

# Civilizations of the Ancient Near East

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# Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia

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WALTER FARBER

MESOPOTAMIAN RELIGIOUS beliefs are not easy to understand for people of our times, steeped in Western culture and imbued with what we call "enlightenment." We are used to thinking in categories of opposites, such as monotheism and polytheism, god and devil, religion and magic, faith and superstition, priest and layperson, and medical science and quackery. It is hard for us to cope with a system that in general fails to make such clear distinctions. In texts from ancient Mesopotamia, we might, for instance, encounter a "priest" engaged in very diverse functions. In one text, he might be performing the daily ritual of a specific temple or god, while in another, he may be working as a scholar or physician, poring over pharmaceutical handbooks and trying to find the right prescription for a sick person in his neighborhood. A third text could well show him engaged in an apotropaic ritual to avert the evil portended by a lizard seen in his own bedroom, reciting an incantation to soothe a crying baby, or copying and editing the text of a recently composed hymn to the sun-god. Although for him all these activities clearly belonged to the realm of "religion," they might well end up being described in four or five different chapters of a twentieth-century cultural history of Mesopotamia, under headings as di-

verse as "Magic," "Science," "Medicine," "Literature," and "Religion."

When dealing with such texts, we therefore have to keep in mind that all manifestations of magic or of divination must not be seen as distinct subsystems outside a mainstream concept of religion but rather as homogeneously integrated into it. It then becomes quite clear that it is impossible to give an adequate definition of magic based on such a contrast, without imposing criteria based on our heritage and not on the culture under study. Magic, or witchcraft, as a separate entity simply did not exist in Sumerian and Akkadian thought, in spite of the abundance of texts and artifacts related to practices that we commonly associate with the terms. Any definition of magic and divination, and thus this essay itself, therefore rests on an artificial separation of certain texts, activities, and objects from their wider context. In order to make it easier to describe their place in Babylonian religious life in a relatively coherent and organized way, it still can be of advantage to use such a definition. It must, however, not be understood as reflecting the actual categories of experience and faith in ancient Mesopotamia. While we may never be able to re-create, or even basically understand, the ancient concept of magico-

religious thought, any serious attempt to get closer to such an understanding will have to go well beyond the scope of the magical texts and artifacts. Instead, it will have to see them as just one aspect of a multifaceted philosophy of life based not on rational but on mythological experience.

"Magic" in the sense in which I will be using the term comprises that whole area of religious behavior which tries to influence man's success, well-being, health, and wealth by using methods based neither on rational experience nor solely on private or public worship of a deity. This excludes, for instance, the treatment of stomach trouble by using a traditional herbal potion or the appeal to a god's mercy and goodwill through a certain prayer during the daily ritual of a temple. It does include, however, the enhancement of the effect of such a potion by means of a spell or the use of a similar prayer in a private ritual to avert the evil effects of the birth of a malformed animal. While we could call the aforementioned approaches "scientific" and "cultic," it becomes quite clear from this example how artificial such differentiations are. Wherever we choose to draw the lines, a substantial part of the underlying beliefs and of the techniques used will always overlap into adjacent areas, and thus defy strict definition.

If we keep this in mind, it will be much easier to understand why magic in Mesopotamia was not at all restricted to prophylactic, apotropaic, or manipulative actions. To be sure, those aspects also existed. Actually, some of the most elaborate textual sources deal with such matters, and it is with these that we will start our survey.

## DEMONS AND GHOSTS

It has been said that the ancient Babylonians lived in a world full of supernatural forces constantly threatening their lives and well-being, and that their philosophy of life was thus determined by the permanent fear of something negative lurking in the dark, unknown and ready at any time to afflict and destroy the individual. In fact, this picture may not be altogether true, since by their nature the textual materials tend to overemphasize the dangers. In other words, nonthreatening situations did not need counter-

action and therefore would generally not appear in the handbooks of the ancient specialists in combating the negative influences of the supernatural. However, it is quite clear from the extensive collections of omens (see below) that many situations in life could be interpreted as foreboding negative events about to befall the individual. The absence of a fixed divine law (such as the biblical Ten Commandments) also made people much more vulnerable to divine punishment for sin and negligence in cases where the perpetrator might not even have been aware that he had disobeyed divine rules. Finally, evil demons and human sorcerers could always strike the individual with premeditated mischief. It has to be emphasized here that these dangers were, within the cultural context, perceived as absolutely real and that any attempt to explain them on the level of psychological aberration is grossly inadequate for the understanding of their religious background. (See "Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia" earlier in this volume.)

Although we know the names of many Mesopotamian demons, only a few are individually described in our texts. The others remain rather shapeless sources of evil. Those demons taken over into Akkadian beliefs from earlier Sumerian mythology remain especially colorless. For all those *utukkus*, *asakkus*, *rābišus*, and such, we have no more than rather general descriptions of their role in all sorts of evil and sickness. The accompanying rituals are also very stereotypical and give few clues to the individual traits of these figures. They mostly show up in groups, often in sevens, and the same general type of incantation can be used to dispel any of them, exemplified by the following:

They are seven, seven are they,  
in the depth of the primeval waters they are  
seven,  
the seven are its adornment.  
Neither female are they, nor are they male;  
they are the ones who keep flitting around.  
They have no spouse, never bore a child,  
they do not know the result of their actions,  
nor do they pay attention to prayer and offering.  
In the street, they stir up a storm,  
they keep roaming about in the thoroughfare.  
They are seven, of seven seven times seven.  
(From a Sumerian spell against the *utukkus*)

But there are also a few highly individual demonic figures. The best-known of these is Lamashtu, a misbegotten daughter of the sky-god, Anu, who, in one of his many moments of undisguised hostility to mankind, let her loose to wreak mischief and illness on earth. She is mainly feared for her fiendish acts against pregnant women, young mothers, and babies, and has therefore—somewhat simplistically—been described as the demon of puerperal fever. The many incantations to ward her off vividly speak of her ugliness and evil deeds:

She comes up from the swamp,  
is fierce, terrible, forceful, destructive,  
powerful:

[and still,] she is a goddess, is awe-inspiring.  
Her feet are those of an eagle, her hands mean  
decay.

