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Materiality and Reality of the Communication of Divine Will in the Sargonid Period*

1 Introduction

The ancient Mesopotamian world-view determined that human life on earth was inextricably intertwined with the divine, and the omnipresence of this divine element was never seriously questioned. It was beyond doubt that the plans of the gods and their wishes could be observed in all manner of celestial and terrestrial signs and events, which could be interpreted through the art of divination. The deduction of the divine will was of particular importance for the kings and rulers of Mesopotamian states throughout the ages, as they laid great emphasis on governing in accordance with the wishes of the gods, and it was understood that this was to ensure a successful reign.

Messages from the gods could manifest themselves in a myriad of forms, which can be divided into two categories: *omina oblativa* consisted of signs that could be readily observed in the environment and which foreshadowed certain events, while *omina impetrativa* were provided by the gods on request, in a substance offered to them embedded in a specific ritual. Although both types of omens held significance for the running of the state, their implications were different: while the former could only inform the ruler of impending fortune or evil, leading to counteractive measures if necessary, the latter could be used to ascertain the gods' approval or disapproval of a particular course of action.

The communication of the divine will undergoes a sequence of transmissions of information, starting with its display through an ominous event and ending with the delivery of the insights gained to the king; where deemed necessary, the revelations could be further utilised to validate or justify political and military decisions, and as such were further distributed. During these processes the materiality of the communication is not static, but changes character depending on circumstances such as the sender, recipient and aim of the transmission, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, the specifics of any single communicative act are influenced by the individual correspondent.

* The present contribution results from the author's research within the Sonderforschungsbereich (Collaborate Research Centre) 933 "Materiale Textkulturen. Materialität und Präsenz des Geschriebenen in non-typographischen Gesellschaften" (Teilprojekt B 01 "Materialisierung gedanklicher Ordnung. Darstellungsformen von Gelehrtenwissen auf Tontafeln"). The SFB 933 is financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

2 Significance of the Extrapolation of the Divine Will in the Ancient Near East

The first extant reference to the use of divinatory methods can be found in a royal inscription of Ur-Nanše of Lagaš from the 26th century BC and reflects the use of extispicy, i.e. the examination of the entrails of a sacrificial animal, usually a sheep. The text reports that the suitability of the candidate for the office of priest of the goddess Nanše was established by oracular means.[1] Although no lists of omen entries are preserved among the many texts from the third millennium BC, there is ample evidence showing that extispicy was practiced and played an important role in the conception of kingship already throughout this early period: The occupational title "extispicer"—literally "the one who extends the hand towards the sacrificial animal"—appears in Early Dynastic lists of professions from Farā and Tell Abū Ṣalābīḫ (ca. 26th century BC),[2] and rulers such as Gudea of Lagaš (2141–2122 BC)[3] and Ur-namma of Ur (2112–2095 BC) praise themselves as proficient in extispicy[4] or as ruling by its grace.[5] Furthermore, so-called historical omens from later periods, pairing specific observations with concrete historical events from the reign of a particular king, are indicative of the use of the practice during the period of the Akkadian empire (2340–2200 BC),[6] as are clay models of livers from Mari that contain historical references.[7] Occasional

1 The foundation tablet discovered in Lagaš's sister town Girsu (modern Tellōh, located in Southern Mesopotamia) reads: ^{d}nanše.ur / lugal / lagaš / … / ur-nimin / dam- / ^{d}nanše / maš bi-pà "Ur-Nanše, the king of Lagaš, … chose Ur-Nimin as 'spouse' of the god Nanše by oracular means." (*RIME* 1.9.1.17 col. i 1–3 … iii 3–6).

2 lú-máš-šu-gíd (VAT 12619 [published in *WVDOG* 43, 47] viii 63 — ED lú C from Farā [ancient Šuruppak, located in Southern Mesopotamia on the banks of a since dried-up tributary of the Euphrates]; AbS T 235 // AbS T 232, 130 — ED lú E from Abū Ṣalābīḫ [not yet securely identified with an ancient geographical name, located about 35–40 miles north of Farā on the same tributary]).

