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Between divinatory and magical practices in Mesopotamia

Abstract. The article deals with the question of where, in Mesopotamian terms, the possible border between divination and magic is. In ancient Mesopotamia, the notions of divination and magic intermingled because they both referred to one conceptual whole and represented one coherent world. Can we define the scope of these concepts and the boundaries between them? More specifically, was divination a magical practice for the Mesopotamians, or to what extent was divination likely magical? One of the earliest modern (1900 AC) works to discuss divination is entitled *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Nineveh and Babylon*, which suggests that Western scholars treat magic and astrology (one of the branches of divination) as being on the same level. A comparison of selected divinatory and magical texts serves as a canvas for further research and discussion.

Keywords: divination, magic, Mesopotamia, *Maqlû*, *āšipu*, *barû*, Shamash, Ea (Enki), rituals

Introduction

This article focusses on the relation between divination and magic. The main question is whether we can define the scope of these concepts and the strict boundaries between them. More specifically, was divination a magical practice

for the Mesopotamians? Or perhaps the question should be to what extent was divination magical? Was it a real conceptual problem for the Mesopotamians, or is it only a problem for contemporary scholars? One of the earliest modern (1900 AC) works to discuss divination was written by R.C. Thompson and entitled *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Nineveh and Babylon*, which suggests that magic and astrology (one of the branches of divination) have been treated as the same by the author and the whole Western conception of science.

The structure of the article is based on a comparison of appropriate motifs taken from divinatory literature and magical series and a search for similarities and differences. In this case, the comparison applies to some examples related to divinatory texts, i.e. haruspical reports, celestial divination, and magical procedures, especially from *Maqlû*, the anti-witchcraft series.

Divination

In Burkert's opinion, divination is the human observations of perceived divine signs and the response to them (Burkert, 2005, p. 1). Until one deciphers omens, they represent unbridled forms of divine power. While their meanings and consequences are unknown they remain potentially dangerous. The act of interpreting a sign seeks to limit that power by restricting the parameters of a sign's interpretation. Such a practice would be able to diagnose and soothe any enflamed divine wrath before it could unleash its destructive potential to destabilize a policy (Maul, 2008, p. 364). The aims of divination per Veldhuis, is not only to tell the future, but to shape the future (Veldhuis, 2006, pp. 487–497). Divination is a form of ritual, a kind of formal procedure that trained practitioners perform to provide clients with advice or help for solving their problems. This ritual aspect of divination lays emphasis on the traditional nature of what the seer says and does (Flower, 2008, p. 189). In opinion of Maul "Derived omens were a sign of divinity and thus carried a guarantee of unfailing accuracy. Divination is based on the idea that to some extent the future is pre-determined; but that the gods especially Shamash and Adad have made available to man certain indications of the future (omens and portents) in the world around them, which can be interpreted (divined) by experts with specialist knowledge. The future as crystallized in the present was not considered by the Babylonians as created solely by gods but as the result of a dialogue between man and god" (Maul, 2008, p. 362).

In all these definitions we observe the same elements: divination is a kind of ritual, it answers for the unpredictability of life – including political and

religious matters – and as such it is a form of dialogue between the gods and humans.

The Mesopotamians tended to view all aspects of the world as potential signs of divine activity or as signs conveying significant information about the future. 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 was the entrails and especially 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 (*barû*) (Launderville, 2003, pp. 214, 216). Extispicy was a very direct way of asking the gods about particular events and their decisions. The gods were asked to be present in the sheep about to be sacrificed and to write their will on its entrails.

In the specific case of King Ashurbanipal, it is the fear of an eclipse, about which two astrologers, Balasi (SAA 10, 57) and Nabû-ahhê-erība, (SAA 10, 75) wrote similar reports. Since most omens derived from eclipses were unfavourable, a successful prediction would give the scholars and the king more time to prepare for any approaching danger (SAA 8, p. xix).

Divination was a salient characteristic of Mesopotamian civilization (Michałowski, 2006, p. 247; Bottéro, 1974, pp. 70–197; Oppenheim, 1977, pp. 206–227). According to contemporary scholars, out of 3594 “Babylonian literary and scientific texts” in the library of Ashurbanipal (kept in the British Museum) 270 cannot be classified, 1085 are “archival texts” and 645 are “divination reports”. Of the other 1594 texts – i.e., the “library texts” – 746 are divinatory (46,8%) (Fincke, 2003–4, p. 130; Schaper, 2013, p. 231). Oppenheim estimated that fully 40 percent of those scholarly texts were related to the art of divination. Even if we must take some distance to such a calculation, the number of divinatory texts is significant (Oppenheim, 1977, pp. 15–17).

Magic

We have many definitions related to magic, for example: “Magic is a discourse pertaining to non-normative ritualised activity, in which the deviation from the norm is most often marked in terms of the perceived efficacy of the fact, the familiarity of the performance within the cultural tradition, the ends for which the act is performed, or the social placement of performer” (Edmonds III, 2019, p. 5. For more contemporary definitions of magic, see 13, ref. 23). In opinion of Graf, magic is the name given to a collection of practices that are in conflict with the rules of society (Graf, 1997). Magic, in its extreme, so-called evil form, (called by Schwemer “black magic” or just witchcraft, see Schwemer,

2015, p. 29) is imagined to be anti-social, and the verdict of society is that this kind of magic is negative or even destructive. It is understood as non-normative acts which are directly dangerous for social and political order (Edmonds III, 2019, p. 21. Schwemer divided magic into four main categories, see Schwemer 2015, p. 29). One who practiced evil magic was treated as a person who did not respect the normal order of things established by the gods. Interestingly, only certain forms of non-normative behaviour, such as the laying of curses, appear as evil magic in antiquity, whereas other behaviours appear as entirely normative forms of ritual action undertaken by some kinds of professionals and priests to protect the king, his army and the whole empire.

