

# **DIVINATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SIGNS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD**



# DIVINATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SIGNS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

*edited by*

AMAR ANNUS

*with contributions by*

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THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
ORIENTAL INSTITUTE SEMINARS • NUMBER 6  
CHICAGO • ILLINOIS

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009943156

ISBN-13: 978-1-885923-68-4

ISBN-10: 1-885923-68-6

ISSN: 1559-2944

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Published 2010. Printed in the United States of America.

*The Oriental Institute, Chicago*

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ORIENTAL INSTITUTE SEMINARS • NUMBER 6

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*Cover Illustration:* Bronze model of a sheep's liver indicating the seats of the deities. From Decima di Gossolengo, Piacenza. Etruscan, late 2nd–early 1st c. B.C. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY

*Printed by Edwards Brothers, Ann Arbor, Michigan*

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Services — Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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## PREFACE

This book makes available the revised versions of the papers read at the fifth annual University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminar *Science and Superstition: Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, which took place at March 6–7, 2009. The printed volume has a slightly different title, and it includes two papers from scholars, who were invited to the seminar, but could not come — from Barbara Böck and Niek Veldhuis, while one participant, Clifford Ando, has decided to publish his paper elsewhere. I remain thankful to all the contributors for a very smooth and efficient collaboration that gave birth to this sizable volume.

I am grateful to Gil Stein, who initiated this remarkable post-doctoral symposium program, and to the Oriental Institute for giving me the opportunity to organize this event, so making one of my dreams a reality. I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Mariana Perlinac, Kaye Oberhausen, and Christopher Woods for all that they have done to help me organize this event. I also thank Thomas Urban and Leslie Schramer for their help with the printing and editing of this book. I am also thankful to Cathy Duenas for her help in everyday matters.

Finally, I should mention my family — my wife Merili, and children Kaspar and Kreeta, who patiently shared half of my time here in Chicago. I am happy that they were willing to come with me to a far-away city, where Kaspar could satisfy his ever-increasing curiosity, and where Kreeta literally made her first steps in life.

Amar Annus



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

## 6

# THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE PRACTICE OF CELESTIAL DIVINATION

NIEK VELDHUIS, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

The letters and reports by Assyrian and Babylonian scholars to the Neo-Assyrian king provide a unique window to the relationship between a body of scholarly texts and the practice of actual scholarship. The theory of knowledge as adhered to by the experts of the king was founded upon a body of immutable texts ultimately derived from the god Ea himself. The scholars of the time dealt with the practical problem of using this ancient corpus for addressing current issues at the royal court by creating additional layers of textual interpretation. As it turns out, the practice of ancient scholarship did not coincide with its theory.<sup>1</sup>

### THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

The travails of Gilgameš, who in his search for life traveled to the edges of the earth and beyond, made him a better king, a man who had experienced everything and had achieved wisdom. The first-millennium version of the Gilgameš story emphasizes this wisdom aspect in its introduction (lines 1–8):<sup>2</sup>

He who saw the deep, the foundation of the country  
who knew the proper ways, was wise in all matters;  
Gilgameš, who saw the deep, the foundation of the country,  
who knew the proper ways, was wise in all matters,  
he explored everywhere the seats of power.  
He knew the totality of wisdom about all things,  
He saw the secret and uncovered the hidden,  
He brought back a message from before the flood.

The reference to the flood connects this introduction to the Utanapištim passage in tablets 10–11, where Gilgameš learns from the survivor of the flood how the latter was saved and received eternal life and why his, Gilgameš', quest is in vain. More importantly, however, the antediluvian report (*ṭēmu*) that Gilgameš brings back refers to a well-known motif in first-millennium scholarly literature. All the important knowledge was revealed by the gods before the time of the flood and the scholars and kings of the present day owe their knowledge, directly, to primordial sages (Lenzi 2008b). This knowledge, in first-millennium scribal circles, is called *nēmequ* "wisdom" (Parpola 1993b; Beaulieu 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Alan Lenzi and Chessie Rochberg for their criticism and comments — and for being wonderful colleagues.

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<sup>2</sup> After George 2003: vol. 1, 538–39; and George 2007; see van der Toorn 2007: 23, with further literature.

As van der Toorn (2007) has pointed out, this same first-millennium introduction specifically makes Gilgameš into a *literate* hero, one who wrote down his adventures and thus allowed later generations to profit from the lessons that he learned (lines 24–28):

[Find] the tablet-box of cedar,  
 [release] its bronze clasps!  
 [Open] the lid of its secret,  
 [pick] up the lapis lazuli tablet and read aloud  
 all the travails of Gilgameš, all that he went through!

