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The Figure of the Seer as an Example of Contacts and Crossing the Boundaries Between Mesopotamian and Hellenic Civilizations

The idea of contacts and boundaries between civilizations, cultures and people is as old as the notion of civilization. These physical (economical, personal) contacts accompanied the more subtle religious, spiritual and ideological borrowings, imitations, and exchanges of thought. Additionally, both these phenomena have taken place simultaneously but at a different pace. In this article, the author focuses on the figure of the seer who stood as an authority for people and institutions in antiquity. According to Cicero, divination played the decisive role in societies of the ancient Near East, Greece, Rome etc., as its role in many civilizations was extremely important in religious, political and civil spheres of life. This article focuses only on the religious-military activities of the seer. In spite of the great differences in terms of functioning of the Eastern, often called Oriental (Mesopotamian civilization) and Western (Hellenic civilization) worlds, which have been recorded in our understanding of history, the author presents a different picture, in which the influences of different civilizations and religious impulses flowed from East to West over the centuries.

Keywords: seer, Mesopotamia, Hellenic, contacts, boundaries, civilization, divination, religion, military, antiquity

Introduction

The issue of mutual contacts and transgressions between civilizations in the world of antiquity has become a more popular topic in contemporary scholarship. Earlier only a few scholars paid attention to the influences of the Mesopotamian civilization on the Hellenic one. Today this issue has become a regular subject of research, with the result that there are now many spheres of the activities of

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civilizations that are under investigation. This article focuses on one of the most important manifestations of religious life in antiquity i.e., divination and even more precisely the activity of its divinatory representatives – the seers. These individuals had many obligations and because of that, to make the study clearer, I only focus on the military aspects of their actions. The most interesting point of these investigations are those contacts which led to the crossing of borders between civilizations. These influences and borders in this case study are understood in both a physical and an ideological (religious) way.

In the case of Mesopotamian and Hellenic civilizations, it is a great challenge to trace the direct relations between them. Both civilizations developed in different time periods and originated in separate regions. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is not to trace step-by-step the physical places of meetings but to present similar approaches to many religious and military aspects of life which resulted from cultural borrowings and imitations. In connection with this, it is worth noting that especially in the case of antiquity, our interpretation of historical facts is related to the sources that we use. With regard to this, there are opposing historical testimonies referring to Alexander's approach to divination. According to Curtius, Alexander knew how much power vain religious scruples had over uneducated minds, while according to Plutarch, the same Alexander always supported prophecy zealously (Plut. *Alex.* 25). Thus, the interpretation of Alexander's attitude toward divination depends mostly on the author of the account and his assessment of divination and its pragmatic effects. In contrast, in the case of Neo-Assyrian historical sources, the picture is uniform because it was successfully reviewed by the official state propagandists.

Aspects such as supernatural rituals and divination were an integral part of war. Magical technologies and rituals can be described as the semiotics of war, they delineate the parameters for the correct and incorrect conduct of war (Bahrani 2008: 16). In the Mesopotamian civilization the king, after consultation with the gods, had to ensure that a war could be considered fair². It would also seem that in the case of the Assyrian kings' aggressive attitude to their neighbors, to find such a justification could not have been a simple matter, but ideology solved this problem (Bahrani 2008: 14). In the case of Assyria, war was waged only on the instruction of the gods. For this reason, one had to know what the will of the gods was.

The Greeks also had an obligation to wage just wars. The Greek philosopher Onasander explains that divine powers had to be propitiated before battle. In his *Strategikos*, he says that "soldiers are far more courageous when they believe they are facing dangers with the good will of the gods" (Onasander *Strat.* 10.26). Wars

² *Bellum iustum* was invented much earlier than the Latin phrase would indicate.

were given religious justifications. The Spartans³ in particular, cared about divine permission to conduct wars (see Hdt. 9.7; Thuc. 4.87, 2.74–5, 7.18; Xen. *Hell.* 4.7.2; Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 13.2; Paus. 3.4.4). Walter Burkert says of the ritualization⁴ of Greek warfare: “war may almost appear like one great sacrificial action” (2007: 267).

Divination, the basic definition and practice

There is overwhelming evidence that portents played an important role in all areas of life in the ancient world. Divination⁵ is a particularly salient characteristic of the Mesopotamian civilization, but its popularity cannot be denied in Greece as well.