Then, on the one hand, magic in antiquity was understood as the idea of an extra-ordinary solution (Edmonds III, 2019, p. 4). However, on the other hand, according to the definition given by Abusch, we can classify as magical all those rites that addressed the needs, crises and desires of the individual and served to improve their standard of living (Abusch, 2008, p. 373).

A great variety of terms can be used in Akkadian to refer to witchcraft. The primary term for evil witchcraft is *kišpū*, it is derived from the corresponding verb *kašāpu*, which also forms the basis of the agent nouns *kaššāpu* 'warlock' and *kaššāptu* 'witch'. *Kišpū* designates both the evil actions performed by the witch and the resulting evil which takes possession of the patient, makes him impure and binds him. Many other terms refer to witchcraft, i.e. the verb *epēšu* 'to do', 'to perform, practice rituals' and then also 'to perform, practice witchcraft rituals'. Besides *kišpū*, the two nouns *ruḥû* and *rusû* serve as the general terms for witchcraft in Akkadian texts; often the three words are found in the formulaic sequence *kišpū ruḥû rusû upšāšû lemnûtu* translated as 'witchcraft, magic, sorcery, evil machinations'" (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 3).

Magic as such was composed of a positive magic – which was generally accepted in Mesopotamian civilisation – an evil magic and its counterpart – anti-witchcraft rites – which as such were part of a wide range of magical performances. The *Maqlû* series is the longest and most important of the Mesopotamian texts concerned with combating witchcraft: "The ceremonies and rites were intended to counteract and dispel evil magic and its effects, to protect the patient, and to punish and render ineffectual those responsible for the evil. They fashion figurines and identify them with the patient by pronouncing his name and by using materials that have been in contact with him. They gag the figurines, dirty them, pierce them, burn and dissolve them in different ways. They immure them in a wall; they inter them in a grave (symbolizing the death of the victim) or under a launderer's mat (making sure that all the dirty laundry water constantly runs over the figurine); they bury them under a threshold, in a gate, on a bridge or under a crossroads, places

where people constantly trample over them. They make funerary offerings for the patient by pouring out water; they perform evil rituals before the stars or other deities including Šamaš himself” (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 6).

These widely attested rituals addressed the suffering caused by many different forms of witchcraft. The ritual proceedings included offerings to Shamash, the burning of figurines representing the warlock and the witch and the extinguishing of the fire; at the conclusion of the ritual the patient would undress, an act that symbolised the removal of impurity from their body. The actions of burning, extinguishing and stripping are each accompanied by thematically corresponding incantations (*Šamaš annûtu ēpišû 'a, Attûnu mû* and *Ašhuṭ ašhuṭ*) (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 270; Schwemer, 2015, p. 33).

Common points

As I mentioned earlier, the relationships between divination and magic in Mesopotamian civilisation were both complex and subtle.¹ It is the appropriate moment to present them in order of validity.

a) Shamash and Ea as the patron gods

Magic in its normative and anti-witchcraft aspects was universally accepted, and together with divination they both had the same divine patrons. The often called god in divinatory and anti-witchcraft texts is Shamash. He is the patron of divination and is called master of decisions (*bēl pūrrussī*) (Charpin, 2013, p. 71). He is associated with divination by extispicy because he sees everything from above, (Reiner, 1995, p. 65) and is also called di.KU₅/*sēru* “supreme judge” and *pāris pursussē ilāni rabûti* “decider of decisions of the great gods” (Rochberg, 2004, p. 192; Jeyes, 1991–1992, pp. 23–41; Charpin, 2013). An all important consideration was that “Shamash spend the nights in the netherworld and passes through the netherworld, because of that he knows potential future and infinite sequence of days to come. At daybreak, when he returns to the upper world, he becomes the future which is realized” (Steinkeller, 2005, pp. 34–35). Shamash inscribes (*šatāru* or *ešeru*) omens into the world, for example, into the body of the sacrificial animal. In the very popular Neo-Assyrian hymn to Shamash, he is presented as a god of divination, *barû*

¹ The same problem of definition and complicated interactions exists in the relation between magic and medicine. In the opinion of Geller, ‘theoretically at least, magic and exorcism address themselves to the patient’s mental state and anxieties, while medicine tended to concentrate on physical symptoms, such as pain, fever and seizures.’ (Geller, 2009, p. 4).

ša mati ("Divine seer of the land") (Bahrani, 2008, p. 81; Falkenstein & von Soden, 1953, pp. 247–248).

In the Neo-Assyrian queries to Shamash, an entire battle strategy was drawn out on papyrus and placed before the god (in front of his cult statue in the temple):

"Should Esarhaddon Carry out a Written Plan?

(2) [Whatever Esarhaddon, king of Assyria], w[rot]e on [this] tablet and placed [before] your [great divini]ty

(4) should he act accor[ding to] this document?

(5) Is it pleasing to your great divinity? Is it acceptable to your great divinity?

Is it decreed and confirmed in a favorable case, by the command of your great divinity, Šamaš, great lord? Will he who can see, see it? Will he who can hear, hear it?" (SAA 4, 129).