3 All dates given follow the so-called middle chronology. For an overview of the early chronology of Mesopotamia and its problems refer to Åström 1987–1989.

4 máš-bar$_6$-bar$_6$-ra šu mu-gíd-dè / máš-a šu ì-gíd máš-a-ni ì-sa$_6$ "He inspected a white sacrificial animal. He inspected the sacrificial animal; his sacrificial animal (i.e. his omen) was favourable." (Gudea Cylinder A xii 16f.; cuneiform copy: *TCL* 8 pl. xii; edition: *RIME* 3 1.1.7.CylA).

5 zà-mi / ^{d}en-líl-le u$_4$-du$_{10}$-du$_{10}$-ga-na máš-e bí-in^{i}-pà-dè-en "Enlil appointed me in his good days by means of an oracle." (*TCL* 15 nr. 38: 57f.)

6 With the exception of an apodosis alluding to the legendary king Gilgameš (*YOS* 10 42 i 2f.), which is not necessarily to be understood as reflecting historical fact, no references to rulers preceding the Akkad dynasty are preserved in the corpus (Goetze 1947, 1f.). Omens with historical references are not restricted to the extispicy series, but are also documented in the series concerning birth malformations, *šumma izbu*, and *enūma Anu Enlil*, the astrological omen series (Goetze 1947, 1 n. 1), although further sources recording the use of these practices are lacking.

7 The clay models recovered at Mari (modern Tell Ḥarīrī, located on the western bank of the Euphrates in Syria, near the border with Iraq) present single findings of the liver that are indicated graphically with only the apodosis noted in writing on the reverse of the items. A number of these apodoses,

references regarding other divinatory methods in the early periods,[8] as well as the relatively large and differentiated nature of the written corpus in place at the beginning of the second millennium BC, show that extispicy was not the sole form of divination practiced in the third millennium BC.[9]

By the Old Babylonian period, lists of omens consisting of entries of the form "if (observation), then (prediction)" have emerged and compendia of different genres of divination are attested, some of which—namely those relating to *omina impetrativa* other than extispicy—are short-lived and do not enter the so-called "stream of tradition".[10] *Omina oblativa* range from the observation of astrological and weather phenomena to the behaviour of humans and animals and the appearance of facial features, to name but a few. In the late second and early first millennium BC, the entries are consolidated, arranged and elaborated into extensive collections of a "serialised" character comprising a set number of tablets with prescribed entries, resulting in the form known best to us from Neo-Assyrian tablet finds from the capital city Nineveh, but often attested elsewhere with little deviation. The standardisation of the com-

which are generally introduced with *amūt* "liver, i.e. omen, of …" illustrating the inseparability of the material properties of the liver and its foreboding, refer to royal names, sometimes giving as little additional information as a simple geographical name. The models Rutten 1938, n°s. 1, 2 and 3 refer to the Akkadian kings Sargon, Rīmuš and his brother Maništušu, and Narām-Sîn respectively, while n°s. 5 and 6–8 name the Ur-III (2111–2003 BC) kings Šulgi and Ibbi-Suen and n°s. 9–10 and 11 connect the portrayed findings with the early Old Babylonian kings Išbi-Erra and Išme-Dagan of Isin. As stated by Pettinato, the liver models "sind der Sprache nach noch altakkadisch" (Pettinato 1966, 17) and, if not primary sources from the Akkadian period, can be understood as carrying on earlier traditions (cf. also Goetze 1947, 264f.).

8 Cf. for example the boastful account by Šulgi of Ur, who claims that he was versed in both lecanomancy and libanomancy (Volk 1996, 210 n. 187).

