

The Mari Livers and The Omen Tradition

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The point is well taken that the historical omens best represent the Mesopotamian view of the past as paradigm. Finkelstein in his study of the matter devotes some time to the question of how omens may have been recorded, and his sketch resembles the opinions of other scholars.¹

He imagines, for example, that Naram-Sin consulted omens before undertaking his assault on Apishal and that the omens were favorable. The diviners recorded what were the salient features of the liver in question and that the result was favorable. But the next day, when word reached them that Naram-Sin really had taken Apishal, they changed their indication that the omen was good to read, "The omen of Naram-Sin, who through a breach took Apishal."²

Finkelstein makes much of the seriousness with which Mesopotamians dealt with omens and writes that this "work was pursued with the same honest and detached attitude that might be expected of the modern empirical scientist in his laboratory, or the historian in his archive."³ This picture is inviting but perhaps exaggerated. To ferret out a closer view of what the makers of the tradition did, one must turn to their texts.

With this in mind, it is here proposed to reexamine the oldest group of divination texts, the liver models from Mari.⁴

Nougayrol has said that the models show "comment des présages prenaient forme historique au lendemain même des événements dont ils allaient nous conserver le souvenir."⁵ He elsewhere dates the models to the middle of the Isin domination, following Mlle. Rutten,⁶

1 J. J. Finkelstein, "Mesopotamian Historiography," *PAPS* 107 (1963), 461-72. This paper owes much to Prof. Finkelstein's criticisms. Its errors remain my own.

2 *Ibid.*, 465. Cf. J. Nougayrol, "Note sur la place des 'présages historiques' dans l'extispicine babylonienne," *École pratique des hautes études, Annuaire* 1944-45, 5-41, # 5.

3 Finkelstein, *Historiography*, 465-66.

4 M. Rutten, "Trente-deux modèles de foies en argile inscrits provenants de tell-Hariri (Mari)," *RA* 35 (1938), 36-52 and plates.

5 Nougayrol, *Note*, 32.

6 J. Nougayrol, *RA* 38 (1941-45), 72, following Rutten, *Modèles*, 36.

who does so on the basis that Ishbi-Irra and Ishme-Dagan, founder and third successor of that dynasty are the latest recognizable kings mentioned.⁷

Gelb has shown that the liver models are not a unity as far as spelling characteristics are concerned.⁸ He finds that they have numerous orthographic similarities to the Old Assyrian texts from Anatolia and must be regarded as separate in dialect from the standard Old Akkadian of Ur III and from later Old Babylonian. It would be attractive to see the lack of unity as a sign of language evolution over time and to correlate that evolution with the succession of known kings recorded in the models. The chart below presents some distinctive orthographic conventions seen in the models. It must be remembered that the texts are too short to place much reliance on any one convention, and the age classifications can be compelling only for a few of the models:

Some Distinctive Orthographic and Dialect Features⁹

| Number and Catchword | <i>ana</i> OB <i>iš</i> M | <i>amut</i> OB <i>UD-mut</i> M | <i>ina</i> OB <i>in</i> OAkk | <i>u-um</i> OB <i>a-um</i> OAkk | <i>ša</i> OB <i>sá</i> M | <i>tí</i> M | <i>ú</i> M | <i>-na</i> M |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. Sargon | | OB | | | M | | | |
| 2. Rimush | | OB | | | M | | M | |
| 3. N-Sin | | OB | | | M | | | |
| 4. Akkad | | M | | | OB | M | | |
| 5. Shulgi | | OB | | | M | | | |
| 6. Ibbi-S | | OB | | OAkk | | | | |
| 7. " | | | | OAkk | M | | | |
| 8. " | OB | OB | | | M | | M | |
| 9. Ishbi-I | | OB | | | M | | M | |
| 10. " | OB | | | OAkk | OB | | | M |
| 11. Ishma-D | OB | OB | OAkk | OB? | M | | M | |
| 12. Amurru | | | OAkk | | OB | | | |
| 13. Namaḥani? | | OB | OB | | | | | |
| 14. canal | | | | OAkk? | OB | | M? | |
| 15. <i>durum</i> | | | | OB | | | | |
| 16. <i>saḥururim</i> | | OB | | OB | M | | | |
| 17. <i>udate</i> | | M | | OB | M | M | | |
| 18. cities | | OB | | | M/OB | M | | |
| 19. <i>nakrum</i> | OB | | | OAkk/OB | OB | | | |
| 20. LIK-MA? | | | | | | | | |
| 21. <i>šarrum</i> | | | | OB | | | | |
| 22. " | OB | | | OAkk/OB | M | | | M |
| 23. <i>ruba'u</i> | | | | OAkk/OB | M | | | |
| 24. <i>be-al</i> | OB | | OAkk | OB | | | | |
| 25. <i>ruba'u</i> | | | | OAkk | | | | |
| 26. dream | | | OAkk | | | | | |
| 27. ditch | | | OB | OB | | | | |
| 28. cities | | | | | OB | M | | |
| 29. <i>šalatam</i> | OB | | | OAkk | M/OB | | | |
| 30. <i>ru'im</i> | OB | | | OAkk | | | M | |
| 31. <i>ruba'im</i> | M | | | OAkk | | | | |
| 32. <i>nakrim</i> | M | | | | | | | |