For the same reasons Shamash is the patron god of magic. Especially in the anti-witchcraft texts, he is the most important deity, who was frequently asked and called:

"¹¹ For undoing witchcraft which you do not know, ^{12'} you make figurines (of wax) of the warlock and the witch, ¹³ (of a man and of a woman). ¹⁴ You convict them before Šamaš. You coat them with tallow, ¹⁵ you put them in a disposable pot, You burn them: ¹⁶ "Šamaš, may their sorcerous devices return to them ¹⁷ *who turned to evi[l] against me!*" (or: *who stood as an evil sign against me*") ¹⁸ ((Thus)) you speak ((three times)), then ¹⁹ [you throw] the disposable pot together with the burnt mater[ia]l into the river," (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 50, Text 1.5).

"¹⁹ Incantation: "Šamaš, king of heaven and earth, you are the judge of god and man,

²⁰ pay attention to my prayer to le[arn] of my condition!

²¹ Foolishness, depression, ²² fear (and) fright

²³ which I constantly experience and suffer in my body, in my flesh (and) in [my] sinews:

²⁴ Šamaš, before you this one replaces me, this one receives (my suffering) from me.

²⁵ (My suffering) is entrusted to the figurine of the Deserter, it is driven away to the west, it is removed from my body!" (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 156, Text 7.7)

"³⁴ Its ritual: In the morning [you place] a censer with j[uniper] before Šamaš. [...].

^{35'}You knot seven knots; [you recite] the incantation seven times before Š[amaš].

^{36'}You make

^{35'}[*figurines of the warlock and of the witch*]

^{36'}of clay. [You recite] this incantation seven [times and]

^{37'}you sea[l] [*their mouths*] [with] a seal of magnetite. [...]” (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 189, Text 7.8)

^{26'}Šamaš, judge of heaven and earth,

^{27'}you are the judge of the dead and the living!

^{28'}Pay attention to (my) prayer to

^{29'}learn of my condition” (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 25, Text 8.1).

In Mesopotamia, more than only one origin of divination is known. Despite the fact that Shamash (and Adad) were the divinities typically associated with knowledge divination and the successful performance of an extispicy, it was Enki/Ea, the god of wisdom, who was explicitly credited with its origin (Rochberg, 2004, p. 182). We are told that diviners transmitted knowledge “from the mouth of the god Ea” (Michalowski, 1996, p. 186). The Assyrian bilingual incantation describes the exorcist as “the diviner of Ea” (STT 1, 173: pp. 13–14; Rutz, 2013, p. 20). In magical texts, for example *Utukkū Lemnutū* Series, the exorcist protect himself saying: “I belong to Ea” (Geller, 2007, pp. 199–201, Tab. 3, l. 7, 54, 79, 147. The similar one: YOS 11, 96, § 31). It is very intriguing that the god who was venerated as the god of wisdom was also the god responsible for inventing divination and magic. Divination and magic were probably a part of those skills which were incorporated into the vast area of wisdom by the ancients. According to current thought, the god Ea would have been perceived rather as being a god of magic than of science, but for the Mesopotamians, he was the god of wisdom, magic and divination (Lambert, 1962, pp. 64–65, 68–69; Schwemer, 2015, p. 41).

^{37'}[May he be released] by the command of Enki,

^{38'}Asaralimnu[nna], fo[remost] son [of the subterranean ocean: treating kindly and making feel better are yours!”

Incantation formula]” (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 421, Text 10.4).

Interestingly, in some magical texts the gods Ea and Shamash appeared together:

“Ea (it is) your magic; Šamaš, (it is) your magical practice; let it be kept away by your incantation” (No. 115: 29–32, 39–44, In: Scurlock, 2006, p. 27 = LKA 88: 1 r.20; CT 23.15–22+ I 49'–55'/KAR 21 18-r.6).

b) Representatives of each field participating in the same rituals and complementary activities

In the *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*, the patient complains about his bad luck:

“The exorcist did not clarify the nature of my complaint,
While the diviner put no time limit on my illness” (*Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*, II, 110–111; Foster, 1995, p. 307).

Translation given by Lambert is even more specific:

“My complaints have exposed the incantation priest (*mašmaššu*),²
And my omens have confounded the diviner (*barû*).

The exorcist (*āšipu*) has not diagnosed the nature of my complaint,
Nor has the diviner (*barû*) put a time limit on my illness” (Lambert, 1996, pp. 44–45; cf. Koch, 2017, p. 8).

The same problem, in this case illness, was therefore treated by different professionals in divination and magic. From the official register of the professionals, a *barû* was responsible for divination and an *āšipu* for anti-witchcraft (generally, magical) procedures; i.e. dispelling the evil force at their roots, purifying and protecting clients against threats. However, the more detailed studies of Mesopotamian healing revealed that not only the *asû* (physician or medical expert) and the *āšipu*, but also the *barû*, were involved in the healing process and used magical procedures.³ It seems that the three (or even more) professionals performed complementary rites. As well *barû*, chief diviner (*rab bārê*), diviner of the king (*bārî šarre*) as exorcist (*mašmaššu*) and exorcist of the king (*āšip šarre*) are often mentioned in different kind cooperation on the royal court (Pongratz-Leisten, 2015, pp. 248, 451; Jacob, 2003, pp. 522–535). The kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal consulted both; the chief astrologer Issa-šumu-ēreš and the chief exorcist Kišir-Aššur. Interestingly, Issa-šumu-ēreš belonged to a family of astrologers and exorcists, whose genealogy can be traced back to Gabbi-ilāni-ēreš, chief scholar to King Ashurnasirpal II (see SAA 10, p. XIX, chart. 3; Pongratz-Leisten, 2015, p. 396). Both, Old Babylonian exorcists and healers were well educated and it happened that they used two languages, Sumerian and Akkadian (Wasserman, 2010, p. 345).