Divination interprets the signs of the divine. The Mesopotamians believed that gods wrote signs into the universe, and therefore the world could be read by those who were educated enough. This conviction was based on the idea that to some extent the future was pre-determined; that gods, especially Shamash and Adad, made certain indications of the future (omens and portents) available in the world to man, which could be interpreted (divined) by experts with specialist knowledge. For the Mesopotamians, the future as crystallized in the present was not considered as created solely by the gods but rather as the result of a continuous dialogue between men and god (Maul 2008: 362).

The seriousness with which divination was treated is presented in *Naram-Sin and the Enemy Hordes* (Westenholz 1997: 263–368), where we read of king Naram-Sin (2254–2218 BC) who does not comply with the divine words heard during extispicy⁶. This act of disobedience gave rise to a series of military defeats and was detrimental to the entire kingdom.

It might seem that the situation was quite different in the case of the “rational” Greeks. However, divination was also central to Greek religion (see ThesCRA 3: 1–51; Lateiner 2007: 810). In the case of the Greek civilization it was the awareness of the presence of the gods that motivated all human activities. The Greeks were totally helpless when making decisions without consulting their gods. This resulted not from any lack of ideas or creativity, but from the fact that such a behavior would be ungodly and demonstrated misuse of divine prerogatives (*hubris*). The

³ According to Xenophon, only the Spartans were experts (*technitai*) in warfare (see Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 13.5).

⁴ There are a number of books by Walter Burkert in which he explores the similarity between myth and ritual: (Burkert 2001, 1997, 1979).

⁵ On the complex subject of Mesopotamian divination, a good place to start is, for example, (Oppenheim 1977: 206–227). Detailed introductory discussions are also given in: (Bottéro 1995: 125–137; 2001: 170–202; Flower 2008: 104–131).

⁶ Alexander the Great behaves similarly, although victorious in battle, after the battle his health deserts him, see Arr. *An.* 4.4.

religious obligations of the times often prevailed over purely military considerations and the final decision was often made by seers (Pritchett 1971: 126).

Cicero was convinced that the use of divination was universal amongst all humans. Divination is, in his opinion, irreplaceable because it deals with crisis and conflict, and does so with a high degree of rationality (Cic. *De Div.* 1.1.1–2). This kind of attitude does not differ substantially from the case of the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon, who, before his expedition, asks the god Ashur, through the oracle, about almost everything: “If they go and set up camp before the city Amul, will they, be it by means of war, or by force, or through tunnels and breaches, or by means of ramps, or by means or battering rams, or through friendliness or peaceful negotiations, or through insurrection and rebellion, or through any other ruse of capturing a city, capture the city, Amul?” (SAA 4: no. 63).

The role of diviner (*bārû*) in Mesopotamian civilization

Scholars were an important part of the Neo-Assyrian royal court. The five disciplines of Assyrian wisdom (*nēmequ*), based on religious and metaphysical concepts, are represented by a chief scholar, the *ummānu*⁷, and his assistants: the *āšipūtu*⁸ or “exorcistic lore”, the *āsūtu* or “medicine, therapy”, the *bārūtu* or “divination, extispicy”, the *kalūtu* or “science of lamentations” and *tupšarrūtu* or “science of the scribes”, that is, astrology (or rather celestial divination) (Veldhuis 2006: 78). The list of the scholars that accompanied Esarhaddon during the second invasion of Egypt starts with seven astrologers (*tupšar EAE*, literary “scribe of the canonical omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil*”; often abbreviated to “scribe” *tupšaru*), followed by nine exorcists (*āšipu*), then five diviners (*bārû*), nine physicians (*asû*) and six lamenters (*kalû*). So far, this is an expected range of experts representing the five main branches of Mesopotamian scholarship (Radner 2009: 222).

In Akkadian, *pašāru* means a multilayered reading or decipherment of texts. *Pašāru*, as a form of textual exegesis, was closely linked to divination (*bārūtu*) which was, in turn, related to vision as an act of seeing. A *bārû* was a type of priest who was also a diviner, the noun *bārû*, which is derived from the verb to “see”, literally means observer or seer. The *bārû* then was an expert in *bārūtu*, the

⁷ The human sages, *ummānu*, appear for the first time in the Neo-Assyrian king lists. The *apkallu* are for the first time listed by name and correlated with legendary and historical kings. While Mesopotamian kings remain on the throne, the *apkallu* remain confined to myth and ritual. In the Seleucid period, after the loss of native kingship, the *apkallu* enter anew in history. Evidence of a historically developing identification between the Mesopotamian ritual practitioner and the *apkallu* in general and Adapa, finally emerges in Seleucid Uruk (see Sanders 1999: 144–145).