Through this introduction, Gilgameš' adventures are related to the self-consciousness of first-millennium scholars who referred to themselves as the guardians of the Wisdom of Adapa, the paradigmatic *apkallu*, or primordial sage.

The knowledge or wisdom (*nēmequ*) that is defined this way consists of the handbooks of the scholars at the Assyrian court: astrologers (*šupšarrūtu*), diviners (*barūtu*), exorcists (*ašipūtu*), lamentation priests (*kalūtu*), and physicians (*asūtu*).

The perception of the technical corpora of these five groups of experts may be further illustrated by various other pieces of evidence. Several of these corpora are attributed to the god Ea in the so-called Catalog of Texts and Authors (Lambert 1962; see Rochberg 1999), of Neo-Assyrian date:

[The exorcists'] corpus; the lamentation priests' corpus; When Anu and Enlil;  
 Figure; Not Completing the Months; Diseased Sinews;  
 [Utter]ance; O king, the splendour of whose storm is majestic; Fashioned like An

---

These are from the mouth of Ea

The list of compositions attributed to Ea includes the corpus of incantations and rituals to be used by the exorcist (plausibly restored by Lambert in the break), the corpus of laments meant to appease the anger of the gods, a variety of divination texts, and two myths around the god Ninurta. The divination compendia listed are *Enūma Anu Enlil* (When Anu and Enlil), the main compilation of astronomical omens; *Alamdimmū* (Figure), the body of physiognomic omens; *Sag itī nutila* (Not Completing the Months), the collection of omens from monstrous births otherwise known as *Šumma izbu*;<sup>3</sup> *Sagig* (Diseased Sinews), the compendium of diagnostic omens; and *Kataduga* (Utterance), a collection of omens derived from speech habits, usually perceived as a chapter of the physiognomic series *Alamdimmū*.

The two Ninurta narratives listed in this same section (conventionally known as Lugal-e and An-gin<sub>7</sub>, respectively) depict Ninurta as a heroic warrior who goes to battle and defeats monstrous opponents. Sumerian versions of these narratives are known as Old Babylonian literary compositions. In the late second millennium the texts were provided with interlinear Akkadian translations and that is how the compositions circulated in the first millennium. These narratives are among a small group of Old Babylonian Sumerian composition that had survived the ages and they are the only two that were still regularly copied in both Babylonia and Assyria.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The identification of Not Completing the Months with *Šumma izbu* was already suggested by Lambert (1962: 70) and was confirmed by Biggs (1968). For the text published by Biggs, see now Böck 2000.

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<sup>4</sup> For these compositions and their history, see Streck 2001 and Annus 2002.

The Catalog of Texts and Authors continues with two otherwise unknown compositions (both in Sumerian) authored by Adapa, the prototypical sage or *apkallu* (lines 5–7):<sup>5</sup>

“[In triumph], Enlil”; “It is me, supreme divine power.”  
 [These are the ones which] Oannes-Adapa  
 [...] spoke.

The rest of the Catalog of Texts and Authors, as far as preserved, mentions a variety of literary texts, some known, some otherwise unknown, and links these to human authors, some well attested as legendary figures of the ancient past (such as king Enmerkar), others apparently more recent in date.

Van der Toorn (2007) has argued that the classification of the compositions in this catalog “is by presumed antiquity, which is also an order of authority.” The handbooks of the scholars, authored by the god Ea, come first. Literary compositions such as Gilgameš, Etana, proverb collections (the series of Sidu),<sup>6</sup> and others are supplied with human authors and are placed in the very last section of the text.

The Catalog of Texts and Authors thus throws some indirect light on the self-perception of the scholars of the time. The diviners, astrologers, exorcists, physicians, and lamentation priests saw themselves as the guardians and administrators of the most ancient and most prestigious knowledge, based, ultimately, on the authority of Ea himself. This picture is confirmed by several other pieces of evidence (collected in Rochberg 1999), including the legend of Enmeduranki, which relates how the knowledge of libanomancy (observation of oil on water) and extispicy (reading of the entrails, in particular the liver, of a sacrificial animal) was revealed to Enmeduranki, the sixth antediluvian king who reigned at the city of Sippar for 54,600 years (Lambert 1998).<sup>7</sup>

Lenzi (2008a) has collected a broad spectrum of evidence to argue that all five scholarly disciplines at the Assyrian court claimed an authoritative body of secret texts, given by the god Ea to the *apkallu*s, or sages. This “mythmaking strategy” (in Lenzi’s terminology) served to distinguish these scholars from mere scribes and provided them with the authority and competence to serve as an intermediary between the king and the gods. The secrecy of these texts was occasionally emphasized in the colophon: “Secret of the great gods. An expert may show it to another expert. A non-expert may not see it.” Against most earlier interpretations, Lenzi argues that such secrecy colophons should be taken seriously, that indeed the entire scholarly corpora of astrologers, diviners, physicians, exorcists, and lamentation priests