9 Note also the presence of historical apodoses in the series *šumma izbu* and *enūma Anu Enlil* (note 5).

10 While a number of methods for *omina impetrativa*, such as divination by means of pouring oil on water, scattering flour, burning incense and similar, are amongst the early omen compendia, extispicy is the sole practice of provoked omens to become part of the written 'stream of tradition', as reflected in the sources from the first millennium. However, their absence from the written record does not seem to reflect the reality of their use, as references in later texts illustrate (cf. for example Nougayrol 1963, 381 for aleuromancy). Rather, it has to be assumed that these cheaper methods for the investigation of the divine will were commonplace among the general population, who did not have access to sacrificial sheep, and that their absence from the written record reflects the fact that writing was intrinsically connected to the administrative body of the state and the wealthy upper classes. In addition, it is conspicuous that the two Old Babylonian lecanomancy texts, which preserve the majority of the entries including apodoses, contain a limited number of predictions regarding the fate of the army and are mainly concerned with the destiny of ordinary people. The 72 entries of the text published by Giovanni Pettinato as "Text I" (Pettinato 1966, 12ff.) contain 16 references to campaigns, only one of which is the sole prediction of the apodosis, while all others are part of two-part apodoses, with alternative interpretations for campaign and sick patient. "Text 2" (Pettinato 1966, 57ff.) has a slightly larger ratio, with 17 apodoses referring to military campaigns in 67 entries in total, three of which are single-part apodoses.

pendia goes hand in hand with their inflation to compilations containing as many as 10000 omens, spanning more than one hundred tablets.[11] This is driven by two main factors. On the one hand, the aspiration to create comprehensive works, neglecting no possible observation, leads to the creation of purely theoretical entries that follow the combinational patterns of the series in question, despite not reflecting observable realities;[12] on the other hand, the apparently secondary arrangement in series with a particular focus means that single omens and even whole complexes of observations find their way into more than one series.[13]

3 The Neo-Assyrian Network of Scholars in Royal Employ

Just like their forebears, the Neo-Assyrian kings considered themselves rulers by divine favour and representatives of the Sun God on earth, installed to execute the will of the gods. In order to live and rule in accordance with this, the palace employed a large staff of scholars from five main disciplines that could be traced back to the antediluvian sages:[14] Personnel educated in the fields of *tupšarūtu* ("astrology"), *bārûtu* ("extispicy"), *āšipūtu* ("incantation"), *asûtu* ("medicine"), and *kalûtu* ("lamentation")[15] were at the king's service for advice and support and to carry out all necessary actions.[16] While there does not seem to have been a clear division between experts of

11 The most extensive series is the collection of terrestrial omens, known after its incipit as *šumma ālu ina melê šakin* "if a city is set on a height", which must have spanned at least 107 tablets containing around 10000 entries (Freedman 1998, 6).

12 Rochberg-Halton 1990, 27.

13 While each series has a particular focus and collects observations in accordance with its main theme, the exhaustion of all possible phenomena necessarily leads to overlapping topic areas. Thus entries included in the teratomancy series, *šumma izbu*, also have a certain relevance in sections of the terrestrial series *šumma ālu* concerned with animals (Moren 1980, 53f.).

14 According to legend, a total of seven fish-men emerged from the *apsû*, the sweet water horizon situated below the earth and residence of the god of wisdom, Enki/Ea, on his orders to deliver knowledge of the sciences and crafts and other aspects of civilisation to humankind (Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 296). The story is still reflected in Berossos' *Babyloniaca* (Burstein 1978, 13f.).