Her fingernails are long, her armpits unshaven.  
She is dishonest, a devil, the daughter of Anu.  
In view of her evil deeds, her father Anu and  
her mother Antu

sent her down from heaven to earth.  
The daughter of Anu counts the pregnant  
women daily,  
follows on the heels of those about to give  
birth.

She counts their months, marks their days on the  
wall.

Against those just giving birth she casts a  
spell:

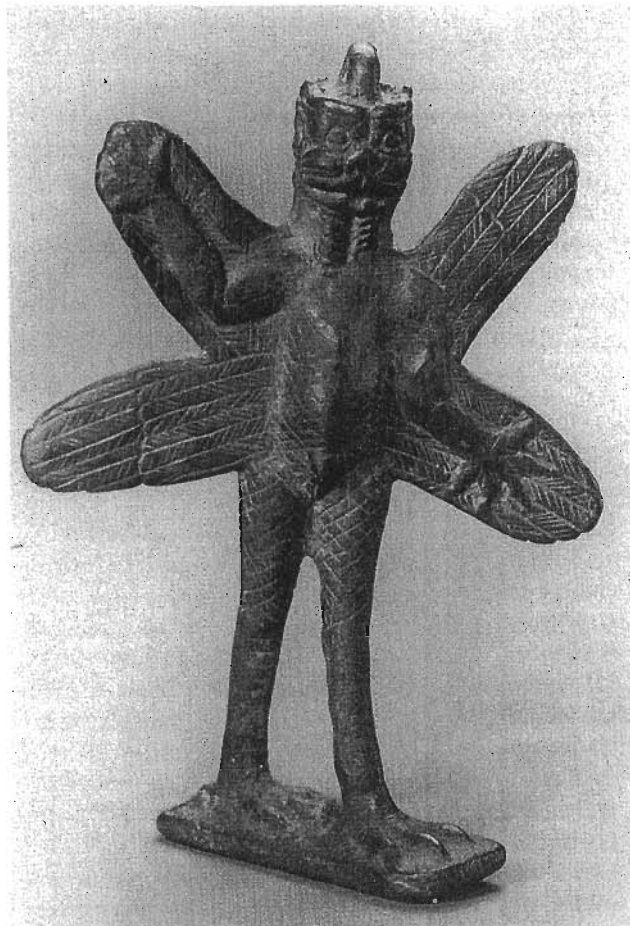
“Bring me your sons, let me nurse them.  
In the mouth of your daughters I want to  
place my breast!”

She loves to drink bubbly(?) human blood,  
(eats) flesh not to be eaten, (picks) bones not to  
be picked.

(From *Lamashtu* series, tablet I)

Many amulets depicting her have also been found, which were used to deter her by means of her own likeness. The ritual texts accompanying the spells describe several magical techniques, most prominently featuring effigies of her being killed, destroyed, buried, sent downstream, or dispatched to the desert.

Another demon, well known from both incantations and pictorial representations, is Pazuzu, a rather ambiguous figure who was often called upon to counteract Lamashtu, but who on other occasions was also understood as an evil force in his own right. (See fig. 1.) Ardat-Lili, the “Maiden of the Storm,” prototype of the biblical



**Fig. 1** Frontal view of a bronze statuette of the demon Pazuzu, Neo-Assyrian period. Provenance unknown. ORIENTAL INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Lilith, is a succubus incapable of love and childbearing who has turned all her frustration into malicious vengeance against young adults. (See “Ancient Mesopotamian Religious Iconography,” Part 8, Vol. III, for a view of Pazuzu pursuing Lamashtu.)

Ghosts of the dead could also haunt the living. The cause for their return was almost invariably that they had not been buried properly or had not received their fair share of funerary offerings. Thus, the main purpose of any rituals to stop their vengeful acts was to appease the ghosts and to remedy the negligence that had caused them to keep roaming the earth. Many of the rituals are centered around offerings called *kispu*, the same term that was used for offerings

made in the regular care of the dead. Also, a figurine representing the (unknown) dead person was sometimes buried, and divine help and pity were often requested. Other ghost rituals are very similar to those used against demons, showing that the souls of former human beings were held to be immortal and to possess demonic powers. In the earlier Sumerian incantations, ghosts were likewise mentioned on the same level as all the other demons. (See also "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought" earlier in this section.)

### SORCERER AND SORCERESS

Almost as unpredictable as the activities of demons or ghosts were the machinations of human sorcerers, and many rituals dealing with this problem are known. It has to be stressed, however, that black magic as a category never existed in Mesopotamia; sorcerers used exactly the same techniques and spells for their illegitimate purposes that the victims might use to defend themselves legitimately. The only difference is that evil sorcery was done by secretly invoking the gods or manipulating other supernatural powers, while the defense relied on the openness of its acts. It is not easy to understand how the gods themselves could be fooled by this simple distinction, but they obviously were believed to act on behalf of the illegitimate rites as long as the victim failed to point out to them, in his own nonsecretive ritual, how things really stood. Only after the victim did so could the gods be expected to reverse their allegiance.

The most famous of all antiwitchcraft rituals is contained in a series of tablets called *Maqlû*, or "Burning." In a lengthy nocturnal ceremony an effigy of the witch has to undergo a trial to determine the criminal nature of her acts, after which her likeness is destroyed by fire:

My witch and my sorceress is sitting in the  
shadow behind a brick pile.  
She is sitting there, practicing witchcraft  
against me, fashioning figurines of me.  
I am going to dispatch against you thyme(?) and  
sesame,  
I will scatter your sorceries, will stuff your  
words back into your mouth!  
May the witchcraft you performed be aimed at  
yourself,

may the figurines you made represent yourself,  
may the water you drew be that of your own  
body!

May your spell not close in on me, may your  
words not overcome me.