² *Āšipu/mašmaššu* relates to positive magic and the gods Ea and/or Asalluhi (Marduk): (Hutter, 1996, p. 90; Pongratz-Leisten, 2015, pp. 458–459; Schwemer, 2015, p. 23).

³ An interesting point is that an *āšipû* priest was an expert in the art of manipulating supernatural forces (including illness-causing demons) by magical means and was also translated as “magician”: Rochberg, 2004, p. 45; saa 10: xxxiv. The *āšipu* was then the magic-expert who countered disease by charms and incantations, by magical means. The *asû*, by contrast, was the physician who healed the sick with bandages, by his medical craft, which was rational. In the healing process, also *barû* take part: Heeßel, 2009, pp. 13–14; Schwemer, 2015, p. 27; cf. Jean, 2006; May, 2018.

We would assume that these did not happen at the same time, but that those involved would have known about the other's activities and not protested about participating in the activities of another professional; a *barû* priest would not have been surprised about being involved in the work of a magician and vice versa.⁴ Importantly, the *barû* is mentioned as one of the most important participants of these activities. In some apparently medical texts, if the situation was complicated, Ea performed a divination to resolve the problem and get insight into the problem from a deeper level (No. 169: 1–14; Scurlock, 2006, pp. 37, 62 = *BAM* 473 iii 6'-24'/*BAM* 474 1'-10').

This means that in Mesopotamian civilisation different professionals – diviners and magicians (positive magic) – were commonly accepted by society. In difficult cases, both of them were consulted, and it was not the profession but the skills of the individual that decided about his fame. We naturally assume that for the patient the most important was a positive final outcome of treatment (more examples: Worthington, 2009, pp. 63–64).

There was also significant contact between anti-witchcraft and *namburbi* rituals. This interaction was due to the idea that witches could send evil signs, which led to the use of *namburbi* rites against witchcraft (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 17; Schwemer, 2015, pp. 36–37). In one such anti-witchcraft ritual, Shamash was called:

“84” who destroys the wicked, who undoes the (evils countered by) *namburbi*-rituals,

85” the evil signs (and) omens, the terrifying, bad dreams” (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 313, Text 8.5).

In this special kind of anti-witchcraft *namburbi*, the patient's role was especially active (Scurlock, 2006, pp. 43–44; examples of co-called ghost *namburbis*: pp. 46–47).

Namburbi rituals were especially important in times of chaotic events to avert evil. This was practiced by observing the sky, celestial divination, which resulted in the taking of decisions that were important for the whole empire in a time of crisis, very often of a military nature, and the unification of the activities of different kinds of diviners in order to protect the king and/or his empire:⁵

⁴ According to Koch: “The questions answered by the *āšipu* are exactly those you would expect from a divinatory diagnostic-prognostic procedure: The diagnostic question here is: “who is responsible” and “what can I do about it?” (Koch, 2017, p. 14). The *āšipu* Adad-šumu-ušur wrote letters and reports with astrological content: SAA 10, no. 206.

⁵ There are many protective and apotropaic rituals: (*Āšipu's Manual*) KAR 44; Geller, 2000, pp. 225–258; Jean, 2006; Maul, 1994, pp. 432–444; 2013, pp. 104–109; Frahm, 2018, pp. 9–47.

“Mars and Saturn in Lunar Halo on Full Moon Day

(7) These are words concerning Akkad. Mars remained four fingers distant from Saturn, it did not come close. It did not reach it. I have (nevertheless) copied (the relevant omen). What does it matter? Let the pertinent *namburbi* ritual be performed” (SAA 8, 82, o. 7–10).

c) Preparation and course of rites

The *barû* before undertaking his inquiry is obliged to “cleansed himself with holy water, anointed himself with purifying oil containing the plant ‘resisted 1,000 (diseases),’ then dressed with a pure garment, purified with tamarisk and soap plant, he has to chew on an empty stomach chips of cedar or cypress in his mouth” (Böck, 2010, p. 218). Later he asked the gods Shamash and Adad (*šaālu*) and the god(s) answered (*apālu*) with confirmation (*annu*) or refusal (*ullu*) (Zimmern, 1901, pp. 88–89). This means that the diviner had to perform an elaborate ritual to be in contact with divinity. The ritual of the diviner started “at dawn, before sunrise” on a propitious day.⁶ Divination is performed at special places, such as the edge of a village, which symbolize a transition from one sphere to another (Koch, 2013, pp. 133–134). The place of divination is “the place of truth of Shamash and Adad,” “the place of decision/judgment by divination” (Koch, 2010, p. 45). The 1st millennium rituals show that divination could be performed in the framework of a complex ritual lasting from sunset to sunrise, in which sheep were sacrificed to Shamash and Adad. The distinction between divination and magic rituals, that gifts go from man to god in the latter not the former, does not hold for extispicy: “The diviner shall not approach the place of judgment, he should not lift the cedar, without present and gifts, they (the gods) will not reveal to him the secret answer to his question (*tāmīt pirišti*)” (Zimmern, 1901, nos. 1–20, 24; Koch, 2010, p. 51).