15 Verderame 2008, 52.

16 The plans of the gods were not inevitable, and rather than having to surrender to evil portended by the observation of an unfavourable unprovoked omen, becoming aware of it in advance provided the opportunity for counteraction by means of performing the relevant ritual, as is reflected in the nonchalant attitude of the Assyrian scholar Balasî (*SAA VIII* 82, 10: *mì-i-nu ḫi-iṭ-ṭu* NAM.BÚR.BI-*šú lu e-pi-iš* "What is the harm? Let its *namburbi* ritual be performed." For the nature and role of *namburbi* rituals see Maul 1994). Particularly serious cases threatening the life of the king necessitated the performance of the complex substitute king ritual, during which a commoner was installed on the throne for a prescribed period of 100 days while the king himself was to be addressed as "the farmer" (cf.

the single disciplines, and scholars were versed in the knowledge of assorted texts of a variety of genres,[17] individuals were employed for specific tasks. The *tupšarrū* were primarily responsible for the observation and interpretation of celestial phenomena set out in the series *enūma Anu Enlil*, but were expected to stay alert to signs from other series of unprovoked omens of possible significance for the fate of the king or the country. As an expert in extispicy, the *bārû* was commissioned to obtain essential information indicating whether a planned undertaking was seen as favourable or unfavourable in the eyes of the gods. Although the extispicy series was composed according to the same principles as other omen series, listing entries of the nature "if ..., then ...", its application was quite different. Apodoses were essentially reduced to their nature as positive or negative and the answer to any individual omen query was obtained through the addition of all positive and negative signs observed on the sacrificial animal's liver.[18]

The experts, referred to as *ummânū* in Akkadian, were divided into an inner circle of royal advisers, and an outer circle consisting of the more remote scholars. Members of the inner circle, who seem to have been recruited largely from a limited number of influential and established Assyrian scholarly families, were situated at court[19] or in the capital city and held considerable power.[20] Extraneous advisers who were not resident at or near the palace were part of a complex network, monitoring ominous events outside of the capital and spanning the entire territory of the Neo-Assyrian empire.[21] While the performance of extispicy was the main focus of the diviners in

for example *SAA X* 26, sent during this period: *a-na* LÚ.ENGAR EN-*ia* "To the farmer, my lord" (l. 1)). In order for the ritual to be effective and spare the king's life, the substituted subject had to either die or be killed at the end of the period in question to satisfy the divine plan. For a description of the complex of rituals and activities, see Verderame 2013, 317ff.

17 A letter from the Babylonian scholar Marduk-šapik-zēri details his accomplishments not only in his father's profession, the discipline of lamentation (*kalûtu*), but in the study of a variety of omen series (*SAA X* 160, 36–46).

18 See, for example, the extispicy report *SAA IV* 280, which, following a detailed report of the observations during the examination (ll. 1–13), repeats the indicators with negative implications (ll. 14–17) and sums up 5 TAG.MEŠ *ina* ŠÀ-*bi* / SIG_5.MEŠ *ia-a-nu* / TAG-at "(There are) five 'afflictions' in it, there are no positives—unfavourable." (ll. 18–20). While the simple addition of positive and negative apodoses formed the basis for the interpretation of an extispicy, it was complicated by the fact that certain "joker" signs had specific implications and could reverse the result or render a query void (Koch-Westenholz 2000, 57f sub *nipḫu* and 61 sub *pitruštu*).

19 *SAA X* 182, a plea from a slighted extispicer appealing to the crown prince, shows that a place within the inner circle of scholars was lucrative and had many benefits attached, but that the position was never secure and individuals were dependent on the mercy of the royal family.

20 Thus displays of rivalry and jealousy, as in *SAA X* 226, 30–49, are not surprising and were probably part of everyday life at the Neo-Assyrian court.

21 *SAA VIII* 499 refers to a meeting between the sender and the king in the Southern Babylonian city Ur (ll. 10f.) and indicates that remotely stationed scholars did not communicate with the king solely in writing, but could have personal audiences.

the king's vicinity, this type of *omina impetrativa* did not enjoy the same significance in the remainder of the empire,[22] and observations of phenomena that might foreshadow significant future events were of greater importance. It was particularly crucial for the king to have *tupšarrū* stationed throughout Assyrian and Babylonian territory to "keep the king's watch"[23] and submit regular reports,[24] as the possibility for the observation of celestial phenomena could vary geographically and any singular event connected to animal or human behaviour could be of significance.