<sup>5</sup> The beginning of line 5 is to be restored [u<sub>3</sub>-ĝa<sub>2</sub>-e<sup>d</sup>en-l]il<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub> :: ĝa<sub>2</sub>-e-me-en nam-<sup>d</sup>en-lil<sub>2</sub>-l[a<sub>2</sub>]. These two titles are listed adjacently in the late Assyrian catalog published by Lambert 1976: 315 lines 8–9. Provisionally, I have taken u<sub>3</sub>-ĝa<sub>2</sub> as a variant writing of u<sub>3</sub>-ma = *irnitum*. The alternative reading u<sub>3</sub> ĝa<sub>2</sub>-e (“and I myself”) results in a rather unlikely opening of a composition. Lambert’s original reading of line 5 of the Catalog of Texts and Authors ([ud-sar an <sup>d</sup>en-l]il<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub>) was based upon the parallel in Nabonidus Verse Account. Machinist and Tadmor (1993) have argued that the title mentioned in the Verse Account

is not a real composition, but a polemic and intentional distortion of *Enūma Anu Enlil* (see also Lenzi 2008a: 101 n. 184).

<sup>6</sup> Finkel 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Enmeduranki is found in the list of antediluvian kings in the Babylonian Royal Chronicle, known from Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian sources (Glassner 2004: 126–34 with further literature). In the Old Babylonian Sumerian King List he is known as Enmeduranna (see Glassner 2004: 120), but at least one text has the variant Enmeduranki (Finkelstein 1963: 42).

were considered to be secret — even though the great majority of such tablets had no explicit secrecy colophon.<sup>8</sup>

Lenzi's argument defines the *ummânū* or scholars of the Assyrian court as the bearers and transmitters of textualized secret knowledge given by Ea, god of wisdom, to the primordial sages (*apkallū*) with whom the scholars identified. Exact transmission of this secret knowledge was, therefore, an important concern. As Lenzi demonstrates, some of the secrecy colophons and secrecy labels are attached to Kassite tablets<sup>9</sup> and thus the idea of secret knowledge is older than the Neo-Assyrian period. The Kassite evidence, however, is too isolated to understand how this secret knowledge functioned or was used. By contrast, the correspondence of the Neo-Assyrian kings and the tablet collections from this period provide a wealth of evidence that allows us a view of various aspects of the use and perception of this prestigious, secret body of knowledge.

### SCHOLARLY PRACTICE: QUOTATION AND INTERPRETATION

The scholarly tradition that was thus imagined to derive from Ea and the primordial sages was actively used by specialists who were in service of the crown. Several hundreds of letters and reports sent by those specialists to the kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal reveal much that is of relevance for understanding the complexity of the written scholarly corpus and the way this corpus was used in the Neo-Assyrian period.<sup>10</sup> The letters and reports reflect on all five scholarly disciplines and they provide evidence how this secret knowledge was used in practice.

The letters and reports contain many quotations of omens, in particular (but not exclusively) celestial omens. They provide a glimpse at the relationship between a corpus of traditional texts and the process of actual decision-making at the court, between the theory of divine (secret) wisdom and the practice of royal counsel. In the present section I focus on the corpus of celestial omens and its uses, because that is where our evidence leads us.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that in other areas of scholarly specialization theory and practice developed other kinds of relationships — the important aspect to note is that any such relationship is complex and cannot be read or guessed from the theoretical (traditional) scholarly texts alone.

The scholars clearly quote omens as literarily as possible — “as it was written on the tablet,” as Mar-Issar puts it (SAA 10, 362) — rather than giving a summary or paraphrase. The omen quotations are always in Standard Babylonian, the language used for all traditional texts, and commonly use the technical (heavily logographic) writing style of the divination compendia. Other parts of the letters and reports are in the local (Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian) dialect; the contrast is particularly clear in the letters and reports written in Assyrian. The

<sup>8</sup> On secrecy, see also Rochberg 2004: 210–19.

<sup>9</sup> The medical tablet BAM 385 (see Lenzi 2008a: 180) and the expository text PBS 10/4, 12 (see Lenzi 2008a: 188).