(*Maqlû*, tablet V)

The text takes great pains to secure the identity of the effigy with the perpetrator, who, as in all surviving witchcraft texts, remains anonymous and, presumably, unknown to the victim. This anonymity, seemingly an important part of the Babylonian belief in witchcraft, is also reflected in the fact that we have no evidence for witches being actually criminally prosecuted, although several "law codes" mention such procedures. The machinations of a person recognized as the witch were probably no longer magically dangerous and were therefore not mentioned or counteracted in extant rituals. In any case, an accusation of sorcery after the fact was extremely hard to prove, could easily lead to the death of the accuser himself, and was thus probably avoided whenever possible: the standard procedure in such a case was not a trial by human judges, but rather an ordeal by immersion into the "Divine River" who could pronounce the accuser guilty by drowning him, or innocent by letting him survive.

### SIN AND CURSE

If neither a specific demon nor human sorcery could be held responsible for the deterioration of one's well-being, there could be another equally dangerous reason: the afflicted person could have committed a sin or sacrilege without even knowing it. This would result in a "ban" or "curse" (Akkadian *māmitu*) separating the individual from the favor of the god(s). It has been argued that such beliefs started out on a purely casuistic level, in some ways similar to the concept of "ominous" situations (see below), although in the case of such curses, the sanction arose through one's own fault, not from a predetermined divine sign. If the individual was aware of his "sin," remedy would probably be sought through restitution, rectification of the situation, or a personal prayer to the offended god. But if no specific reason for such divine wrath was apparent, the approach would again

have to be on the level of magic (note that here again the differentiation from religion is artificial). A well-known magical compendium was designed specifically for this kind of situation. Its name, *Šurpu*, also means "Burning," but with a nuance slightly different from *Maqlû*. This collection of spells and rituals explores all conceivable types of misbehavior, such as cultic negligence, domestic troublemaking, lack of care for the poor, violence against animals, and inadvertent contact with unclean people or places. While *Maqlû* has as its central concern the destruction of the figurine of the witch, *Šurpu* is mainly concerned with what we might call the purification of the offender-victim. What was burned here were objects that, by means of contact magic, were transformed into carriers of the sufferer's misdeeds. Besides burning, the rituals also involved the disassembling and discarding of such objects as an onion, a strip of dates, or a flock of wool that the patient had to hold in his hand during the ceremonies. The result was the releasing of the patient from whatever evil effects his former actions had had. One spell follows:

Just as this flock of wool is plucked apart and  
thrown into the fire,  
(and just as) the Firegod consumes it  
altogether,  
just as it will not return to its sheep,  
will not be used for the clothing of god or  
king:

May invocation, oath, retaliation, questioning,  
the illness which is due to my suffering, sin,  
crime, injustice, and shortcomings,  
the sickness that is in my body, flesh, and  
veins,

be plucked apart like this flock of wool, and  
may the Firegod on this very day consume it  
altogether.

May the ban go away, and may I (again) see  
light!

(From *Šurpu*, tablet V/VI)

## OMENS AND RITUALS OF UNDOING

A last major group of prophylactic or apotropaic magic is concerned with averting the ill effects of a predetermined situation, as revealed to a person by means of an "omen." We have to

pause here for a moment, to have a brief look at the two types of divine revelation that we subsume under this general term. An omen is a divine sign given to a person as a warning about a specific danger foreshadowed by an observable fact or as an alert of a propitious development in the future. Omens were the most important way Mesopotamian gods showed their will, intentions, or fateful decisions to people. Only rarely do we encounter other means of such communication, such as oracles, prophecy, necromancy, or incubation (the practice of spending the night in a sanctuary in order to receive a revelation through a dream).

Omens came in two forms, solicited and unsolicited. In a solicited omen a professional specialist examined a situation that he deliberately had brought about; an example of this is extispicy, in which the entrails of an animal slaughtered specifically for this purpose are inspected. By soliciting an omen, one could ask the gods for advice in a specific situation. If the answer was negative and foreshadowed disaster, the result would simply be that the planned action, such as a wedding, a battle, or a groundbreaking for a new temple, would not be carried out at that time.

By contrast, an unsolicited omen, such as a solar eclipse, the birth of a baby with two heads, or the appearance of a wild animal in the city, could be observed by anyone who had his eyes open. Such an omen was not restricted in its effects to a particular action, situation, or person. The ominous meaning could affect anybody, even a casual observer. If the sign was foretelling evil, it would have been of no use to sit back and wait for a better omen, as was possible with the solicited kind of message. Yet, since the sign only predicted but did not itself constitute the evil, the observer still had an opportunity to ward off the dreaded effect. If the sign was of a kind that pertained to public life (the king, the state, or the city), special ceremonies would be performed in the palace or temple.

Omens predicting disaster for an individual, on the other hand, called for the speedy performance of a specific apotropaic rite to prevent the threat from becoming reality. Rituals of this kind were as diverse as the divine signs prompting their use. They normally were handed down on individual tablets, each designed for a specific situation. Sometimes the ritual instructions were

even included directly in the omen series (see below) at the appropriate places, enabling the omen specialist immediately to come up with the necessary countermeasure. These rituals, though never conceived as a standardized series, were commonly called "Undoing (*Namburbû*) of Such-and-Such an Evil." They typically consisted of an incantation accompanied by actions to transfer the portended evil to a disposable object. Offerings and purification rites were included to secure benevolence of, and protection by, the god thought to have sent the ominous warning. It is interesting to note that in this genre certain traits of a cultic approach become visible: the giver of the sign was a god sending a message to a person, and the ritual, in spite of its apotropaic purpose, was thus directed not only against the evil but also toward the god:

Shamash, king of heaven and earth, judge of  
things above and below,  
light of the gods, leader of mankind,  
who acts as judge among the great gods!  
I turn to you, seek you out:  
among the gods, grant me life;  
may the gods who are with you grant me well-  
being.  
Because of this dog who urinated on me, I am in  
fear, worried, terrified.  
If only you make the evil (portended by) this  
dog pass by me,  
I will readily sing your praise!  
(*Namburbû* prayer from the Neo-Assyrian period)

Therefore, we often encounter here (next to, and occasionally replacing, purely magical spells) incantation-prayers similar to a well-known genre called *Šu-ila*, which means "Lifting of the Hand." This genre otherwise comprised the standard prayers used in the official cult, as well as in private piety. Again, the best way to explain this ambiguity in terms, format, and usage is by accepting that there was no separation between the different aspects of religious behavior involved, and that modern scholars who wonder about such a use of prayers in a magical setting simply fail to understand the underlying unity of magico-religious thought.