⁸ *Āšipu/mašmaššu* relates to white magic and to the gods Ea and Asalluhi (one of the names of the god Marduk) (see Hutter 1996: 90).

observation of signs in the world (Bahrani 2008: 63–64). The diviners in Mesopotamia viewed themselves as integral links in a chain of transmission going back to the gods. A privileged place for the occurrence of such signs were the entrails and livers of sacrificial animals, for it was believed that the gods placed such signs there. This knowledge about the will of the gods was believed to be gained by consulting a diviner (*bārû(m)*).

Bārû participated in military expeditions. As early as the Old Babylonian period, a diviner accompanied the king into battles. In Mari archives records were preserved as to how a *haruspex* used extispicy to confirm prophecies and dreams or even predict a lunar eclipse (Durand 1988: 3–80). There is an example of a military expedition marching out from Babylon under the leadership of *bārû(m)*-priest:

Ilušu-nasir, the *bārûm*-priest, a servant of my lord “leads” the forces of my lord
 A Babylonian *bārûm*-priest goes
 With the Babylonian forces
 These 600 troops are (now)
 In Šabazim. The *bārûm*-priests are gathering
 Omens. When an omen appears favorable
 150 soldiers
 Go out and 150 return (ARMT II, 22.23–3; see Kang 1989: 42).

Presumably diviners accompanied the army in all its operations (Dalley 2006: 421). The oracular consultations were requested for signs of sanction from the gods at the moment of battle and were a necessary step in justifying war and ensuring victory through the approval of the war by the divinities. These cataloged battle omens and strategic queries reveal an intense anxiety and unease about deciding the tactics and strategies of war (Bahrani 2008: 188–9, Fig. 7.1–2; Launderville 2003: 214, 216; Reiner 1995: 64).

The Greek seers – *manteis*

The term *manteis* is translated as soothsayer, diviner, or prophet. He was an expert in the art of divination and the Greek counterpart of *bārû* (Flower 2008: 188). The seer is the most obvious type of religious professional and warfare is certainly the most conspicuous context for divination (Parker 2007: 118). *Manteis* practiced what the Greeks called a craft or skill (*mantikē tekhnē*), with the aim of ascertaining the will and intentions of gods in relation to human action (Aesch. *PB* 484; Soph. *OT* 709; Hdt. 2.49, 2.83). Xenophon’s general observation may be taken to apply to the whole of archaic and classical Greek culture:

In a war enemies plot against one another but seldom know whether these plots are well laid. It is impossible to find any other advisers in such matters except the gods. They know everything, and they give signs in advance to whomever they wish through sacrifices, birds of omen, voices, and dreams. And it is likely that they are more ready to give advice to those who not only ask what they should do when they happen to be in need, but even in good fortune attend to the gods in whatever way they are able (Xen. *Cav.* 9.8–9).

Divinatory rituals were essential prior to combat. The most important role of the seer in Greek society was without doubt on the battlefield (Parker 2000: 299–314; Jameson 2004: 197–228). No general would leave camp or begin a battle without first consulting his seer (Flower 2008: 240). Each plan for a campaign was tested in advance by means of extispicy. Only with the *manteis'* consent and the fulfillment of specified conditions were the troops moved into battle (Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.17–8). The *manteis* regarded himself as the official means of ascertaining the will and intention of the gods, quite apart from the exigencies of the tactical situation (Pritchett 1979: 78).

Alexander the Great surrounded himself with *manteis*, at least four of whom (Aristander, Demophon, Cleomantis and Peithagoras) are known by name, and also with *magoi* and “Chaldean” priests who were seers “borrowed” from other civilizations. A priestly journal of sacrifices with records of divination was kept during his expedition (Pritchett 1979: 146–147). Confirmation that historical military seers were capable of reporting more than simply whether the *hiera* and *sphagia* were favorable or not, is to be found in the activities of the greatest seer of his day, Aristander of Telmessus, who served first Philip II and then his son Alexander the Great between c. 356 and 327 BC (Flower 2008: 93). Aristander accompanied Alexander on the way to Asia in 334 BC and he is an outstanding example of a seer whose competence covered the interpretation of entrails, bird signs, and dreams, as well as natural phenomena. He probably wrote a book on portents, and more certainly a book on the interpretation of dreams (Pliny *HN* index 17.243, and for the dream book, Artem. 1.31, 4.23; see Flower 2008: 52).