The diviner started a ritual with a prayer addressed to Shamash and Adad (SAA 4, p. xvi). Then he whispered the words of the query, which were addressed to “Shamash, great lord,” into the ears of the sacrificial victim. Beginning with the liver, which received special attention, the entire exta of the sheep came under scrutiny according to a fixed sequence. The preparations for the extispicy ritual seem to have been quite extensive, and that may explain why they took place only once a day by the Neo-Assyrian Period (SAA 4, p. xxiii; Flower, 2008, p. 161). The diviner had to be attentive and concerned about attire, food and drink, “Extispicy demands the rituals and the cultic purity

⁶ SAA 4, xxvi; “There is only one attestation of an extispicy performed on the unsuitable date of the 28th but since the text is broken, there is still the possibility that a collation may redeem the diviners,” see SAA 4, no. 5; Maul, 2018, p. 20.

of everything connected with the divination, including the haruspex and his assistants, the sacrificial animals, and the place of event. The contact of the unclean (describes as *lu'û*, *la ellu*, and the like), or the uninitiated in the lore of the diviner, *la kâšid ihzi* of the rituals, with either the, sacrificial sheep, or the place of divination, had the effect of making a favorable divine response impossible. The sacrificial sheep must not be deficient in any way must equally be without blemish.⁷ Cloudy weather during the performance, hiding the face of Shamash from the diviner, was interpreted as a bad omen. In this case, the diviner should excuse himself before the sun god with words: "Please do not take into consideration the fact that day is clouded and it is raining" (SAA 4, p. xxiii, 43, rev. 1; 18, 15; 26, 3'; 56, 13; 89, 8; 90, 10). In the case of something going wrong (Ambos, 2007, pp. 25–47) an 'emergency' procedure was prepared:

o 1' [Disregard the (formulation) of tod]ay's [ca]se, be it good, be it faulty, (and that) a clean or an unclean person [has touched] the sacri[ificial sheep].

o 2' [Disregard that the ra]m (offered) to your great divinity for the performance of the extispicy is deficie[nt or faulty].

o 3'(3) [Disregard that he who tou]ches the forehead of the sheep is dressed in his ordinary soiled garments, [(or) has touched] the (libation) beer, [the *mašhatu*-flour, the water, the container and the fire].

o 4'(4) [Disregard that] I, the haruspex your servant, am dressed in my ordinary soiled garments, [have eaten, drunk, or anointed myself with anything unclean], (or) changed or altered [the proceedings], (or that) the oracle query has become jumbled and faulty in my mouth" (SAA 4, 18, o. 1'–o 4').

Shamash was the god to whom offerings were made during magical rituals. The offerings in an anti-witchcraft ritual were usually presented at the beginning of the proceedings and resembled the regular offerings known from other types of *āšipūtu* rituals. "After the purification of the locale by sweeping and sprinkling water, a portable altar and a censer with juniper incense were set up. The altar was loaded with bread and with a confection made of honey (or date syrup) and ghee; dates and fine flour were strewn on top. If a sheep was sacrificed, the various meat portions were put on the altar as well. A libation of beer was made; often a special libation vessel was set up for this purpose, but sometimes the beverages were provided in bottles that were then placed on the altar. The offering arrangement could be set off from the rest of the ritual area by lines drawn with flour (Schwemer, 2015, p. 33)⁸; in any case,

⁷ Zimmern, 1901, p. 112, Text no. 11: 4–5, 9; SAA 4, xxvi. The diviners' prayer during ritual of extispicy is precisely described, see *The Cedar*. Foster, 1995, pp. 288–290.

⁸ Magical circle of flour is known from divinatory and magical rites, for example from Utukkū Lemnutū Series: Geller, 2007, p. xii.

the destructive rites carried out at a later point in the ritual would often take place at some distance from the offering arrangement" (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 21). The course of a magical ritual was very similar to its divinatory counterpart:

"¹⁴ Its ritual: Before Ištar, in a secluded place, you sweep the roof, you sprinkle pure water, you set up a portable altar (and) place a censer with *burāšu*-juniper (next to it). ¹⁵ You offer a pure sacrifice, you bring the shoulder, the caul fat and the roast meat, ¹⁶(then) you pour a libation of beer and wine. You lay down four bricks edge to edge, you heap twigs of poplar wood (on them). ¹⁷You kindle a torch with burning *sulphur* and then you light the pile of brushwood (with it). ¹⁸As soon as the pile of brushwood has burnt out, ¹⁹you strew cedar wood (chips), cypress wood (chips), 'sweet' reed, myrtle, *ballukku* aromatic and (scented) *maṣḥatu*-flour (on the embers). You pour a libation of beer and wine. ²⁰You recite this incantation three times before Ištar. Then he prostrates himself (and) tells (Ištar) everything that worries him. His prayer will be heard. ²¹God, king, magnate, nobleman, courtier, attendant and (the guard of) the gate of the palace will be(come) reconciled with that man; ²²his angry [g]ods will be(come) reconciled with him. He will obtain what he desires, he will walk about lordly ²³and he will obtain his wishes. They will talk favorably with him. ²⁴[You mov]e censer and torch past that man, then he shall go straight home. He must not look at an impure man (or) an impure woman" (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, pp. 368–369, Text 8.13).

In both cases the rituals have taken place in a secluded area which is connected with the idea of liminal space (in steppe, on a roof of house or at a canal bank) (Scurlock, 2006, pp. 22, 45).