Other *Namburbû* rituals, also including this kind of prayer, were used in contexts not related to ominous portents, to ask a divine power for general assistance and protection in problem situations. These *Namburbû* prayers were some-

times called "Undoing of Any Conceivable Evil." Prophylactic and manipulative purposes seem intertwined here, but this again is a differentiation not perceived as such by the ancient Mesopotamians: their terminology completely ignores the distinctions reflected in our definitions. The most prominent feature present in all *Namburbû* texts is the high level of direct divine involvement in the underlying problem, and this is then reflected in the ritual. The incantation is thus directly addressed to the respective god or goddess and comes close to our definition of a prayer.

### POTENCY RITUALS AS MANIPULATIVE MAGIC?

Many more situations in the daily life of a Babylonian called for, or at least could benefit from, the use of magico-religious techniques. Perhaps the clearest example for manipulative use of magic are the *Šaziga*, or "Potency," rituals. This group of spells and instructions was used to induce, or rekindle, love in an unresponsive individual, and specifically to enable the male partner to sustain an erection. Although the extant texts are silent on this point, it seems quite likely that the short-term results achieved were not always in the long-term interest of the person magically induced to such involuntary love or lovemaking. Thus, *Šaziga* would be the only genre of Mesopotamian rituals that, without being stigmatized as illicit witchcraft, at least silently accepted a negative result for the person at whom it was aimed. However, we know nothing at all about the context or occasion for these spells, and it is easily conceivable that any use of them outside a socially accepted partnership was in itself deemed illegitimate. Such an interpretation would fit particularly well with the literal meaning of *Šaziga*, which refers to the erection or restoration of physical potency in the male. The aspect of seduction, clearly present in the wording of some of the incantations, might also have been a very necessary ingredient of Babylonian family life: marriages were generally not based on love, but rather were prearranged by the families. Thus, a little magic might have helped to make life together more



agreeable by at least secondarily inducing sexual desire where it was not necessarily present in the first place. Thus, *Šaziga* might not have been seen as illicit trespassing on another individual's rights, but might even have served a fully legitimate social purpose. The ritual activities prescribed in the *Šaziga* texts are mostly "inductive," certain objects being magically "enriched" with love power derived from, among other things, the sexual organs of certain animals. These carriers were then brought into contact with the desired partner. The wording of the spells, often also alluding to the strong sexual force of animals and using vivid descriptions of sexual techniques, desires, and fantasies, was clearly aimed at preintercourse stimulation and arousal, as in this:

Let the wind blow, let the palm grove sway,  
let the clouds mass together, and a rainstorm  
pour down!  
Let my potency flow like river water!  
Let my penis be (as taut as) a harp string,  
so that it will not slip out of her!  
(*Šaziga* incantation, Neo-Assyrian period)

## OTHER INCANTATIONS AND RITUALS FOR PRIVATE USE

We do not have the space to examine in similar detail all other genres and uses of magico-religious rituals that were available to the ancient Babylonians. A few brief examples must therefore be enough. There were, for instance, specific incantation-prayers for "reconciling a man's god or goddess with him," used in case of general, nonspecific trouble traced back to the temporary estrangement between deity and human being. A roughly comparable thrust is discernible in the texts "for a woman whose husband has turned away from her." These, by the way, are very different from the *Šazigas*, completely refraining from manipulative techniques and achieving their goals through the intercession of the goddess of love, Ishtar, on behalf of the neglected wife. If this is more than mere coincidence, it might open some interesting aspects of male- and female-role perception in Mesopotamian society.

Other spells were known to dispel the dangers

of fire, to ease childbirth, to prevent the development of a sty in the eye, to quiet a baby whose crying was disturbing the household, or to keep wild dogs from biting, as in this:

He is long of leg, a fast runner.  
He does not need much sustenance, is a poor eater.  
(But) to his teeth clings his semen:  
Wherever he bites, he engenders a son of his.  
(Old Babylonian spell against a rabid[?] dog)

A number of these are neither apotropaic nor manipulative in a narrow sense and can be traced back to forms of folk poetry. The baby incantations, for instance, reflect the motifs and style of earlier lullabies. The fact that such "secular" little poems could be integrated into the corpus of magical texts, could be secondarily provided with ritual instructions, and then became a fixed part of the tradition of exorcism sheds an interesting light on the complex system of magico-religious thought. Examples like these show that magical protection or support was not restricted to exorcism in the Western sense of the term or to the defense against evil powers: magic was equally appropriate in most cases where, from our point of view, a religious prayer or even a completely secular nursery rhyme would be the remedy of choice.

## MAGIC AND MEDICINE

Short spells, often in garbled and no longer understandable foreign languages (Hurrian and Elamite elements have occasionally been identified), are hallmarks of many magico-medical rituals and prescriptions. This aspect of magic and the pertinent texts are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this book, so a few general remarks seem sufficient here. Just as there were no lines separating "magic" from "cult" and "religion," there was no clear distinction between healing practices based on "rational science" and those based on magico-religious techniques. It is true that two specialized professions shared the task of providing health care to the population, the "magical expert" (*āšipu*) and the "physician" (*asû*). Neither of them, however, was restricted in his activities to what we perceive as his "major



field of specialization," and any *asû* would readily use a spell to enhance the effects of an enema. Similarly, the *āšipu* could incorporate the application of a herbal salve in a ritual of magical fumigation. It is also interesting to see that the libraries of magical experts, of which we know several, always include medical handbooks and works on pharmacopoeia, in which prescriptions and recipes were arranged by empirical, scientific criteria, such as symptoms, anatomy, or botanical classification. (See "Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health in Ancient Mesopotamia" below.)

