed their predictions to be written down and collated with the Sibylline oracles.¹⁷

This is an appropriate point to turn to the two articles which deal directly with the Greek and Roman worlds. Allen challenges our assumptions regarding signs which are not easily compatible with the ways in which Greek philosophers viewed them. The opening section considers the term 'sign' as often utilized in modern-day English as well as Aristotle's understanding of those inferences that allow us to know the *that* and those which help us understand the *why*. A feature of the ancient view was that experience was insufficient to understand the underlying nature of things. Real art (τέχνη) and real knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) were required for a true understanding.

After a brief summary of Sextus Empiricus (whose followers regarded experience as sufficient, drawing a distinction between 'commemorative' and 'indicative' signs), Allen contrasts the Stoic and Epicurean views. The Stoic viewpoint is examined *via* Cicero's interpretation of natural and artificial divination. Observation and experience offer clues to understanding the will of the gods and, as such, there is no distinction between the natural and non-natural.

These clues can be comprehended along 'purely empirical lines'. For signs are not only produced by the divine will but are intended to be recognized by the human interpreter (normally the diviner). The Epicurean position, as outlined in Philodemus' *De signis*, might be seen to overcome the limitations on experience in the debate between rationalism and empiricism [39], since the Epicureans omit to offer a contrast between the two. Their approach is characterized by a limited

¹⁶ On the multifaceted abilities of Greek seers, see [Dillery 2005](#) and [Flower 2008](#), esp. ch. 2, pp. 22–71. On Aristander, see [Nice 2005](#).

¹⁷ On C. Marcius Rutilus, the first plebeian pontiff and augur, see Livy, *Ab urbe* 10.9.2. On M. Marcius, *rex sacrorum*, see Livy, *Ab urbe* 27.6.16. On the prophetic Marcius or Marcii, see Cicero, *De div.* 1.115, 2.113; Livy, *Ab urbe* 25.32.3–4. See [Rüpke 2008](#), 787–790 for a full prosopography.

grasp of the natures and causes at work in which observations reveal that things have to be as they are observed to be. Non-philosophers may find this paper somewhat heavy going unless they are familiar with the prevailing views on the interpretation of signs among the different philosophical schools.

Jacobs seeks to find traces of the omen series *Šumma izbu* in Cicero's *De divinatione* and to explain the transmission of those traces. He notes that despite Cicero's general understanding of divination in the Near East, no Classical scholar has attempted to trace these influences.

A brief study of abnormal human births in the *De divinatione* is slightly flawed by Jacobs' analysis of the phrase 'visa est' because he equates 'videri' with 'somniare' [323]. Cicero's 'somniavit se peperisse satyricum' is an accusative and infinitive construction not a 'reflexive construction'¹⁸ and the phrase 'visa est' does not have to indicate specifically a dream. The phrase is standard in the prodigy lists of Livy and Julius Obsequens, and indicates any phenomenon which *was observed* and *seemed* to be a warning from the gods.¹⁹

The main argument centers around Cicero, *De div.* 1.121: 'if a woman gave birth to a lion, the country in which this happened would be overcome by a foreign nation.' The similarity of this dream to others about Pericles in Herodotus and in Plutarch reflect concerns in a series of lion omens to be found in *Šumma izbu*, but particularly 1.5.

As Jacobs notes there is no clear evidence of transmission from Near East to Rome. Nonetheless circumstantial evidence allows a more generous conclusion. The coast of Asia Minor and its Greek colonies offer an immediate starting point. It was Burkert who first argued that the Sibyl of Delphi had much in common with the 'raving women' of Babylon and Assyria, and the interconnected stories of Calchas, Amphiaraus, and Mopsus offer another East to West association.²⁰ A comparison of Theophrastus, Pliny, and Artemidorus on the writings of Aristander of Telmessus, Alexander the Great's legendary seer, hint at a literary transmission from Near East to Hellenistic

¹⁸ See Glare 1983, 1790 *s.v. somnio* 1b.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Luterbacher 1904, 44; Engels 2007.

²⁰ See Stoneman 2011, 77–80.

Greece and thence to Rome.²¹ A close analysis of the surviving fragments of Etruscan brontoscopic calendars, such as that attributed to Nigidius Figulus,²² with the protasis/apodosis form characteristic of the Mesopotamian omen lists might yield a step from Near East to Rome. More persuasive, however, is the Roman tradition for the transmission of augury from Persia to Italy *via* Cybele's favorite *silenus*, the Phrygian Marsyas and his envoy Megales.²³ And in his *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, Varro suggested that *hydromantia* and *necromantia* were brought to Rome by the Persians, and that *hydromantia*, taught to Numa by Egeria, was how Numa learnt the secrets contained in the pontifical books.²⁴ Furthermore, Livy's Numa receives his religion from the Sabines and they, if the myths are correct, learnt augury from Megales and acquired their 'plain living and austerity' from their admixture of Spartan blood. Would it be too farfetched to suggest that the false association of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras with Numa may conceal the intervening step in this process of divinatory transmission?²⁵

As with any collection derived from a conference, papers vary considerably in length and strength. The articles range in scope from 9 to 50 pages. Some readers may be frustrated by those articles which lack a clear or strong conclusion (Allen, Noegel, Böck, Jean, Jacobs). Nonetheless, the point of research is not only to find answers to pressing questions but also to suggest possibilities for future enquiry. In this 'age of information', it is barely possible for individual scholars to assume that they can have read all the relevant literature or have all the answers.

²¹ See Nice 2005, esp. 90–95 with nn19, 23.

²² See Swoboda 1964 93–106.

²³ See Silius Italicus, *Pun.* 8.502–504 for the arrival of Marsyas in Italy; Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 3.12 (Cn. Gellius) for Megales imparting augury to the Sabines. On Marsyas, his role in augury, and his significance at Rome, see Small 1982; Torelli 1982, 99–106; Coarelli 1992, 91–123; Schertz 2005.

²⁴ Cardauns 1976, 36 = Varro, *Ant.* 1 app. iv.

²⁵ See Livy, *Ab urbe* 1.18.4 (on Numa and the Sabines), 2.49 (on Dionysius). On Numa and Pythagoras, see Livy, *Ab urbe* 1.18.2; Cicero *Resp.* 2.28 ff. Penwill 2004, 39 suggests that when the Pythagorean books of Numa were discovered in 181 BC [cf. Livy, *Ab urbe* 40.29], the problem with them was that they problematically revealed Numa's Roman religion not to be Roman at all but Greek.

It should be clear that there is much to be learnt from a fuller understanding of the Mesopotamian omen literature and its relationship to the worlds of Greece and Rome: for example, in matters concerning the circumstances of composition and the complexities of the literary narratives, as well as the psychological, social, and political significance of divination (including prophecy). Then too, those articles that approach divination diachronically—Richardson on the historical development of Mesopotamian liver divination; Shaughnessy on China; Noegel on Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel; Scurlock on Babylonia and Israel—stress the importance not only of the comparisons but also of the contrasts in understanding the function and importance of divination in different cultures and in different eras. Above all, this is a volume which argues for the significance of divination as a semiotic system which should not be relegated to the realms of ‘superstition’ or ‘magic’ but which, as Peek [1991, 2] has suggested, can be viewed as the ‘primary institutional means of articulating the epistemology of a people’.

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