Extispicy as a dominant divinatory method in antiquity

Extispicy clearly dominated other forms of manticism in Mesopotamian divination. The divinatory liver is divided into parts according to the areas responsible for interpreting specific signs (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 45). For example: “The ‘Hole’ was associated with death, the ‘Weapon’ with warfare, the ‘Foot’ with an approaching enemy” (Jeyes 1980: 25). The roles of the “Weapon” (*kakku*, giš.tukul) and the “Path” (*padānu*) were especially connected with war, battles, power and

armed forces (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 48–51; Hutter 1996: 100). The “Strength” (*danānu*) deals with secrets but also with military strength and impregnability (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 46–47). Here are some examples:

Manzāzu Commentary 1

A iv 7, 8, 9 C iii 27, 28, 29 100) If the Presence has disappeared and a Weapon is placed in its normal place and it points to the Thin Part of the Yoke: The armed forces of the prince will prevail over the forces of his enemy.

A iv 32, C iv 10 116) If a Weapon lies cross wise in the middle of the Presence: My army will divide the spoils (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 146),

Chapter 4 of the Babylonian extispicy series *bārūtu*, *Padānu*, ‘the Path’

Padānu Tablet 3

A 1’, B 2, C 2 2) If there are two Paths and they lie side by side: My army will abandon its campaign and embark on another.

A 2’, B 3, C 3 3) If there are two Paths and the second one is bent and points to the normal one: Weapons that were not brought inside will attack the prince (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 187),

Pān tākalti Commentary 7

A 5’, B 3’ 4) [If the Str]ength is turned and its base is split: My army will capture the leader of the enemy army.

A 6’, B 4’, 5’ 5) If the Strength is bent and its rear end is split: Your secret will go out to the enemy.

A 8’, B 7’ 7) If 2) the head of the Strength is erased: The gods [will desert] my army.

A 9’, B 8’ 8) If 3) the base of the Strength is erased: Witchcraft will seize my army (Koch-Westenholz 2000: 424).

Greek iconography depicted seers examining livers from about 530 BC onwards (Burkert 1995: 49). Representations of warriors examining entrails appear on nineteen black-figure and three red-figure Attic vases dating from the last quarter of the sixth century and the first quarter of the fifth century BC, that is, from c. 525 to 475 BC (Straten 1995; ThesCRA 3: 1–3, Fig. 27a, b, c, 66a).

In the Greek military context, the organs used for divination in the sacrifices termed *τά ἱερά* (*hiera*) are designated as either the liver or *σπλάγχνα* (*sphagia*)⁹. Extispicy was very popular in the Greek world; if the liver was not smooth, clean and light-colored, especially if it was missing one lobe, it was an unfavorable omen (Pfißfig 1998: Fig. 46; Xen. *Hell.* 3.4.15, 7.7.7). Invisible patches in the liver sealed the fate of Hephaestion and Alexander (Plut. *Alex.* 73.4 records the omen being told to Alexander outside of Babylon by the mantis Pythagoras *vel* Peithagoras

⁹ In Plut. *Alex.* 73; *Arat.* 43; *Arr. An.* 7.18.4; Paus. 6.2.4 reference is expressly made to the liver (*τὸ ἴπαρ*). In Polybios 7.12 the word used is *σπλάγχνα*, but since in this passage the organ is portable, the liver may have had the part of the sole removed (see Pritchett 1979: 74).

shortly before his death, comp. Arr. *An.* 7.18.4). It is worth comparing this with the Babylonian prophecy: “If the entire liver is anomalous: an omen of the king of Akkad regarding catastrophe” (Jeyes 1989: no. 2; Guinan 1997: 423).