The left side was unfavourable in both divinatory and magical procedures. In the opinion of Starr, the system of binary opposition is a "first paradigm" of Mesopotamian divination; the fundamentals of this structure are right/left, bright/dark, concave/convex (Starr, 1983, pp. 15, 18; Oppenheim, 1977, p. 211; Glassner, 2011, pp. 153–154; Winitzer, 2017, pp. 174–177, 198–201, 223).

"3 If a ewe: I ask for something, I [shut it up] in a house, I seal the door in its face, the sun rises and I see the ewe, its left eye is speckled: the enemy will raise his speckled eyes against us and defeat us."⁹

An "illness" associated with the left side is more dangerous and had to last longer than the seven days that was associated with the right side:

"If a donkey passes by at his right hand: that diseased person will recover and within one year he will die. If a donkey passes by at his left hand: that

⁹ No. ii Omens from an Ewe Confined Overnight (Lambert Folios 16364–71, 22945 verso), George, 2013, pp. 289–291.

diseased person will become ill and he will die (variant: he will recover)” (Labat: 22f.; George, 1991, pp. 142, 164).

The name of the malicious witch or warlock was written on the figurine’s left shoulder which had ominous meaning (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, pp. 139, 141, 142, 363; Text Group 7.6.2, 15’-16’ and 7.6.4, 8 and 7.6.5, 10 and 8.12).

The gratitude and gifts for the divine help were also attested in both procedures. After defeating his enemies, Zimri-Lim was obliged by the prophet of the god Shamash to thank the god and send him generous gifts (for example, the throne and his own daughter were to delivered to the temple of Shamash at Sippar) (Nissinen, 2017, p. 269).

The night’s rituals were often required for a successful procedure.¹⁰ Many magical (and/or medicine) terms and prescriptions required an overnight wait including purificatory water exposed to the power of the astral gods (Scurlock, 2006, p. 21; Schwemer, 2015, p. 42).¹¹ The purpose of astral influence is to establish that the celestial powers make the medication effective. In anti-witchcraft compendia the rule applied: “You shall keep it overnight” and the opening incantation of *Maqlû* calls on the gods of the night (Reiner, 1995, p. 48; Schwemer, 2015, p. 42).

Divination frequently took place at night, owing to the belief that that was when Shamash traverses the netherworld’s horizon. At this time, “when earthly judgment ceases, the interest of the cosmic judge turns to divinatory matters, the heavenly counterpart of legal verdicts” (Steinkeller, 2005, pp. 12–13; Winitzer, 2010, pp. 178–179). The night gods are frequently mentioned in both activities (Farber, 1989, p. 159, 5.2.6).

The differences between divination and magic

Divination as communication between the gods and humans received the approval of society and had high esteem within the community. However, it is also known that a magician was one who, through communication with the gods, had the power to do whatever he wished (Apul. *Apol.* 26; Edmonds III, 2019, p. 188). This means that the factor of being in contact with the gods was not sufficient to distinguish divination from magic. In some cases, the claim

¹⁰ *Mis-pî* ritual, inscribed KA-LUH.Û.DA and meaning “washing of the mouth” was performed at night, under the stars on the roof (or in courtyard) of the temple. Finally, exorcist (*mašmaššu*) gave the royal insignia to the king while reciting incantations as the king faced toward the east, toward rising sun. Pongratz-Leisten, 2015, p. 444.

¹¹ Interestingly, the evil rituals from the same reasons have been performed before the same stars.

to receive a special form of communication with the gods had the potential to disrupt the social order and could be treated as magical (For magic as communication: Collins, 2008, pp. 5–7).

a) Suspicious origins

It seems that the main difference lies not in claiming to have contact with the gods. Some kinds of divination – necromancy, for example – could be considered magical because the procedure has extraordinary efficacy. In this situation, the social location of the diviner is marginal, dubious or non-normative. In such the cases, divination could be treated as magical (evil) – i.e. potentially dangerous – because it makes claims to an authority far beyond the normal order (Edmonds III, 2019, pp. 33, 189).

As it turns out, the earliest specific reference to the use of skulls in divination is in a recipe found in two similar Mesopotamian texts which date to the first millennium BC. These fragmentary texts first stipulate the burning of juniper and sulphur in a censer and the preparation of a special salve that is rubbed onto the eyes before the god Shamash (Steinkeller, 2005, p. 24) who is referred to in the incantation and then addressed directly:

“... may he (i.e. Shamash) bring up a ghost from the darkness for me!
May he [put life back(?)] into the dead man’s limbs! I call [upon you],
O skull of skulls: may he who is within the skull answer [me!]
O Shamash, who brings light in (lit. “opens”) the darkne[ss!]” (BM 36703; Finkel, 1983–4, p. 9; Faraone, 2005, p. 275).

Skulls are often presented as regular equipment in magical rituals. In some anti-witchcraft rituals, figurines of warlock and witch are collected in a skull, whose opening it then closed and sealed (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 125, Text 7.4, ll. 8’–11’). The instruction of another ritual requires:

“²⁰You bathe a human skull with pure water, ²¹you rub it with oil, you bind white, red (and) blue (threads of) wool (on it)” (Abusch & Schwemer, 2011, p. 349, Text 8.7).