<sup>10</sup> The letters by Assyrian scholars were first edited by Parpola (1970 and 1983). These texts were re-edited in Parpola 1993a, with the addition of letters from Babylonian scholars. The reports were edited by Hunger (1992). These letters and reports have been

studied in much detail and from various points of view. See, for instance, Brown 2000; Rochberg 2004 (in particular chapter 6); and Robson, forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> Robson (2008) developed a similar argument on the relationship between the medical corpus and the practice of physicians, as attested in their letters. See also Jean 2006 on the exorcists' corpus and the practice of exorcism; and Robson, forthcoming.

quotations are thus set apart as being different from the voice of the scholar himself, coming from a more authoritative source.<sup>12</sup>

The celestial omens quoted in the letters and reports frequently do not come directly from the main series of *Enūma Anu Enlil*, but from one of the derived compositions, primarily from the commentary series *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartīšu*. The material that was at the disposal of the scholars of the king may be divided into the following main categories:<sup>13</sup>

1. the series *Enūma Anu Enlil*
2. the extraneous (*ahû*) tablets of *Enūma Anu Enlil* (containing additional omens, but not considered to be part of the main series)
3. the excerpt series *rikis girri Enūma Anu Enlil* (following the order in the main series)
4. excerpts which contain just a few omens from one or more tablets of the main series, concentrating on a single topic
5. factual commentaries (*mukallimtu*), usually quoting full omens, plus explanation
6. linguistic commentaries (*šātu*), often in the form of word lists
7. the explanatory series *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartīšu*, which has the form of a *mukallimtu* commentary<sup>14</sup>

The boundaries between the various types of commentaries seem to be fluid and the relationships between the text categories are often unclear. One may note that even the main series contains rather heterogeneous material, such as the daylight tables in Tablet 14<sup>15</sup> and the tablet that associates certain stars with certain terrestrial events, not in the usual format of an omen, but rather as an abstract statement (“The Raven star is for a steady market”).<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding the high prestige enjoyed by *Enūma Anu Enlil*, and the scribal myth making that traced the composition all the way back to Ea, it was never truly standardized. Fincke (2001) has shown that there existed multiple versions of *Enūma Anu Enlil* in Assyria: one from Assur and two from Nineveh (one in Assyrian, the other in Babylonian ductus).<sup>17</sup> All versions follow the same general order of topics, but differ in the arrangement of tablets. As a result there is widespread confusion in the assignment of tablet numbers within the series, which further frustrates attempts to clearly understand how the various text types dealing with celestial omens are related to each other. There is a contradiction here between the internal literary history of the omen compendia, that asserts a direct connection with the god Ea, making the text “fundamentally unalterable” (Rochberg 1999), and the external literary history that shows divergent lines of development, even within the same library at Nineveh. The scribal myth depicts a very orderly world in which the omens that deliver messages from the gods are collected in compendia authorized by those same gods — copied and guarded through the ages by the scribes. In reality, the corpus of celestial omens is chaotic and difficult to navigate.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent discussion of this phenomenon, see Worthington 2006.

<sup>13</sup> For these categories and for further information about their format and contents, see Weidner 1942: 182; Koch-Westenholz 1995: chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> For this series, see Koch-Westenholz 1999; and Gehlken 2007.

<sup>15</sup> See Al-Rawi and George 1991–1992; and Hunger 1998.

<sup>16</sup> For this tablet and other unusual formats, see Reiner and Pingree 1981: 24–26. The example comes from Reiner and Pingree 1981: 40–41 line 3. Note that the format is already attested in an Old Babylonian text (Rochberg 2004: 68–69).

<sup>17</sup> Note, however, that Fincke’s reconstruction was criticized as being too schematic by Gehlken (2005: 252 n. 81) in his detailed discussion of the tablet numbers of the Adad section in *Enūma Anu Enlil*.

In the letters and reports scholars rarely specify where their citations come from. If they do, however, they distinguish between *iškaru* “the series,” *ahû* “extraneous omens,” and (factual) commentaries, usually referred to as *ša pî ummâni* (from the mouth of a master),<sup>18</sup> but once as *mukallimtu* commentary (SAA 10, 23).<sup>19</sup> Mar-Issar, in a letter to the king, reports that Jupiter appeared five days late; it had been invisible for thirty-five days, while the normative period of disappearance (as he explains) was twenty to thirty days (SAA 10, 362). He quotes various applicable Jupiter omens, some of which have been identified in the omen literature.<sup>20</sup> He continues (in the translation by Parpola 1993a: 299):

Furthermore, when it had moved onwards 5 days, (the same amount) by which it had exceeded its term, it completed 40 days. The relevant interpretation runs as follows:

r. 3 “If Neberu drags: the gods will get angry, righteousness will be put to shame, bright things will become dull, clear things confused; rains and floods will cease, grass will be beaten down, (all) the countries will be thrown into confusion; the gods will not listen to pray[ers], nor will they ac[cept] supplications, nor will they an[swer] the queries of the haruspices.”