### EXPERT AND LAYMAN

All the rituals and incantations discussed so far could be used for the benefit of any individual. We have to keep in mind, however, that in a largely illiterate society all written material tends to be concerned only with the needs of the uppermost social stratum. In Babylonia, many of the extant magical texts were probably restricted in their practical use to the royal household and its immediate dependents. In spite of this, we may confidently assume that some similar rituals, though possibly less learned, less elaborate, and less expensive, were also performed for, and maybe even by, the average illiterate citizen. Such an assumption is especially plausible in those genres where we can detect traces of oral folklore in the written versions preserved in the libraries of the learned. Nevertheless, with the exception of very simple procedures and spells, we have to assume that any magical rite needed staging and recitation by a professional expert, the aforementioned *āšipu*. He is the person regularly referred to in the second person in ritual texts ("You do such-and-such, say so-and-so"). There has yet to be found a single contract or receipt of payment for the free-lance services of such specialists, who often had priestly functions in a temple or were in the service of the king. Circumstantial evidence suggests that they also visited private houses for healing the sick, counteracting dangerous omens, or helping in difficult situations. The widespread use of amulets, which have been found in virtually every conceivable location from royal palaces to low-income neighborhoods in the city, also attests

to the fact that magico-religious thinking was not restricted to any particular social level. Everybody shared in it in his or her own way, which probably varied mainly according to economic status, but probably not so much with level of education or social standing.

### OFFICIAL RITUALS

Besides the private rituals and incantations described so far, we also know of many "official" ones. They often share the same methods with the former, but are markedly different in their purpose and setting. For example, while the cure of a sick daughter of the king is basically a private matter, even if it takes place in the context of the palace, a celestial omen foreboding danger for the king as the representative of the state calls for a different level of action. Similarly, the apotropaic protection of a bedroom in which a woman is about to give birth may be superficially similar to, but is essentially different from, the magical provisions needed to invest a newly built temple with the ritual purity necessary to make it a place fit for the dwelling and worship of the gods. A more detailed analysis of such official rites would furthermore have to try to distinguish between the spheres of temple and state—a task that is complicated by historical factors. For instance, the Assyrian kings, direct representatives of Assur, the state god, in their very person linked both spheres, but still relied heavily on rituals originating in Babylonia, where temple and state were much less closely intertwined. This feature has not yet been investigated in sufficient depth and can therefore not be dealt with in this overview.

One of the most elaborate royal rituals is known as *Bit rimki*, or "House of Ablution." It is an Assyrian adaptation of earlier Babylonian material and contains elaborate purification rites for the king, to be performed outside the city in a setting of reed huts over several days. It involves the recitation of numerous prayers and incantations, some of which were taken directly from such "private" compendia as *Maqlû* and *Šurpu*.

The king enters the fifth hut, while the exorcist recites the prayer formula "Great Lord, Who in the Pure Heavens." The king says the incantation

“Shamash, Judge of Heaven and Earth.” You set up a figurine of the “Curse Demon,” pierce its heart with a dagger made of tamarisk wood. He (the king) rinses his mouth with water and beer, spits it over (the figurine). Then you bury it at the base of the wall.

(*Bīt rimki* series, ritual tablet)

Similar purification rites were contained in other tablet series, such as *Bīt salā' mē*, “House of Water Sprinkling,” or *Bīt mēseri*, “House of Detention.” All these rites were concerned with cultic impurity caused by contact with impure substances or people, by transgressing taboos, or by situations beyond human control, such as earthquakes, eclipses, or other signs of divine wrath. Not unexpectedly, most of these rituals, in some way or other, make use of water, oil, and several cleansing substances like potash, once more showing rational techniques used in a magical context.

Of great religious importance were rituals for the building of temples, accompanying the construction through all its major stages, from the selection of the site to the final consecration. Equally important were the rites to purify and introduce into the temple the divine images of worship. These rituals, known as the “Opening/Washing of the Mouth” (*pīt/mīs pî*), were repeated whenever the cult statue had come into contact with the impure, for instance, through repair work or after illegitimate intrusions by noncultic personnel.

Magical protection for secular structures, both palaces and private residences, was mostly achieved through representations of protective spirits near windows, drainpipes, and doorways—in other words, wherever the demons were likely to seek entrance. No specific rituals connected with such reliefs or statuary in palaces are known to date, but lengthy texts describe the manufacture and use of prophylactic figurines for similar purposes. Many private rituals making use of magical images supplement our knowledge about these matters. Furthermore, a good number of such artifacts, some with appropriate apotropaic inscriptions, were found in private and official buildings throughout Mesopotamia.

Other official rituals were concerned with military matters, magical protection of the army before battle, purification of weapons, and so forth. Still others aimed at averting omen-related dan-

gers from the king, state, or army. Probably the best-known of these texts concern the investiture of a substitute king during a crisis that threatened the life of the real monarch. (See “Esarhaddon, King of Assyria” in Part 5, Vol. II.) Because of some similarities with the biblical concept of the “scapegoat,” these texts, although only preserved in fragments, have stirred much interest. The main thrust of the ritual is to transfer the risk to the substitute, accompanied by additional prophylactic manipulations for the real king. After the period of danger—usually caused by the occurrence of an eclipse—was over, the substitute was killed to fulfill the omen, and after still another set of purifications, the legitimate ruler was reinstalled. Such drastic measures, involving the death of an innocent victim, were of course only used as a last resort in cases of extreme danger to the stability of the state. No direct parallels from private rituals exist, but somewhat similar rites can be found in the manipulation of figurines that would, by means of contact magic, take on the illness and death threatening an individual.