The second point is that magic could only be effective long-term within the social context. An interesting example which illustrates this social acceptance is the case of Sasi. It is related to divination, which was normally well accepted socially but in this case was treated differently because it was performed in an improper, malicious way. We have testimony that it was regarded as not correct prophecy, but rather vague vision (*diglu*), a kind of illusion. Only later, the genuine procedure and correctly applied divinatory rites give the favourable signs for the king. The prophecies from the conspiracy of Sasi (Holloway, 2002, p. 311, ref. 281) are the only known case that

the administrator of the temple refused to obey the prophetic words (SAA 13, 37; Nissinen, 2013, pp. 22-23. Pseudoprophecy in Harran, Sasi – ABL 1217 r. 2-5, see Nissinen, 2001, pp. 203-205; SAA 9, 1.4). In 671 BC, it was reported to Esarhaddon that a (treasonous) oracle had been given by Nusku of Harran to someone named Sasi, to the effect that the Sargonid dynasty shall be terminated (Holloway, 2002, p. 311, ref. 281): “Nabu-rehtu-usur reproduces this oracle given by the slave-girl near Harran. The author warns the king of peril in the name of Nikkal, urging that the guilty parties be executed with utmost dispatch. In another letter, a vision (*diglu*) was bestowed to the author regarding the king’s peril from named conspirators, including Sasi. Possibly, Nabu-rehtu-usur was himself a prophet, and therefore his exasperation over the anti-Sargonid oracles assumes a dimension of professional outrage” (Holloway, 2002, p. 411, ref. 488–491). Following this: “Kudurru, a Babylonian haruspex, melodramatically expostulated that the chief eunuch would usurp the kingship of Assyria and he himself become king of Babylonia” (SAA 10, 160, rev. 13, 31, see Holloway, 2002, p. 411; *The Conspiracy of Sasi*, SAA 16, 59. *More on the Conspiracy of Sasi*, SAA 16, 60, see YOS x, 31, iv 19–24). All in all, the situation concluded in a positive result for the king:

“ii 19–26) Favorable omens concerning the securing of my throne (and) the prolongation of my reign came to me in dreams and through oracles. I saw those signs, was encouraged, and my mood felt good” (57, ii 19-26; RINAP 4, p. 124).

As we see from this example, divination was treated as a part of a correctly functioning social order and the reflection of divine harmony (Charpin, 2013; Frahm, 2013). However, any deviation from the norm makes it suspicious and untrustworthy. Therefore, social status and its location in the human world and hierarchy is vitally important in distinguishing the category of divination. The diviner can only be socially – and first of all politically – approved after training for a long time and being recommended by his teachers. The first thing is to recognise him as a diviner and later to express acceptance for where and when the divination practices are performed. Following tradition and commonly accepted rules guarantees his reliability and provides divine favour. Divination is the way to contact the royal secret council and the divine assembly through the diviner, because only he had the authority to set the king’s plans before the gods via an extispicy, and to read the judgment of the gods:

“Being (now) clean, to the assembly of the gods I shall draw near for judgment.

O Shamash, lord of judgment! O Adad, lord of ritual acts and of divination!

In the ritual act I prepare, in the extispicy I perform put your truth!" (SAA 19, 55).

In the iconography, the diviner is depicted sitting in the judge's seat before Shamash and Adad and dispensing a just decision. These gods will stand by him, they will render a decision for him and give him an affirmative answer (Zimmern, 1901, pp. 1–20, 122–125; Starr, 1983, pp. 57–58).

In turn, it is said that evil magic is practiced by the category of people which are simply called 'others', i.e. witches and warlocks. Their "profession" was illegal and punishable (Schwemer, 2015, p. 28). Their social status must have been low, as the verdicts given by them via magical procedures seem to have been short-term and unreliable. Thus, the first main difference between divination and evil magic is clarity, transparency and social acceptance.

b) Not a dialogical way of practicing magic

The extispicy ritual itself was presented as a dialogue. The diviner asked (*saālu*) and the god answered (*apālu*). Similar phrases are regularly used in the Neo-Assyrian oracular queries placed before Shamash (*ilūtka rabītu ide*) "does your great divinity know it?," (*ilūtka rabītu idū*) "which your great divinity knows" (SAA 4 passim, for the same phrase in the *tāmītu*; Lambert, 1997, pp. 85–98). In the queries the question is formulated directly: "Does your great divinity know it? Is it decreed and confirmed in a favorable case (of extispicy) by the command of your great divinity, Shamash, great lord? Will he who can see, see it? Will he who can hear, hear it?" The Akkadian phrase is not necessarily to be understood as a question, but either way the implication is that the god has access to the answer and can make it known to the questioner. The closing formula of the queries sums up: "Be present (lit. 'stand') in this ram; place in it an affirmative answer, favorable, propitious omens of the oracular query (*tāmītu*) by the command of your great divinity so that I may see (them)" (SAA 4, p. xxii). Divination had its own order: first the gods wrote their decisions on the liver, then the diviner delivered his report to the king in written form and finally the decision of the king was announced to others – sometimes via immediately sent tablets (See SAA 4, p. xxviii and 1, 4; SAA 19, 121).