Results might have been slightly different had entries on models with two or more entries been considered separately. And several other features might have been noted which were omitted for reasons of space. But the point is that there seems to be no progression among historical omens, and several of the non-historical ones also seem to be either old or dialectal.

Gelb suggests that all the Mari livers were copied by one hand from older texts.¹⁰ Though the variation in signs is sometimes striking, the overall impression is that the signs were very similarly made throughout and that the scribe had what may seem considerable leeway in how he wrote. For example, in model 14 the first *ga* sign lacks the usual vertical followed by horizontals while the second has the horizontals. Similar variation is seen in the *ad* signs in model 27 and in the divine name in models 3, 6, 7, and 8. It seems one person did copy these models, and these texts at least were not all written "au lendemain même" of events.

But the one copyist may have been using older material. Turning to the content of the models, one can observe that some of them appear to be expansions or revisions of others.

| | | |
|--------------|--|---|
| So model 30: | šum-ma a-na ru-i-im a-a-bu-tám i-tá-ú ú 'à-wa-tum ú-ší-i | If to a friend they seek enmity and word gets out . . . |
|--------------|--|---|

| | | |
|-------------|--|---|
| Compare 19: | šu-ma na-ak-ru-um a-na a-li-im a-i-ma te-bi-am i-ta-ú-ma a-wa-sú ú-ší-i-a-am a-ni-um ki-a-am i-ša-kà-an | If an enemy to any city seek an uprising and word of it gets out, this will look thus. |
|-------------|--|---|

The models more or less resemble each other in Rutten's Plates X and XV. Number 19 is hard to date from orthography, but 30 may be old or dialectal. One can see that the changes in wording may be due to a desire in 19 to make 30 more explicit. "A friend" becomes "any (allied) city." "Seek enmity" becomes "seek an uprising," and the explicit conclusion to be drawn from the protasis is added. But the addendum found in 30 (or was this the original observation?) is absent in 19.¹¹

7 I. J. Gelb, "Notes on the Recently Published Economic Texts from Mari," *RA* 50 (1956), 3, n. 1, notes that Išma-Dagan could be the Ur III period governor of Mari who spelled his name thus instead of Išme-Dagan of Isin.

8 *Ibid.*, 3-7.

9 OB stands for an Old Babylonian feature, Oakk for Old Akkadian, and M for what may be a Mari dialect feature. For the full exposition of the features see Gelb, "Economic Texts," *RA* 50 (1956), 1-10.

10 *Ibid.*, 3.

11 The addendum reads: *mi-lik ma-tim i-ša-pil* "The counsel of the land will become low." Perhaps this in turn is related to the enigmatic but similarly shaped model 20, reading: LIK-MA (read *ma-lik* ?) KALAM.

Note also model 31, entry b:

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| šum-ma na-ak-ru-um | If an enemy |
| iš a-a-bu-tí | to enmity |
| i-d ₇ -ku-ma | strike (or seek) and ¹² |

| | | |
|------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| and 31, d: | šum-ma 'à-wa-a-t | If word |
| | na-ak-ri-im | of an enemy |
| | iš qe-ra-ab | to the midst ¹³ |
| | ma-tim | of the land |
| | wa-ša-a-t | gets out |

Also related must be both parts of 32:

| | | |
|--------------------|----------------|--|
| šum-ma 'a-wa-túm | iš na-ak-ri-im | If word to an enemy |
| ú-ší-ì | | gets out . . . |
| šum-ma 'à-wa-a-t | | If word |
| [E.] GAL wa-ša-a-t | | of the palace gets out ¹⁴ |

Not so closely related to these but worth noting is model 24 I, which looks similar in shape to models 30 and 19:

| | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| šum-ma be-al | If a lord |
| šum-e-im ša-ba-am | of renown a troop |
| in za-ri-šu ú-ta-ma | among his enemy seeks, and |
| ú-wa-ší-ì | makes go out |