The warrior-goddess as the main protector of the king

As I wrote earlier, diviners were part of the military cortege; they participated in and enabled a dialogue between the gods and the king. Without the gods’ agreement, it was impossible to begin or finish a war, i.e., to make a treaty. Here are examples of such texts related to military affairs found at Mari and Eshnunna (Nissinen 2003: 13–95):

Thus says Ishtar of Ninet:
 [“W]ith my strong weapons
 I will stand by you (31.A.2666 = AEM 1/1, 193, 16–8 in: Roberts 2002: 217).
 As soon as I heard the tablet of my lord,
 I summoned the diviners, and
 The question as follows
 I asked them, saying,
 [“M]y lord made an urgent question
 And [wro]te to me. What do you counsel? (48. M.5704 = AEM 1/1, 225, 6–19 in: Roberts 2002: 241).

In the collection of oracles to Esarhaddon, mostly from the goddess Ishtar, it is the goddess who throws the king’s enemies at his feet, before flaying them. She promises: “I will finish off your enemies” (*Esarhaddon and Ishtar* in: Foster 1995: 218). There are letters to Esarhaddon which make explicit appeals to the gods in relation to the king’s military success. In one of them, the writer reiterates the idea that it is the gods who are the active agents on the battlefield, bringing victory to the king whose role is passive: “all the [gods of hea]ven are ready (for battle). [May they march] in the presence of the king, my lord, and [bring] the enemies of the king, my lord, [quick]ly to submission before the feet of the king, m[y] lo[rd]! May they let] the wishes of the king, [my] lord, [be fulfilled]” (SAA 16: no. 132). The meaning of oracles given by Ishtar of Arbela and other gods is decisive for military campaigns and political affairs (see Fales, Lanfranchi 1997: 99–114). Here is one of the examples:

Oracles of Encouragement to Esarhaddon
 (i 4) [Esarh]addon, king of the lands, fear [not]!
 (i 6) What wind has risen against you, whose wing I have not broken? Your enemies will roll before your feet like ripe apples.

- (i 11) I am the Great Lady; I am Ištar of Arbela, who cast your enemies before your feet. What words have I spoken to you that you could not rely upon?
- (i 18) I am Ištar of Arbela. I will flay your enemies and give them to you.
- (i 20) I am Ištar of Arbela. I will go before you and behind you.
- (i 24) Fear not! You are paralyzed, but in the midst of woe I will rise and sit down (beside you).
- (i 30) King of Assyria, have no fear! I will deliver up the enemy of the king of Assyria for slaughter. [I will] keep you safe and [make] you [great in] your Palace of Succession.
- (ii 2) What [.....] I would not have heard you? [The enemies ...] in neck st[ocks], [the vassals] under tribu[te]; I defea[ted] your enemy in a single [encounter].
- (ii 27) Do not trust in man. Lift up your eyes, look to me! I am Ištar of Arbela; I reconciled Aššur with you. When you were small, I took you to me. Do not fear; praise me! (SAA 9: no. 1).

In Diodorus we find a similar story of the proximity of the king and goddesses. When Alexander arrived at the temple of Athena at Ilium, he noticed that a statue of Aribarzane, a former satrap of Phrygia was overturned, and an oracle given by a seer explained that Alexander with his own hands would slay a general of the enemy in battle and that Athena would help him in his success (*DS* 17.17.6).

Consulting the battle strategy with divinity

In the Neo-Assyrian queries to Shamash, an entire complicated battle strategy was drawn out on papyrus and placed before the god (in front of his cult statue in the temple). The questioner then asked, “Should this particular strategy, in this document, be followed?” The strategy was not written out in detail, like other queries, but put before the god in the form of a drawing or diagram. The god, in the guise of his cult statue, observed the document and gave his response through the entrails of the sacrificial animal, which was offered at the same time as the submission of the document for divine consent. The oracle was described as having been written (*šatāru*) into the body of the animal, just as other omens were written into the sky or the city and could be read by expert seers (Bahrani 2008: 188).

Alexander the Great experienced the same kind of divinatory practices at the Siwah oasis. Before a meeting of Alexander with the god Ammon, Callisthenes reported on the process of consulting the oracle of the god Ammon. The god gave responses by nods and signs, and a similar method we know from Greek culture (17.1.4). Gods might spontaneously enter their statues and cause them to move, weep, or do various other things, which their worshippers were then expected to interpret. Lucian tells us about a statue of Apollo in Hieropolis/Bambyce (a popular ancient resort city near the Euphrates) that was especially renowned for this

sort of behavior. It moved around on its throne whenever it wanted the temple priests to pick it up; if they delayed too long, it would move more vigorously and begin to sweat. Once they had picked it up, the statue indicated to them the direction in which it wanted to be carried. After the statue had reached a place where it was happy, the high priest would ask it questions. If the statue moved backwards, the answer was “no”, if it moved forward, the answer was “yes”. Similar statues in Egypt are mentioned at about the same time (Curt. 4.7.15–24; *DS* 17.50.6)¹⁰.