## THE MAGICAL EXPERT

As far as we know, all nonprivate acts of magic were to be performed by the official magician, the *āšipu*, who on occasion cooperated with other cultic personnel, such as the chanters (*kalû*) or the singers (*nāru*). A few texts from a Middle Assyrian palace archive record the delivery of animals and other materials needed in the rituals to several *āšipus*, clearly for use in official rituals. Besides often being mentioned in the ritual texts, the magical experts also figure prominently as scholarly advisers to Neo-Assyrian kings, and much important information regarding their activities can be culled from the court correspondence. It is not absolutely clear whether the exorcists figuring in these royal archives are in fact the same people as the magicians employed in the service of certain gods and temples or those who presumably provided magical services to private citizens. What we do know is that the profession of *āšipu* was normally handed down from generation to generation within the same families. The royal archives also enable us to follow the personal careers of some

prominent magicians, whom we can trace for up to forty years. Most of these careers seem to be quite linear, the young scholar starting with the title of "scribe" or "apprentice magician," moving on to become an *āšipu*, and eventually being further promoted to "chief exorcist"; but on occasion we can also witness the demotion or dismissal of an individual without, however, learning about the reasons. Such ups and downs may only have to do with their position as court scholars and would not necessarily affect their abilities, and right, to pursue their profession in a different setting. Unfortunately, even less is known about those magical experts who were not affiliated with the palace. Our best sources are tablet colophons or ex libris. From these labels, we can often see the interests and learning of an individual *āšipu* who owned a library. Family connections and temple affiliations are also sometimes mentioned, but no insights into a magician's daily professional life are offered. A catalogue of texts making up the core of the magical tradition has been preserved, and it helps us to evaluate the scope of tasks expected from the exorcist. Finally, we gain an interesting glimpse of the organization and work conditions of the temple magicians from a few Late Babylonian documents from Uruk (biblical Erech, modern Warka). We learn from these that the standard number of *āšipus* in the Anu temple was seven—certainly no coincidence since seven was already then the magical number par excellence. Similarly, prebends from the *āšipu* office were always sold in fractions of one-seventh of a share. Here again, it is noteworthy that all known exorcists, or even shareholders of the prebends, belonged to one of only three clans in which this profession was passed down from generation to generation.

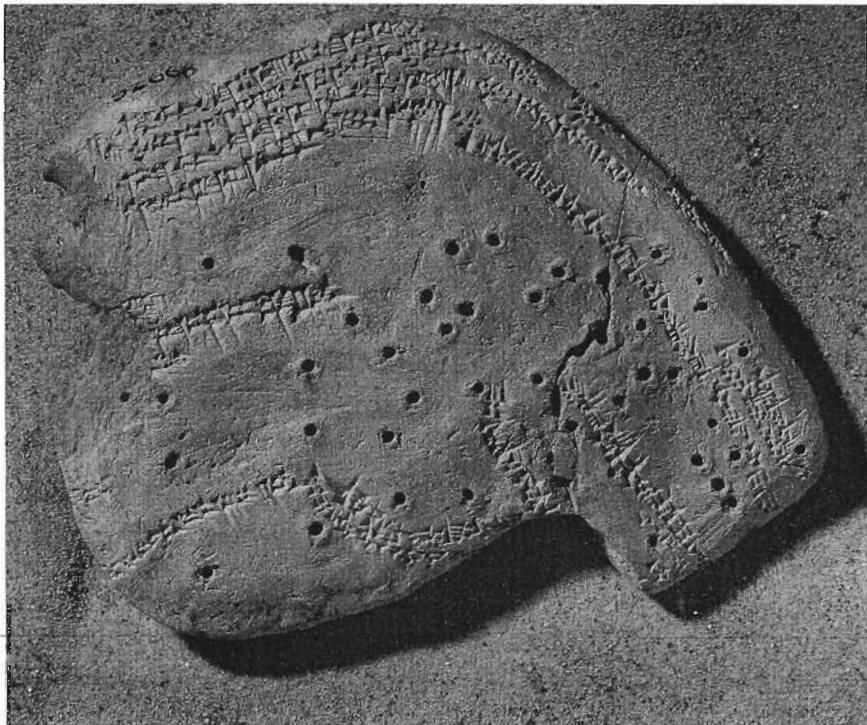
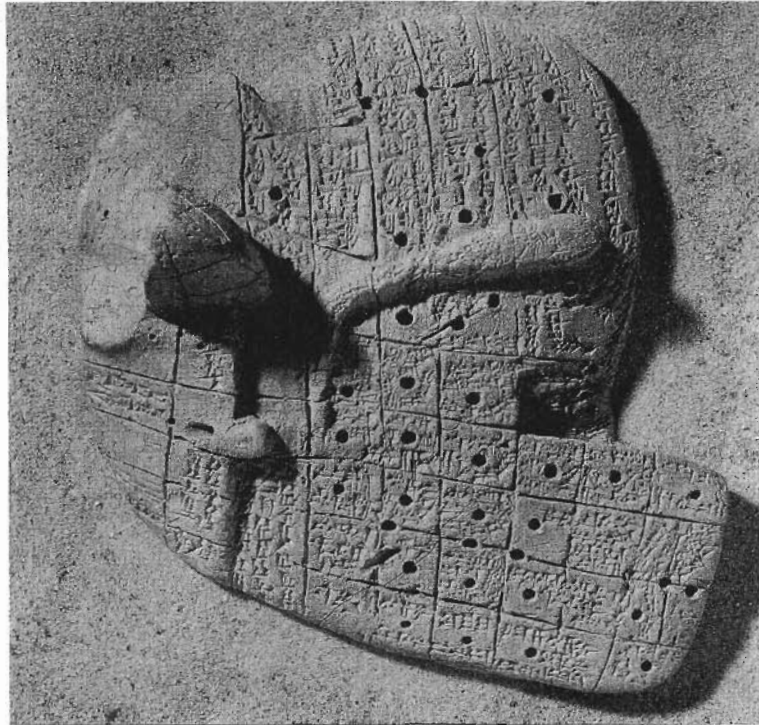
### DIVINERS AND SOLICITED OMENS