All scholarly experts were bound to the king by oath,[25] although appointment to the king's service was by no means for life and individuals depended on his good will as they could be demoted at any point.[26] In addition to the oath, the loyalty of distant scholars who could not be under the direct control and supervision of the king and his most trusted advisers, often seems to have been secured through the residence of the scholars' sons at the royal court, ultimately as hostages.[27]

4 Materiality of the Divine Message

Although part of the same idea, namely the interaction and communication with the gods to determine divine plans for the future of humankind, *omina oblativa* and *omina impetrativa* differed considerably in their conception and use.

Omina oblativa were dependent on the gods providing information and could only foreshadow significant events in accordance with the established framework of entries within the omen series. Thus the nature and shape of the gods' communications were predetermined by the inclusion of any given event in the omen series, as only

22 This does not take into account military campaigns, during which inquiries into the divine will were indispensable. It is likely that under those circumstances, other types of *omina impetrativa* that required fewer resources than extispicy could also be employed.

23 Cf. a letter from the Babylonian astrologer Munnabitu, who states LUGAL *ṭè-e-mu il-tak-na-an-ni um-ma* EN.NUN-*a úṣur* "The king has given me instructions. Thus he: "Keep my watch!"" (*SAA VIII* 316, 30) and notes elsewhere that, now that he has submitted his report, the chief exorcist should carry out all necessary measures (l. 18).

24 *SAA VIII* 338 indicates that an astrological report was due to be issued at the end of the month and that early reports could be understood as premature (ll. 4–8).

25 *SAA X* 7, 6–14: [^{lú}]A.BA.MEŠ ^{lú}ḪAL.MEŠ / [^{lú}]MAŠ.MAŠ.MEŠ / [^{lú}]A.ZU.MEŠ / [^{lú}]*da-gíl* MUŠEN.MEŠ / [*ma*] *n-za-az* É.GAL / [*a*]-*ši-ib* URU / ^{iti}BARAG UD.16.KÁM / *ina* ŠÀ *a-de-e* / *er-ru-bu* "The astrologers, the extispicers, the exorcists, the physicians and the augurs, who are courtiers of the palace and residents of the city, will enter into the oath on the sixteenth day of Nisannu".

26 *SAA X* 294 presents a long and detailed account of the fate of Urad-Gula, who, (at least in his own opinion) through no fault of his own fell from royal grace, and *SAA VIII* 442 shows the plight of a scholar who has been assigned to making bricks instead of following his profession.

27 Cf. *SAA VIII* 517, which ends with the plea to return the scholar's son to his supervision so that both may carry out their services to the king together (ll. 20–23).

events listed as ominous could be interpreted and understood, and the meaning of any given event was prescribed *verbatim* in the paired prediction. As stated above, the main purpose of the observations was the identification and subsequent prevention of impending evil. However, despite all predictions concerning the fate of the country or the king having to be reported to the palace by royal decree,[28] this was directly dependent on the presence or absence of an observer and his or her knowledge of its pertinent meaning, as the majority of ominous events were singular and selective.

Omina impetrativa, on the other hand, offered a means for the human partner of the conversation to start the dialogue and could be performed as required, putting divine information at the disposal of the king. The significance of this was particularly enhanced by the application of Neo-Assyrian extispicy, employed to gain clear approval or dismissal of royal plans rather than providing disjointed pieces of information on possibly irrelevant or disconnected topics. With expense as the only limiting factor to the frequency of addressing the gods and the performance of the enquiry by trained extispicers, the risk of missing any important communication was as good as eliminated. In addition, precautions were put in place to ensure that no unknown factors, such as unconscious improper conduct by anyone involved in the performance, would alter the disposition of the gods and influence the outcome of the query.[29]

5 "In the eye of the Beholder": The Impact of the Scholar as Recipient of the Divine Message

Theoretically, the interpretation of signs on the basis of the existing omen collections was predetermined and *ad hoc* interpretations were not intended. However, the process of interpretation as reflected in the omen reports is more fluid, as both astrologers and diviners could only ever provide a subjective interpretation.