Astrology and the mysterious case of lunar eclipses

In conjunction with prophetic divinatory texts, there are many scholarly and epistolary texts which refer to other types of divinatory legitimation for warfare. One refers to the state of the Moon as the reason why “the cities of the Mannean will be plundered, his people taken in captivity” (SAA 10: no. 112, o 16).

Esarhaddon received many letters and astrological reports from the chief lamentation-priest (*galamāhu*) of Sin from Harran (Holloway 2002: 482). The Neo-Assyrian texts direct attention to a period of eclipse. During Esarhaddon’s reign, there were no fewer than twelve full or partial lunar eclipses and two solar ones (Leichty 2006: 953; Farber 2006: 1903). The most extreme situation posed by an omen was that of the lunar eclipse that portended the death of the king (SAA 8: no. 19; Rochberg 2004: 77).

Generally, an eclipse is a source of troubles: “and either plague will strike the king’s army at the command of a god, or it may be defeated on the battlefield by force of arms, and a revolution may take place in the palace” (No. 2b (lunar eclipse), ll. 27–8 in: Lambert 2007: 47). 122 tablets including 2065 lines of observations of eclipses and oracles taken from the eclipses in Esarhaddon’s reign are known of to date, as well as predictions based on the movements of the Moon (Bottéro 1995: 128, Fig. 3). The lunar eclipse which occurs in the month Tishrin is a source of war, and great crisis for Babylon (*AM* 212: 19–213: 2 in: Müller-Kessler 1999: 437). “Eclipse of the Moon in the Morning. (r 9) If there is an eclipse in Sivan (III) on the 14th day: a mighty king who is famous will die, but his son who had been designated for kingship will take the throne, and there will be hostility, variant: there will be deaths” (SAA 8: no. 4).

Diodorus emphasizes Alexander’s great appreciation for the skills of the Chaldaeans (*DS* 17.116.4), especially when it came to astrology (*DS* 2.30–1, see

¹⁰ This way of divination is typically Egyptian. Particularly, a papyrus dated to the fourteenth year of pharaoh Psammetichus I (651 BC) shows the image of the god, Amon-Ra, carried on a boat-shaped litter by twenty priests, while the enquirer stands in front facing the procession (Parke 1967: 200). See more *Cic. De Div.* 1.74; 1.98–9; 2.58; *Luc. Syr. D.* 36; cf. *DS* 17.50–1.

Murphy 1989: 39, 41). The importance they attributed to lunar signs was shared by Alexander. Indeed, a lunar eclipse was explained as a sign of success in his campaign. On 20/21 September 331 BC (month Boëdromion), after Alexander had crossed the Tigris and the Euphrates, he rested for two days. During the night, an eclipse of the moon occurred. Curtius says that the consternation in the army bordered on mutiny. Alexander assembled his officers (according to Curtius) to hear a declaration from his own *mantis* Aristandros (according to Arrian) and from Egyptian seers (according to Curtius). They proclaimed that Helios favored the Greeks and Selene the Persians; hence the eclipse portended the victory of the Macedonians (Arr. *An.* 3.7.6; Curt. 4.10.1–5; Plut. *Alex.* 31.4; Pliny *NH* 2.180; Cic. *De Div.* 1.53; cf. Pritchett 1979: 112).

Augury, bird omens “flying” from Mesopotamia via Greece to Rome

Bird oracles are strictly connected with war (Hazenbos 2007: 103). The bird watchers operating in Assyria are frequently identified as originating from Anatolia and Northern Syria (Högemann, Oettinger 2008: 17)¹¹.

A letter to Sargon II illustrates why a group of *augurs* travelling with the Assyrian army was kept under watch because they were so precious to the war machine. Their strategic importance guaranteed them a comfortable standard of living and powerful social position (SAA 5: no. 163). Indeed, it was the Assyrian practice to drain an annexed country of its specialists, while the *augurs* in service to the Shubrian royal household would certainly have been used by Esarhaddon (Radner 2009: 237).