<sup>11</sup> [This interpretation I have ex]tracted and [sent] to the king, [my lo]rd, (exactly) as it was wr[itten] on the tablet (SAA 10, 362 obv. 19–rev. 12).

The assurance that he copied the omen “as it was written on the tablet” is unusual, because that was what scholars simply were supposed to do. He may have been inspired to add the remark by the gravity of the situation predicted, implying that the channels of communication with the divine world were to be closed.<sup>21</sup>

Ulla Koch-Westenholz has demonstrated that quite a few of the references to celestial omens do not come from the main series, but rather from *mukallimtu* commentaries (Koch-Westenholz 1995: 82–83), in particular from *Šumma Sîn ina tāmariššu* (Koch-Westenholz 1999). Many quotations appear more than once in the correspondence, often by different scholars, and very frequently such quotations go back to commentaries. The following report contains two such omens (SAA 8, 10):<sup>22</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If the moon becomes visible on the 1st day: reliable speech; the land will become happy.

<sup>3</sup> If the day reaches its normal length: a reign of long days.

<sup>5</sup> If the moon at its appearance wears a crown: the king will reach the highest rank.

<sup>7</sup> From Issar-šumu-ereš.

The first omen is attested in *Šumma Sîn ina tāmariššu* tablet 1 line 116 (Koch-Westenholz 1999: 161), and is quoted in three different reports by this same scholar, but also by others.<sup>23</sup> Other scholars tend to quote the variant omen “If the moon at its appearance is seen on

<sup>18</sup> That the expression refers to the commentaries rather than to a parallel oral tradition was argued with good evidence by Koch-Westenholz (1999: 151).

<sup>19</sup> For such references, see Koch-Westenholz 1995: 94–95.

<sup>20</sup> See Reiner and Pingree 2005: 10.

<sup>21</sup> See Reiner 2007; the omen in question has been identified by Koch-Westenholz (2004) on a fragment that includes another Jupiter omen quoted twice in the reports. Although the fragment is clearly part of

the astrological corpus, we do not know what type of composition it belongs to.

<sup>22</sup> Translation by Hunger 1992: 10.

<sup>23</sup> Balasî (SAA 8, 86), Nabû-mušeši (SAA 8, 148–49), Bulluṭu (SAA 8, 116–19), Nergaleṭir (SAA 8, 256–57), Nabû-iqiša (SAA 8, 290–91), Zakir (SAA 8, 303), Munnabitu (SAA 8, 318), Ašaredu the older (SAA 8, 329–30), Ašaredu the younger (SAA 8, 342), Rašil (SAA 8, 389 and 409), Nabû-iqbi (SAA 8, 420–23), Ṭabiya (SAA 8, 439), Ṭab-šilli-Marduk (SAA 8, 445–46) and Bel-našir (SAA 8, 463).

the first day: good for Akkad, bad for Elam,” which is the preceding line in *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartišu*.<sup>24</sup> These reports originate both in Assyria and in Babylonia and clearly belong to the standard omen repertoire to be quoted when new moon happens at the right time (that is, when the preceding month had thirty days).

The second omen quoted by Issar-šumu-ereš is at least as frequent among the reports. This omen comes from *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartišu* tablet 6 (see Gehlken 2007), a commentary to *Enūma Anu Enlil* tablet 36–37.<sup>25</sup> In the commentary the omen reads:

If the day reaches its normal length: a reign of long days; the thirtieth day completes the measure of the month.<sup>26</sup>

The final phrase is the explanatory part, which renders the omen relevant for observations of the new moon on the first day. One may well doubt the appropriateness of this explanation. Tablet 36 of *Enūma Anu Enlil* talks about daylight, influenced by fog and other phenomena — it does not seem to imply anything about the length of the *month*. The explanation, however, is clearly adopted by Issar-šumu-ereš in his report, and in fact several Assyrian and Babylonian scholars quote this omen with the explanation included.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the interpretations in the commentaries and in the quotations in the reports are quite a bit more sophisticated or convoluted than what we have seen so far. The omen quotation “If the moon rides a chariot in month Sililiti: the dominion of the king of Akkad will prosper, and his hand will capture his enemies” is in need of several pieces of explanation. The Elamite month name Sililitu is explained by its common name Šebāt (month 11) and the moon riding a chariot turns out to mean that it is surrounded by a halo while standing in Perseus (*Šību*):

$\begin{array}{l} \text{III} \text{si-li-li-ti} \text{ III} \text{ZIZ}_2 \\ \text{ša}_2 \text{ III} \text{ZIZ}_2 \text{ ina } \text{ŠA}_3\text{-bi} \text{ MUL} \text{ŠU.GI} \\ \text{TUR}_3 \text{ NIGIN-mi-ma} \end{array}$	<p>Sililiti = Šebāt That is: In Shebat, within Perseus it (the moon) was surrounded by a halo.</p>
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This piece of explanation probably comes from *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartišu* tablet 11<sup>28</sup> and is quoted in different reports by different scholars, located in different parts of the empire: Nabû-iqiša of Borsippa (SAA 8, 298), Akkulanu of Assur (SAA 8, 112), and Aplaya, again from Borsippa (SAA 8, 364).