It is an important aspect of Babylonian omens that in many cases the events announced by signs were not considered inevitable fate. Once an imminent threat was recognised, one could try to avert it by offering sacrifices to the god whose anger was the cause of the approaching evil and by performing rituals called *namburbi*, which I mentioned earlier (SAA 10, 10, 5–rev. 5. *Namburbi* rituals; Rochberg, 2004, pp. 201, 272; Pingree, 1998, p. 128; Bottéro, 1992, p. 142; , 2001, p. 196; Beerden, 2013, p. 209; Livingstone, 2000, p. 383; Reiner,

1995, chap. 5). In the Mesopotamian system of interpreting signs, the portent which predicted, for example, the king's death, was not the cause of the king's death but only an omen of it. The prediction was considered only a warning that could be diverted by ritual measures provided through *namburbi*. (Lenzi, 2011, pp. 403–420; Jean, 2013, p. 111). *The Diviner's Manual* instructs that an evil prognostication would only become reality if it was not eliminated by the correct divination response (Oppenheim, 1974, p. 200, l. 46). The heart and core of these release rituals is an appeal on the part of the person affected by an evil omen to the divine judicial court in order to effect a revision of the individual's fate as announced by a sinister omen (Maul, 1999, pp. 124–126). The elimination of evil omens was achieved through apotropaic rituals accompanied by incantations and litanies chanted to appease the gods. These two actions were known in Babylonian as *āšipūtu* (from *āšipu*) and *kalūtu* (from *kalû*, or “lamentation-singer”), respectively (George, 2013, p. xvi).

Divination as communication with the divine was a dialogue with the gods and not a way to force them, as evil magic did. Nonetheless, the difference between a kind request and a cunning trick is almost indistinguishable from the perspective of both our contemporary science and monotheistic religion, which together form the framework of modern civilisation.

In summary of this aspect, magic tries to subvert fate. Divination thus uses the divine instructions and the visions of the future in an attempt to form a dialogue with the gods in order to alter some divine plans. We must remember, as I mentioned earlier, that *namburbi* rituals are also practiced in magical procedures (anti-witchcraft) and that they refer to the past in order to avoid unwanted consequences in the future.

c) Focussing on the future, unidirectional dimension of magic

The third major difference is the fact that magic seems to be only future-orientated. It cares only for a quick solution to a troublesome problem. For divination, it is often most important to know what caused a given crisis situation, for only then may the proper steps be taken to change it and normalise it. The purpose of divination is to identify the event in the past to propitiate the deity and remove the problem. From this perspective, divination is comprehensive and more complex, because the crucial task of the diviner is to identify the past error according to divine decree, heal the present and ensure a proper and prosperous future (Edmonds III, 2019, pp. 192; the example from Homer, Il. 1.62–7; about the possible magical meaning of Homeric verses: Collins, 2008, pp. 122–125).

Conclusion

According to Schwemer (Schwemer, 2007, pp. 1–7), the borders between Mesopotamian magic, religion and science are vague; this is quite an obvious statement even without conducting deeper analysis. During my discussions with eminent scholars (Geller, Schwemer, Scurlock) who studied this topic closely, I have never received a detailed definition of the difference between divination and magic. These two notions are intermingled with one another, because they all refer to one conceptual whole, they represent one coherent world. For example, in dangerous situations, the identity of the king was magically transferred to his substitute. This substitute took on the sins of the king and died in his place, after which the king could feel safe. This kind of existing reality and its consequences are incomprehensible and unacceptable to contemporary science, but were completely normal and understood by the ancient Mesopotamians.

The Mesopotamians were not stuck in a feeling of being torn between the irrationality of magic and the rationality of scientific (medical) or divinatory (astrological and extispical) procedures. For them, nothing was irrational in magical thinking (Scurlock, 2006, p. 81). Magic was also not separated from religion. Even the problem of evil magic existed naturally in the combined and multi-staged system of magic in Mesopotamian civilisation, or even in the whole ancient Near Eastern world (Farber, 1989, pp. 1–2).

According to Sørensen and Petersen, divinatory practices were an attempt to acquire knowledge from the divine powers and magical treatments, were an attempt to convince a person that they could regain control and have impact on their future. This means that divination unveiled the cause of conditions and obstacles, while magic manipulated in order to protect from potential dangers unveiled through divination. In their opinion, both divination and magic manipulated the divine (Sørensen & Petersen, 2021). I would rather not use in this case the word manipulation. I think they tried to find all possible means of shaping the reality to reach their own benefits. The Mesopotamians do not differ from contemporary people when it comes to the goals of life, but they differed in the methods chosen to achieve these goals.

I have not found any internal contradiction in the assessment of divination in Mesopotamian civilisation. Divination assured the stability of the dynasty, and hence of the whole empire, and was treated as genuine knowledge given by the gods. Magic, as I have tried to prove above, was often treated in the same way as divination, especially from the perspective of the common people. However, so-called evil magic did not meet the conditions that were associated with divination, i.e. clarity and stability in the procedures, and honouring

divine verdicts without putting pressure on the gods. Without offering any stabilising factors and not fulfilling the main canons of official religion, evil magic was doomed to exist on the margins of the community.

The ancients were convinced that they knew a way to contact the divine powers and use them for the benefit of the human community. Even this kind of magical “knowledge” and non-normative practices, which were dangerous because of their potentially destabilising effects, seem to have been commonly accepted. They were used by those individuals who wanted to gain advantage for their affairs, interests and desires against the normative order. Generally, the gods were prayed to and asked for help via divinatory methods. All in all, the people used all the above-mentioned practices according to their needs and possibilities, looking for help – especially in everyday affairs. The frequency with which anti-witchcraft rites were used only confirms that people also took advantage of evil magic or believed that others had used it against them. Taking this into account and observing in the medical treatment that patients asked for help from all the possible professionals – magical, divinatory and medical – I assume that for the Mesopotamians it was natural to use all these methods and that they were generally approved. In this sense, divination was magical and the *barû* and *āšipu* were among those professionals serving ordinary people as well as the royal court. All these practices and ceremonies, often surprising from the contemporary point of view, shaped Mesopotamian civilisation and made it unique.

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