For the Mesopotamians birds of prey were viewed as signaling omens (Freedman 1998: tab. 64–79): “If a raptor seizes prey, and flies before the king and breaks the prey with its beak, the king will achieve victory and triumph over his enemy” and “If a raptor seizes prey, and flies before the king and lifts up the prey in its beak, the king will achieve victory and triumph over his enemy” (see Nötscher 1930: 168–169; Noegel 2007: 200). “If a raptor seizes prey, and flies before the king and lifts up the prey in its beak, the king will achieve victory and conquer his enemy” (BM 108874; see Smith 2013: 57–58). Similarly, in Penelope’s testimony: “In my dream, I saw a great eagle with a curved beak swoop down from the mountain and break their (the geese’s) necks, killing them. There they lay heaped in the great hall, while he soared up into the clear sky (...)” (*Od.* 19.536–59).

¹¹ For an opposing view about the origins of Mesopotamian bird divination, see Smith (2013: 67–80).

Livy comments, “such great honor was brought to the *auguries* and the priestly office of the *augurs* that no action was taken, in war or in the city, without the auspices: assemblies of the people, levies of the troops, all the greatest affairs would be broken up if the birds did not approve” (*Liv.* 1.36.2–6; *Cic. De Div.* 1.17). The strength of this kind of manticism lay in the fact that it was very difficult to manipulate (Radner 2009: 233).

In 331 BC at Gaugamela, those who were around Alexander believed that they saw an eagle quietly flying a little above the king’s head, not terrified by the clash of arms, nor by the groans of the dying and for a long time it appeared around Alexander’s horse. It is certain that the seer Aristander, clad in a white robe and displaying a laurel wreath in his right hand, “kept pointing out the bird to the soldiers, who were intent upon fighting, as a sure omen of victory (rousing confidence among the Greeks and terror among the Persians). Hence, great courage filled the beholders, and after mutual encouragement and exhortation the cavalry charged at full speed upon the enemy and the phalanx rolled on after them like a flood” (see *Curt.* 4.15.26–28; *Plut. Alex.* 33.2).

Conclusions

The great convergence of divinatory practices in the Mesopotamian and the Greek civilizations is astonishing. A detailed analysis of the approach to divination taken by the Mesopotamians and the Greeks presents many similarities, a number of which have been presented in this article. Greek heritage is commonly understood as completely rational and related to philosophical ideas rather than divinatory practices. This popular assessment has to be corrected and enriched after studying their approach to divinatory practices. For the Mesopotamians, asking the gods for signs through the use of various kinds of magical procedures was part of the official religion and the difference between magic and religion remained blurred, or rather, it did not exist at all. In connection with this, therefore, where are the boundaries between these two civilizations and is it possible to trace the contacts between them?

As I mentioned in the introduction, divination is a common component of both civilizations. The role of *bārû* and *mantis* is very similar especially in their duties related to war. In both civilizations, the seers decided about the strategies of battles and the outcome of their dialogues with the divine was decisive for the course of the war. The only real difference in their experience is set by their education; *bārû* is connected with scholars, a systematic education that required many years of intensive training and cooperation with the royal court, while *manteis* is linked to individual charisma. However, Aristander, the seer of Alexander is also

associated with special, not only magical, but primarily scholarly skills. Divination in Assyria is better organized and completely subjected to the royal court, but the ways, methods and general meaning are congenial, while the strong need to believe in a close relationship with the divine and unmediated contact with the gods is one of the fundamental traits shared by seer representatives of both of these civilizations. According to Richard Stoneman, “the Mesopotamians made divination into a guild practice, but the Greeks formalized the procedure of making the gods speak” (Stoneman 2011: 112). In my opinion, the Greeks largely used the previous experiences of Mesopotamian civilization, of course, adapting them to their capabilities and the needs of their own civilization, i.e., their recipients.

In both civilizations, seers were perceived as having special bonds with divine powers and means of communication with gods. Some of them enjoyed the special protection of particular goddesses, divine patrons who were responsible for the course of a war (respectively Ishtar and Athena). Additionally, the interpretations of many of the divine signs in both civilizations are so similar that taking them for accidental would be inappropriate and would merely be an artificial obstruction to further studies covering the dynamics of contact between the two of them.

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