An explanatory entry in SAA 8, 304 obv. 3–rev. 4, is derived from *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartišu* tablet 1 lines 68–71:

[If the moon’s] horns at its appearance are very dark:  
[disbanding of the fortified] outposts, [retiring of the guards];  
there will be reconciliation [and pea]ce in the land.

---

GI = to be dark  
GI = to be well

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<sup>24</sup> Nabû-ahhe-eriba in SAA 8, 57; Akkulanu in SAA 8, 105; Nabû-šuma-iškun in SAA 8, 372–73. An unknown Assyrian scholar uses both variants (SAA 8, 188).

<sup>25</sup> In the tablet numbering by Gehlken 2005: 258.

<sup>26</sup> See Virolleaud 1907–1912, Adad section XXXIII (K.50), line 26.

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<sup>27</sup> Balasî (SAA 8, 87), Akkulanu (SAA 8, 106), Nergal-eṭir (SAA 8, 251 and 257), Nabû-iqiša (SAA 8, 290–91), Nabû-šuma-iškun (SAA 8, 372), and an unknown scholar (SAA 8, 506). On this omen, see Koch-Westenholz 1995: 102.

<sup>28</sup> See Gehlken 2007; and Verderame 2002: 91 with n. 285.

GI = to be stable  
Its horns are stable.

The various interpretations of GI in the report come straight from the commentary text,<sup>29</sup> although formulated slightly differently:

GI *ka-a-nu lu ta-ra-ku* GI *ša-la-mu*

GI = to be stable or to be dark. GI = to be well.

The commentary basically explains why darkness of the moon's horns can be interpreted as "Its horns are stable" and why this relates to peace or well-being in the apodosis, thus establishing a link between protasis and apodosis.<sup>30</sup> The connection between the words "to be dark," "to be well," and "to be stable" is that all can be equated with a logogram that has a value GI. The equation  $GI = k\bar{a}nu =$  "to be stable" is indeed common throughout the cuneiform tradition. "To be dark" may be written  $GI_6$  and finally *šalāmu* "to be well," is related to *šul-lumu*, "to repay" or "to compensate," which equals Sumerian *šu ... gi<sub>4</sub>*. The commentary thus uses complex associations between signs and words in which homographs ( $GI$ ,  $GI_4$ , and  $GI_6$ ) may substitute for each other in order to demonstrate the connection between Akkadian words. Although such associations are ultimately grounded in the kind of knowledge that lexical texts provide, they do not immediately depend on such texts. They use the kind of reasoning that is best known from "The Fifty Names of Marduk" in the final section of the Babylonian Epic of Creation (Bottéro 1977).<sup>31</sup>

It seems that *Enūma Anu Enlil*, the text authored by Ea and transmitted via the primordial *apkallus* through a lengthy sequence of generations of scholars, was the ultimate authority in theory but that a second tier of compositions, more geared toward the actual practice of celestial divination, was primarily used for the day-to-day business of the scholars' craft.<sup>32</sup> This second tier, in particular the series *Šumma Šin ina tāmartišu* contained a selection of the more frequently quoted omens, explaining in more detail what the expressions in the protasis meant in terms of observation and adding some learned commentary. This second tier had authority enough to be quoted in letters to the king, yet it did not define the identity of the scholarly community in the same way that *Enūma Anu Enlil* did.<sup>33</sup>

*Šumma Šin ina tāmartišu* offered standardized solutions for some problems that were involved in the practical use of *Enūma Anu Enlil*. On the one hand, the complexity of *Enūma Anu Enlil* and the availability of a hermeneutical system that allowed for various interpretational strategies, implied that a single observation could be related to multiple omens in various chapters of the omen handbook (Koch-Westenholz 1995: 140–51; and Frahm 2004: 49).<sup>34</sup> On the

<sup>29</sup> The commentary in *Šumma Šin ina tāmartišu* is considerably longer because the omen, apparently, had variant applications and interpretations, corresponding to different pieces of explanation. The omen is indeed used for different kinds of observations in the reports (see Koch-Westenholz 1999: 158 with n. 67).

<sup>30</sup> See Al-Rawi and George 2006: 42.

<sup>31</sup> See now Seri 2006.