In contrast to exorcists, diviners did not belong to the priesthood of a certain temple. Most of those known to us by name worked directly for the crown, either as palace scholars or attached to local governments or the army. This picture is quite consistent from Old Babylonian times

through the late periods of Mesopotamian history. "Diviners" in the strict sense (Akkadian *bārû*, which literally means "examiner") were those specialists who solicited omens from the gods and interpreted the signs thus found. By far the most common technique for this was extispicy, in which omens were derived from the appearance of the intestines of sheep that had been slaughtered specifically for this purpose. The sheep had to be carefully selected and often magically purified, and then the diviner asked the gods to "write" their messages on the exta (entrails), specifically the liver, to be seen and "read" after dissection of the carcass. No mention of other personnel is made, so we have to assume that the diviners had all the manual skills needed, and were also qualified to perform the appropriate rites themselves. For the interpretation of the signs, the diviners occasionally used liver models to locate or document unusual features. (See fig. 2.) Besides these, they had voluminous handbooks that listed every imaginable deformation, mark, or discoloration, often further specified by location, along with its significance.

To be sure, there were also some general principles involved that made the interpretation a bit easier. For instance, signs on one side of the liver were supposed to refer to the person on whose behalf the extispicy was performed, while the other side gave readings for his adversary or, in a military context, the enemy. Thus, a positive sign on one side basically equaled a negative one on the other, or the two sides could neutralize each other. Another general idea was that a sign on the left side was negative, while one on the right was positive. Many more, and much more sophisticated, methods to interpret a divine message correctly were developed early and then compiled into the "scientific" manuals that tried, on a very systematic and often quite abstract level, to provide the answer to any conceivable reading of the liver.

Since extispicy involved at least the cost of one animal per query, private citizens are likely to have resorted to this technique only under extraordinary circumstances. Cheaper if less exact methods for soliciting a divine message were lecanomancy (observing the pattern of oil poured onto water, or vice versa) and libanomancy (observing smoke generated by a censer).



**Fig. 2** Obverse and reverse of a clay model of a sheep's liver with annotations describing and locating features of importance for the diviner, Old Babylonian period. Provenance unknown. BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

These techniques also belonged to the domain of the *bārû*. A repetition of the procedure was often needed to ascertain or refine the results, clarify ambiguous readings, or—in the case of a negative first reading—to obtain a favorable reading at a later date. No immediate threat was involved in a negative sign, as long as the situation for which the divine message was sought was properly postponed or even canceled in time. Thus, no follow-up rituals to guard against the dreaded result were necessary.

The types of divination described so far sought answers on a binary level. The client, king or citizen, through the medium of the diviner, asked for a yes or no from the gods for a specific problem or situation, as in this example:

I ask you, Shamash, great lord: should Assurbanipal, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, send Nabûsharra-uşur, the *rab-mûqi* officer, to Egypt? And will he carry out whatever orders Assurbanipal is going to give him?

Stand by me, by placing in this ram a firm positive answer, favorable designs, favorable, propitious omens, in accordance with your great divinity, and may I see them.

May [the query] go to your great divinity, O Shamash, great lord, and may it be answered by an oracular message.

(Omen query on behalf of King Esarhaddon)

If divergent or ambiguous signs were obtained during the process, the respective signs were counted, and a mathematical majority of positive or negative aspects made up the final verdict. Equal numbers resulted in the repetition of the process, which could be repeated at any time to obtain a more favorable final answer.

## UNSOLICITED OMENS

Somewhat more complicated is the situation with omens not solicited by the diviner for a specific situation. In this case, any abnormal finding or observation could be seen as carrying a message that would affect the fate of the observer in an often very specific way. The circumstances of the observation would largely determine the scope of the effect: signs seen in an individual's house would primarily pertain to this particular person; things that occurred in

the community (for instance, a wolf seen in town or an untimely regional thunderstorm) might affect a city or district; events in the capital might have repercussions for the state administration; and terrestrial or celestial omens, such as earthquakes or eclipses, would typically affect the whole country and its representatives, the king, the court, and their politics or warfare.

Since the observed sign was not identical with the evil portended, but rather constituted a divine warning about impending danger, it was most important to get the correct interpretation in time to undertake any prophylactic measures needed to avert the predicted results. An average citizen or peasant would, after seeing such a sign, probably contact the nearest literate person, a priest, a scribe, a *bārû*, an *āšipu*, or even the local authorities. If these people did not have immediate access to the pertinent handbooks, they could at least make further contacts with a better-informed specialist or a higher authority, as in the following case:

To my lord, from your servant Sumkhurabi: In Great Zarrum, amongst the flocks of sheikh Zazum, a malformed lamb was born, but while I was staying with my lord in Mari, nobody informed me. As soon as I arrived in my district, they brought it to me, telling me the following: "It had one head, (and) its face looked like a ram's face; it (also) had just one breast, heart and (set of) entrails. From its umbilical cord (down) to its loin there were two bodies, but during birth one of its shoulders was ripped off, and (later on?) somebody crushed its head." Now I had it sent immediately to my lord. My lord should inspect it!

(Letter from a governor to the King of Mari, Old Babylonian Period)

There does not seem to have been a special profession dealing with such unsolicited omens, and we see members of all the mentioned groups on occasion involved in interpreting signs and counteracting their ill effects. Even in the royal correspondence, such topics are dealt with by no particular type of scholar, although it seems safe to assume that matters eventually ended up on the desk of the magical experts, who then had to arrange for the necessary apotropaic rituals. Things were a bit different whenever celestial phenomena were concerned. Here, a highly specialized group of royal astronomers and astrologers (no clear distinction between the two

professions existed) was in charge, professionally involved in the observation, prediction, and interpretation of all such omens.