The starting point of any reading of the divine signs was formed by the selection of phenomena or characteristics observed, which was certainly determined by the

28 Since diviners in the service of the king were a priori employed to submit all observations to the palace and were bound by oath to this effect, the decree seems to have been a general address to the country. Although omens were no doubt part of everyday life, it is questionable to what extent the general population, and especially the illiterate parts of society, would have been aware of the specific wording of any of the extensive omen collections or in a position to transmit any observation to the king.

29 The so-called *ēzib* ("leave aside, disregard") formulae introduce possible scenarios that might have an impact on the outcome of the extispicy, such as the contact of the sacrificial animal with an impure person or the unwilling contamination of the extisipicer, and instruct the gods not to take those into account when providing their answer to the oracle query (Starr 1990, xxii–xxvii).

knowledge and experience of the individual. Another factor was their familiarity with the required section of one of the lengthy compendia, as the presence of all tablets of an omen collection at any observation "in the field" was unrealistic in light of the sheer volume of text. The fact that it was not possible for scholars to memorise the entire work by heart is highlighted by assurances in the correspondence that observations would be checked against the written tradition.[30] However, the memory of the exact details of an observed sign could fade in the time elapsed between observation and reference check, and features could be overlooked during the initial observation due to the scholar's ignorance as to their significance.

The situation was further complicated because the exact meaning of any given sign was often ambiguous, difficult to understand or in need of further explanations[31] and could thus lead to differing interpretations.[32] Frequently, extraneous material or oral traditions could be drawn upon that were not part of the canonical series,[33] which in turn could be modified from time to time,[34] no doubt resulting in deviating versions.

6 Realities of Life and Their Impact on the Transmission of Divine Communication to the King

In light of the subjective nature of the interpretations, it is not surprising that the confidence enjoyed by scholars was limited to the extent that more than one individual was entrusted with the same task, and there are frequent attestations of disagreements about observations[35] and of warnings to the king not to accept a differing interpretation of a particular phenomenon.[36] Despite the disagreements and compe-

30 In *SAA X* 71 the astrologer Nabû-aḫḫe-eriba informs the king that the observation will be checked and the relevant tablet sent to the king for reference (ll. 1'–5').

31 As pointed out by Balasî in a letter to the king with regard to the terrestrial omen series (*SAA X* 60). The same scholar sends instructions for the exact details to be laid out to the king by one of his advisers on receipt of the news of a lunar eclipse (*SAA X* 57 rev. 3'–7'). The intricate nature of the texts, which rarely used phonetic writing, preferring obscure logographic spellings known only to the initiated, led to the creation of a whole subgenre of commentary texts during the first millennium.

32 In the report *SAA VIII* 7, 10–12, the astrologer Issar-šumu-ereš points out to the king: "Is there any sign that is set? There is not! (GIŠKIM-*šu-ú me-me-ni i-ba-ši* / *ša ir-bu-u-ni* / *la-áš-šu*).

33 *SAA X* 8 quotes omens that are "not from the Series" (*la-a ša* ÉŠ.QAR-*ma* [l. 28]), but "from the oral (tradition) of the scholars" (*ša pi-i um-ma-ni* [l.29]), or "extraneous" (*a-ḫi-u* [l. 35]).

34 Unfortunately it is not clear which series the modification suggested in *SAA X* 177, 15–22 refers to.

35 E.g. *SAA VIII* 83, 6–8: *it-ti-ma-li* ^{Id}15-MU-APIN-*eš* / *ina* ŠÀ É.GAL *ṣa-a-su* / *a-na* ^{Id}PA-PAB.MEŠ-SU *ig-di-ri* "Yesterday, Issar-šumu-ereš had a quarrel with Nabû-aḫḫe-eriba in the palace." Both individuals are scholars known from the correspondence as reporting to the king regularly.