<sup>32</sup> A good number of quotes in the reports come from *Šumma Šin ina tāmartišu*, rather than from *Enūma Anu Enlil* or any of the other textual categories listed above. Since *Šumma Šin ina tāmartišu* has only partly

been edited (Koch-Westenholz 1999; Borger 1973) and is only partly preserved (see Gehlken 2007), the origin of many quotations remains unclear at this moment. Quotations of thunder omens in the reports seem to come directly from the main series (see Gehlken 2008).

<sup>33</sup> See the discussion in Lenzi 2008a: 212–13.

<sup>34</sup> In his discussion Frahm emphasized the advantage of this "divinatory anarchy" to the king: it enabled him to choose the more convenient option from alternative interpretations.

other hand, *Enūma Anu Enlil* may not always have had available omens for what was normal and expected — such as the appearance of the new moon at the regular time. In other words, *Enūma Anu Enlil* offered both too much and too little. *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartīšu* provided a first selection of relevant omens (not all omens actually receive commentary) and supplied an initial interpretation. The fact that the same entries were used by scholars all over the place may imply that the commentary was part of the education of astronomers, as a tool for putting *Enūma Anu Enlil* to practice. *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartīšu* is a relatively rare text, which is consonant with its more practical function. Libraries primarily collect the most authoritative and ancient knowledge.

*Šumma Šîn ina tāmartīšu* was well suited for the purposes of the scholars corresponding with the Assyrian king, whose task was not only to find and quote the appropriate omens, but also to interpret them. Divination compendia that were less frequently used may not have had such an authoritative interpretational body of knowledge and thus the scholars were forced to provide such interpretations themselves. The following letter, SAA 10, 42, includes a quotation from the series of terrestrial omens *Šumma ālu*,<sup>35</sup> as well as a discussion by Balasî, the chief scribe of the king, of the applicability of the omen, the ritual countermeasures that might be taken (even though Balasî does not believe it is necessary) and an unrelated calendrical issue.

<sup>1</sup> To the king, my lord: [your servant] Balasî. Good health to the king, my lord! [May Nabû and Marduk bless] the king, my lord!

<sup>5</sup> As to what the king, m[y lord, wr]ote [to me]: “[In] the city of H[ar]ihumba lightning struck and ravaged the fields of the Assyrians” — why does the king look for (trouble), and why does he look (for it) [in the ho]me of a tiller? There is no evil inside the palace, and when has the king ever visited Harihumba?

<sup>16</sup> Now, provided that there is (evil) inside the palace, they should go and perform the (ritual) “Evil of Lightning” there. In case the king, my lord, says: “How is it said (in the tablets)?” — (here is the relevant interpretation): “If the storm god devastates a field inside or outside a city, or if he puts down a ... of (his) chariot, or if fire burns anything, the said man will live in utter misery for 3 years.” This applies (only) to the one who was cultivating the field.

<sup>r. 10</sup> Concerning the adding of the intercalary month about which the king wrote to me, this is (indeed) a leap year. After Jupiter has become visible, I shall write (again) to the king, my lord. I am waiting for it; it will take this whole month. Then we shall see how it is and when we have to add the intercalary month (translation by Parpola 1993a: 32–33).

In this letter Balasî’s interpretation of the omen text is based on common-sense reasoning, not on the quotation of a commentary. In a similar letter Issar-šumu-ereš answers a query by the king about the applicability of an omen about a mongoose that appears between the legs of a man. The mongoose came out from under the chariot of the king, and according to Issar-šumu-ereš’ opinion the omen is applicable in such a case (SAA 10, 33).

Comparing the celestial omens and their interpretation through *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartīšu* with the letters quoted above, we see that in both cases issues of applicability are addressed.

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<sup>35</sup> The omen is attested in a slightly different form in CT 39 4 31–33.

What is different about *Šumma Sîn ina tāmartīšu* is that it was created (or compiled) as a second *textual* layer, largely standardized and thus delimiting the interpretational authority of the experts. The importance of texts and writing in this whole process is emphasized by the use in these commentaries of complicated sign equivalences, such as the analysis of GI discussed above. We may adduce one more example here from what may be the third tablet of the commentary series *Šumma Sîn ina tāmartīšu*.<sup>36</sup>

DIŠ 30 TAB-*ma ba-ra-ri it-ta- ʾ-dar*  
 AN.MI LUGAL URI.KI  
 ba-ra : la-a : ri : a-dan-nu  
*ina la a-dan-ni-šu*<sub>2</sub> UD 12-KAM UD 13-KAM AN.MI GAR-*ma*  
*ina* EN.NUN AN.USAN<sub>2</sub> AN.MI GAR-*ma*

If the moon is early and is eclipsed at the time of the evening watch:  
 eclipse of the king of Akkad.  
 ba-ra = “not”; RI = “period”  
 an eclipse occurs not according to its period on the 12th or 13th day;  
 (variant): an eclipse occurs in the evening watch.