## OMEN COLLECTIONS

The handbooks used for the correct interpretation of the divine signs were organized by topic, and all followed basically the same format of listing omens with their protasis (or conditional clause: "If such-and-such is seen/happens"), followed by an apodosis that, in more or less detail, described the portended event in a declarative clause. Some of these omens were traced back to historical events of the past, reporting purportedly real occurrences when the phenomenon was observed for the first time. Thousands of different signs were collected, and the resulting texts were then often expanded into purely theoretical "science," by adding scores of conceivable (but neither recorded nor, by standards of modern science, expectable) further possibilities. One of the best-known such tablet series is concerned with births of malformed humans and animals. Its name, *Šumma izbu*, or "If a Malformed Newborn Creature," is derived from its opening line. Another long series, comprising at least 107 tablets, was called *Šumma ālu*, "If a City." It contained what is often summarized, but also a bit misleadingly, called "terrestrial omens." The variety of topics dealt with here is much greater than expected from such a title. There are, for instance, several tablets dealing with the circumstances of everyday life, such as building a house, performing agricultural activities, or washing oneself, as in this:

- If a man washes himself with water in the corridor of the house: he will become old.
- If he washes himself early in the evening: he will not become rich.
- If he washes himself in the stairwell and lets the dirty water run out into the open: he will die within a year.
- If he washes his toes: he will dwindle away.
- If the washing water looks like beer: he will be well.
- If it looks like asphalt: he will not be well.
- If it smells of ghee: he will lose influence.
- If he dawdles (while washing): there will be constant rain.

If he does not dawdle: he will fall into poverty.

(From *Šumma ālu*, "chapter" 43)

A large part of this series is taken up by omens derived from the observation of virtually all kinds of living creatures; other signs are culled from the sexual behavior of human beings and animals, from the occurrence of fires, or from encounters between humans and wild beasts. The series clearly is a late compendium, bringing together selections and expansions of many smaller topical compendia, only a few of which have survived independently. An example of such a shorter series is the collection of dream omens <sup>d</sup>*Ziqīqu* (<sup>d</sup>*Zaqīqu*), or "God of Dreams," which treats unsolicited signs revealed in dreams and should not be confused with another divinatory technique rarely used in Mesopotamia, incubation, in which messages in the form of complete, interpretable dreams were solicited.

## ASTROLOGY

Historically speaking, perhaps the most influential area of Mesopotamian divination was astrology. Here, more than in any other field, the Babylonian belief in divine signs was intertwined with truly scientific observation, mathematical calculation, and eventually correct prediction of the movements of the heavenly bodies. Later Western astronomy is based heavily on these efforts and their results. It cannot be stressed enough that there was no clear distinction between the two aspects of celestial observation, "astronomers" and "astrologers" being very often the same persons, or at least working together very closely. As mentioned before, celestial signs were seen as pertaining directly to the king or state, and thus, the divinatory science of astrology was largely restricted to specialized scholars connected with the palace or the main temples of the land. With the exception of horoscopes, which were developed only late under Hellenistic influence, the accumulation and collection of astrological omens gained in importance after the Old Babylonian Period and peaked in the first half of the first millennium BCE. The main compendium of



these forecasts was called, again after the first line of the first tablet, *Enūma Anu Enlil*, or "When (the gods) Anu and Enlil." It deals with observations of the moon, the sun, the planets, and the fixed stars, but also includes other matters, such as large-scale terrestrial events like earthquakes and overall weather patterns. An example follows:

- If the (constellation) "Worm" is prominent(ly visible): mercy and peace will be in the land.
- If the "Hireling" (Aries) is faint: the king of Subartu will encounter misery.
- If the stars of the "True Shepherd of Anu" (Orion) scintillate: somebody influential will get too much power and will commit evil deeds.
- If the luster of the "Crook" (Auriga) keeps turning black: the dynasty will disappear, and another one will rise to power.
- If the front star of (the constellation) Anzū is very red: if in winter, there will be frost; if in summer, heat.

(From a tablet of omens about fixed stars)

The grouping together of different kinds of signs reflects the fact that the arrangement of the omens was primarily not by medium but by the intended recipient of the divine message and that the observed phenomena were not restricted to a narrow location, thus underlining their importance for the whole community. Several rituals used to avoid the predicted ill effects of such public omens are known. Because of their great importance, most of them are rather elaborate, sometimes stretching over several days and often involving additional cultic personnel besides the main officiant, the *āšipu*. (See "Astronomy and Calendars in Ancient Mesopotamia" later in this volume.)

## OMENS, MAGIC, AND MEDICINE: IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Let me round out this brief overview with a glimpse of still another area where divination, magic, and science were joined together in a way that shows how inadequate must be any modern effort to separate these ancient methods of dealing with the supernatural or unknown.

There is a lengthy text series that enumerates all sorts of medical symptoms and, in perfect parallelism to the omen series, lists them systematically from head to toe. The format used also follows the example of the omens, with the lines divided into protasis (condition) and apodosis (consequence). This apodosis contains no medical prescriptions or instructions but only lists, in a scientific, matter-of-fact style, the name or cause of the illness and the prospect for the patient:

- If he is stricken (by pain) at the right side of his head: hand of Shamash—he will die.
- If he is stricken at his head, and the veins of his forehead, hands, and feet rise all at once, (and) he is red and hot: hand of a god—he will get well.
- If he is stricken at his head, and he is afflicted by one attack after the other, and his face is (alternately) red and greenish; whenever he has an attack, his mind becomes deranged, and he has convulsions: grip of Lamashtu—his days may (still) be long, but (eventually) he will die (from it).

(From *Enūma ana bīt marši āšipu illaku*, tablet 3)

This series of what have been called "diagnostic omens" is expressly meant for the use of the magical expert, the *āšipu*, as is made clear in the very first line of the compendium, which served as its title in antiquity: *Enūma ana bīt marši āšipu illaku*, or "When the exorcist goes to the house of a sick person." We simply could not wish for a better example of the intimate and ultimately inseparable connections between the magico-scientific, magico-religious, and magico-divinatory spheres in ancient Mesopotamia.

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