36 Balasî pleads with the king not to listen to a particular interpretation with the words "This omen

tition, however, there was a sense of community and brotherhood within the scholarly profession,[37] certainly also inspired by a common interest to ensure the king's dependence on the specialists.[38] Thus, it is not unthinkable that scholars in the same area would compare reports before sending them off, in order to avoid scandal or reprimand, meaning that feelings of mutual loyalty amongst individual scholars could influence the final message delivered to the king. For the most part, however, messages appended to the reports show that the senders acted in their own self-interest. The notes give insight into the plights of daily life and range from personal requests for the provision of sustenance[39] and complaints about duties of corvée work[40] to the jealous denunciation of colleagues.[41]

The inclusion of personal messages following the omen reports shows that the scholars believed that their submissions were either read by the king himself or transmitted to him verbatim, and that through this medium they could make their voices heard. Carried to extremes, this could lead to very short, generic reports of two lines followed by lengthy and detailed descriptions of personal problems,[42] giving the impression that in the documents in question the reports may have been used as an excuse for approaching the king. The quantity and length of the submitted reports from all scholars, however, makes it highly likely that the material was not delivered to the king directly, but to the chief *tupšarru*, who was part of the inner circle of advisers to the king and who would evaluate and consolidate the relevant information in order to make it more manageable.[43] Thus the pleas for help and the myriad

is a lie — let the king not take it to heart." (*šu-mu an-ni-u si-li-a-te šu-u-*[*tú*] / LUGAL *be-lí ina* UGU ŠÀ-*šú la i-šak-*[*kán-šú*] [*SAA VIII* 101, 13–14]).

37 This is evident in the request to send a physician for a fellow diviner who has fallen ill, attached to the report *SAA VIII* 463, and the apparent advice concerning the interpretation of a particular sign offered in *SAA X* 384.

38 This is no doubt also the reason behind the statement that no uninitiated person could possibly understand the full extent of an omen series in the previously cited *SAA X* 60.

39 *SAA VIII* 474, 10–21.

40 *SAA VIII* 296, 4–20.

41 *SAA X* 289, 72.

42 See, for example, *SAA VIII* 309.

43 At least some of the scholars who submitted written reports to the palace also seem to have enjoyed occasional personal audiences, as in the case of the extispicer Kudurru, who writes: *ul-lu* LUGAL *be-lí* / *ṭè-e-mu* / *iš-kun-an-ni* / *am-ma ina* MU.AN.NA / 2-*šú a-na pa-ni-ia* / *al-ka* "Did the king, my lord, not order me: 'Come before me twice a year!'" (*SAA X* 371, 32–37).

well-wishes expressed by the scholars,[44] which were probably intended to secure the king's favour, may never have reached their intended audience.[45]

7 Materiality of the Material of the Communications: A Note on the Chance of Preservation

When evaluating the materiality and nature of the communication of divine will to the king in the Neo-Assyrian period, it has to be borne in mind that the information available is incomplete due to the chance of preservation and discovery. The excavation of large numbers of tablets in the archives of the Neo-Assyrian palace in Nineveh[46] means that the spotlight on the correspondence between the king and his scholars is restricted to reports and letters sent to the palace. While formulations such as "regarding what the king wrote to me"[47] document bilateral communication, the exact nature of these communications remains obscure in the absence of the discovery of larger private archives of the scholars. In addition, references in a number of reports point to the use of wooden writing boards,[48] none of which have survived through the ages, and there is the element of oral communication, which certainly took place, at least at court, but the extent of which is impossible to grasp.