The commentary refers to the first omen of *Enūma Anu Enlil* tablet 15; it analyses the rare (and probably technical astronomical) Akkadian word *barāri* (“at the time of the evening watch”) first by analyzing it into its component syllables and then by giving a more conventionally written synonym (*ina* EN.NUN AN.USAN<sub>2</sub> “during the evening watch”). The analysis of *ba-ra-ri* takes the first two syllable of the word as the Sumerian verbal prefix *ba-ra-*, which is a negative modal and may thus be translated by Akkadian *lā*. Although RI does not seem to correspond to a Sumerian word meaning “period,” its use as a logogram for Akkadian *adannu* (period) is well attested.<sup>37</sup>

Although such lexical gymnastics may seem rather farfetched to the modern observer, it should be noted that these comments do not play out in the context of fanciful academic speculation, but are found in the context of the actual *practice* of celestial divination in reports and commentary texts (see Frahm 2004).

In one case, *Šumma Sîn ina tāmartīšu* refers to the source of one of these lexical equations, explaining ITI.NE (normally a writing for the month name Abu) as “this month.” “ITI.NE means ‘this month,’ NE means ‘this,’ it is said in the *šātu*-commentary” (Koch-Westenholz 1999: 156 47–50). Significantly, the source is not a lexical text, but rather another type of commentary (a linguistic commentary or word list) within the realm of the celestial divination corpus.<sup>38</sup>

In a recent article Eleanor Robson (2008) has demonstrated that the relationship between the traditional corpus of *asūtu* and *ašipūtu* on the one hand, and the practical roles of experts who are identified as *asū* or *āšipu*, on the other, is weak at best. Such a discrepancy between theory and practice may not be surprising. The scholarly corpora may be understood as foundational texts that define the self-understanding of a profession, rather than their practice. The scholarly texts belong to the area of scribal myth-making, but are not necessarily the ones

<sup>36</sup> Virolleaud 1907–1912, Sin section XXXI; edited by Rochberg-Halton 1988: 80–81 lines 1–4. This passage is discussed by Koch-Westenholz 1995: 83. For the possibility that this is *Šumma Sîn ina tāmartīšu* tablet 3, see Gehlken 2007. Confusingly, the same

omen is quoted in *Šumma Sîn ina tāmartīšu* tablet 1 with an abbreviated commentary (Koch-Westenholz 1999: 155 line 32).

<sup>37</sup> See CAD A/1, 99 2a–1’.

used in the day-to-day business of divinatory observation and reporting. We see a similar gap between *Enūma Anu Enlil* as a foundational text and the practice of celestial divination at the Assyrian court. What makes this case different, though, is that the gap is filled with written texts. The heavens are a tablet on which the gods write their messages, “heavenly writing” (*šīṭir šamê*),<sup>39</sup> legible for those who are initiated into its secrets. The practice of this reading refers from one text to another: from the heavenly writing itself to the core series (*iškaru*), from the core series to the *mukallimtu* commentaries, and from the *mukallimtu* to the commentary word list (*šātu*). It is hard to over-emphasize, indeed, how much this whole enterprise is textualized — the final step in the process is a letter or report sent in writing to the king. The very practice of reading the skies is grounded in a text — in *Enūma eliš* — where Marduk determines the proper periods of the heavenly bodies, thus establishing the basic determinants of a system based on interpreting deviations from the standard period schemes that had been divinely imposed.<sup>40</sup>

During the first millennium, authoritative knowledge was located in traditional texts, which were carefully transmitted from one generation to another — at least in theory. Such an immutable concept of knowledge and authority is a valuable tool for collecting libraries, for foundational narratives, or for displaying universal knowledge through intertextual references. When it comes to practical application, however, knowledge from before the flood is a burden more than an asset. *Šumma Šin ina tāmartišu* represents the middle ground between the “heavenly writing” in the stars, the traditional knowledge “from the mouth of Ea” in *Enūma Anu Enlil*, and the actual responsibilities of scholars at the royal court.

## ABBREVIATIONS

BAM	Köcher 1963–2005
CAD	The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago
CT	Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum. London, 1896–
PBS 10/4	Langdon 1919
SAA 8	Hunger 1992
SAA 10	Parpola 1993a

<sup>38</sup> It is possible, however, that in this case *šātu* does refer to a lexical text; see Frahm 2004: 46 n. 15.

<sup>39</sup> The metaphor has been discussed most recently by Rochberg 2004: 1–2.

<sup>40</sup> See Brown 2000: 113–22 (period schemes) and 253 (*Enūma Anu Enlil*).

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