Reflecting what may be a similar cliché, the similarly shaped model 27 II reads:

| | |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| šum-ma a-al šu-mi-im | If a city of renown |
| i-na wa-ši-bi-im | in inhabitants |
| ú za-mu-ga-dè | and ? ¹⁵ |
| ú-ra-ad | declines (?) |

A closer relation seems to obtain between numbers 18 I and 28, the shapes of which are similar but with different markings:

| | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| 18 I a-mu-tum | Liver |
| sá na-qá-ar | of destruction |
| a-li sa-ḥa-ru-tí | of little towns |
| 28 ša-aḥ-lu-uq-tí | Ruin |
| a-li ša-aḥ-ru-tí | of little towns. |

The sense is identical, and it is impossible to tell which if either was copied from which.

12 Gelb, *Economic Texts*, 5, suggests reading *i-tá-ú-ma* 'seek'.

13 So Gelb, *Economic Texts*, 5, against Rutten, *Modèles*, 50.

14 Rutten, *Modèles*, 50, reads [*e-*]kál-lim wa-ša-at, reading the PI sign twice.

15 From *samāku* 'to cover over'; *AHw.*, 1017a.

| | | |
|--------|--|---|
| and 23 | šum-ma ru-ba-am ru-ba-um i-ša-lí a-nu-um ki-a-am i-sá-kà-an a-na ma-a-l-ku-i-in i-ki-in | If a prince fights with a prince, ²¹ this will look thus! For the two princelings this held good. ²² |
|--------|--|---|

One is reminded of the several later omens about the two kings involving death at the hands of courtiers.²³ At origin models 2 and 23 may have had nothing to do with one another, but the comment on 23 was later added to draw them together.

It should be noted that several models have more than one entry recorded on them. Numbers 11, 18, 24, 27, 31, and 32 present two or more apparently independent reports while 12, 13, 15, and 30 have one specific political prediction with one technical or general statement.²⁴ Insofar as they are classifiable by orthography, these texts seem mixed, old and newer.

Only one of these double entries occurs in a model with a historical omen, number 11. This omen differs from the other historical ones also in that the general statement uses *šumma*. We have perhaps some indication, as discussed above, that in 6 and 7 the *amut* was changed to *inūmi*. It is logical to suppose that the *šumma* introduction is also younger than the *amut* introduction, and that the historical omens are on the whole older than the more general omens that do not mention historical figures by name. If so, then model 11, with its *šumma*, would show that the custom of putting more than one statement on a model is also secondary.²⁵ This is of course reasonable if the models' purpose were either for unambiguous record-keeping or unambiguous tutelage.²⁶ But perhaps then one can observe in these multiple entries the very beginnings of the omen collections found in the Old Babylonian period.

It is in order to question whether the possible literary relation between models outlined above is really literary borrowing or merely the result of using the clichés of extispicy. To answer that question would, however, demand a survey of those clichés, and that is beyond the scope of this study. It seems on the face of it that some of the relations are quite close; others in comparison with later material may turn out not to be.

In sum one can say that the possible close literary relation among several of the texts tends to disprove, at least for these models, the theory that a multiplicity of liver observatories:

21 Taking the verb from *šālu*, *CAD* Š, s.v.; or maybe even *šalû*, *AHW.*, 1016b. Neither is very satisfying, and perhaps one should read *i-za-ni* from *zenû*.

22 If this is the meaning, the form should be *ikûn*, but perhaps one is to read *i-di-in* as preterite or imperative.

23 Nougayrol, *Note*, ## 29 and 42, and Goetze, *JCS* 1 (1947), ## 13 and 14.

24 Note that Old Babylonian liver and lung models in *YOS* 10, 1, 3, 4, 5 have just one entry apiece.

25 If Rutten is right against Gelb's suggestion, note 7 above, model 11 may have mention of the latest king appearing in these models.

26 I am inclined with Nougayrol, *Note*, 37, to see these as school texts.

led to the multiplicity of omens with similar apodoses but dissimilar protases.²⁷ The redaction that may stand behind the models shows their origins may be complex and interrelated.

²⁷ This is suggested by Nougayrol, *Note*, 36. The use of two entries on one liver model or other omen record may have led to the varied apodoses for the same protasis, as in Nougayrol's #53 ("... c'est le présage d'Apishal. Autre version: protection du pays"). Note too his #52, which may be an example of a conflation of both a specific and a general notice ("... c'est un présage d'Ibbisin, de ruine").