44 For a particularly emphatic wish of good luck cf. *SAA VIII* 421, 8–15: ^{d}*aš-šur* ^{d}UTU ^{d}+AG *u* ^{d}AMAR.UTU / UD-*mu a-na* UD-*mu* ITI *a-na* ITI / MU.AN.NA *a-na* MU.AN.NA *ṭu-ub* ŠÀ-*bi* / *ṭu-ub* UZU *ḫi-du-ti u ri-šá-a-ti* / ^{giš}GU.ZA *šá ki-na-a-ti* / *a-na da-riš a-na* UD.MEŠ GÍD.DA.MEŠ / *ù* MU.AN.NA.MEŠ *ma-a'-da-a-ti* / *a-na* LUGAL *be-lí-ia lid-di-nu* "Let Aššur, Šamaš, Nabû and Marduk day after day, month after month, year after year, give to the king, my lord, happiness, health, joy and exultation, and a firm throne forever, for long days and for many years."

45 *SAA X* 328 bears witness that letters sent to the king could remain unanswered, as an exasperated enquiry after the king's health following the repeated dispatch of medication shows: *šum-ma ú-š*[*e*^{i}]-*ri*^{i}-*bu ina pa-an* [LUGAL EN]-*ia* / *šum-ma la ú-še-rib-bu la ú-da* / *la gab-ri e-gír-ti a-mar* / *la* DI-*mu šá* LUGAL *be-lí-ia áš-šam-me* "I do not know whether they were brought before the king or whether they were not brought; I do not see an answer to my letter; I do not hear (about) the health of the king, my lord" (ll. 11–14).

46 The tablets were excavated at Kouyunjik, one of the ruin mounds of the ancient capital, located on the left bank of the Tigris opposite the modern city of Mosul, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

47 E.g. *SAA X* 68, 7–8: *ša* LUGAL *be-lí* / *iš-pur-an-ni*.

48 For attestations see Hunger 1992, 325 and Parpola 1993, 343 respectively, sub *lē'u* "writing-board".

8 Concluding Remarks

A demonstrated active personal interest in the study of omen literature and a certain readiness to dismiss or reprimand scholars deemed unfit for royal service show that the Neo-Assyrian kings were not blindly reliant on their scholars' reports and advice. Aware of the possibility of errors of judgement, as well as outright manipulation,[49] the assignment of more than one individual to any one task was used as a mechanism of verification, although it is likely that irregularities could still go unnoticed.

While the extent of manipulations and their motivations—for personal gain, out of fear or due to familial, regional or even national allegiance—cannot be reconstructed, the understanding of the Neo-Assyrian omen scholar as "an automaton or a robot",[50] only serving to supply the king with information, must be rejected. Rather, the letters and reports reveal the reality of their human nature and the fact that their judgement, although based on a deep-rooted belief in the omnipresence of the divine, could be influenced by a myriad of other, more worldly, factors.

It emerges from the available evidence that the relationship between the Neo-Assyrian kings and their scholars was one of mutual dependence. On the one hand, the king was in no position to navigate all relevant knowledge, observations, their interpretation and possible remedial ritual actions, so he had no choice but to rely on and trust in the abilities of his staff to provide him with the information necessary to shape imperial policy. On the other hand, the scholars were dependent on the king as their employer and benefactor, and had to tread the fine line between making the information supplied to the king as pleasing as possible while trying to secure their survival both professionally and literally, and retaining their professional integrity, particularly in the face of a comparison with competing experts.

Abbreviations

AbS-T	Signature for tablets from Abu Ṣalābīḫ
RIME	*Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Early Periods* (Toronto)
SAA	*State Archives of Assyria* (Helsinki)
TCL	*Textes Cuneiformes*
YOS	*Yale Oriental Series* (New Haven/London)
WVDOG	*Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* (Wiesbaden)

49 In *SAA X* 179 a scholar freely admits to falsifying an extispicy result under duress.

50 Parpola 1983, xviii.

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