

LEFT/RIGHT SYMBOLISM IN MESOPOTAMIAN DIVINATION*

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The world of Mesopotamian divination is populated by calves with noses on their buttocks, snake-headed babies, soil that oozes blood, livers covered with networks of tissues, misplaced membranes, and odd spots; lizards falling into beer, pigs blundering into houses, strange flashes of light and queer noises. We confront a vast, baffling array of real and surreal and we acknowledge the indisputable place of divination in Mesopotamian intellectual endeavour. In order for our enormous corpus of omens to make a contribution in proportion to its size we need to trace a path through this puzzling world and retrieve what we can of the underlying speculative process. The challenge, in short, is to find systematic interconnections between the protases of omens and their apodoses.

Omens by definition are unusual. They stand apart from the context of normal life and are endowed with hidden significance. They represent direct contact with the unknown, the future, the mysterious, and the imaginative. Only rarely, however, are we able to trace the conceptual link that reaches outside the world of appearances and apprehend the internal logic of a single omen.

Systematic patterns of divinatory interpretation are even more difficult to delineate. However one operative principle has been observed. Ivan Starr found that in extispicy an anomalous feature on the right or the left is related to an auspicious or inauspicious prognostication according to objective principles. The system reflects a familiar symbolic pattern. The right side of the exta pertains to the inquirer and is positive; the left side pertains to his enemy and is negative. In other words, the right constitutes the *pars familiaris* and the left the *pars hostilis*¹.

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¹) I. Starr, *The Rituals of the Diviner*, Malibu 1983, p. 16.

Does this system exist in any other form of Mesopotamian divination? Consistent patterns related to right and left also occur in *Šumma Izbu*, but at first glance the pattern appears to be reversed. In his discussion of the connections between protases and apodoses in that series, Erle Leichty has noted:

“One absolute principle has been observed. Throughout the series an ominous feature on the right is bad and one on the left is good. A further refinement of this principle resulted in two ominous features on the right being good and two ominous features on the left being bad. This association is so consistent that we can only conclude that it is an absolute principle that guided the scribe in the selection of an apodosis.”²

The systems of both extispicy and *Šumma Izbu* correlate with one another and with other forms of divination where such systems do not at first appear to apply. In fact it seems as though we should be able to determine overarching systems of interpretation. We have no trouble at all detecting an intense desire on the part of those who recorded the omens to be systematic. Instead of expressing abstract principles of interpretation, the diviner-scribes strove for comprehensive classifications. Signs were classified according to opposing pairs — right/left, up/down, inside/outside. They were also recorded in larger classification groups. For example, a sign in the south was typically followed by the same sign observed in the north, east, and west.

Original *corpora* of omens were systematically expanded. By the time of the late series we find elaborate sequences of omens and overly extended classification patterns which included omens ranging from the trivial to the absurd. The formulators of this literature were clearly less interested in the empirical validity of the omens than in representing divinatory reality.

Our entry into this world can be gained by correlating classification systems. Large patterns emerge when we observe the way signs were organized and divinatory reality was represented³.

In extispicy the right/left duality serves to polarize a single divinatory context, the exta, into a negative and positive divinatory field. The anomalous features observed were further classified in opposing pairs with positive and negative values. A favorable or unfavorable prognostication is the compounded product of two factors — the positive and negative aspect of the sign and the context against which it

²) E. Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu* (TCS IV), Locust Valley 1970, p. 7.

³) For recent work on divinatory fields in extispicy see, J.-W. Meyer, *Untersuchungen zu den Tonlebermodellen aus dem Alten Orient* (AOAT 39), Kevelaer - Neukirchen-Vluyn 1987, and E. Leichty, “Sheep Lungs”, in M.E. Cohen - D.C. Snell - D.B. Weisberg (Eds.), *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, Bethesda 1993, pp. 132-133.

occurs. A light colored mark on the right was propitious. If it occurred on the left it represented a sign favorable to the enemy and the resulting omen was inauspicious.

Conversely, a dark colored mark on the right was inauspicious. A dark colored mark on the left is a double negative. It is detrimental to an enemy and the resulting omen is favorable⁴.

In this system we obviously find the reflection of a pervasive symbolic pattern and an orientation that lies at the core of much divinatory practice. When we observe the division of the body into right and left we observe the symmetry that divides the whole into equal halves and the asymmetry that gives one side the edge.

The stronger right hand and by extension the right side commonly attracts a wide array of positive associations. It is considered to be auspicious and it stands for a variety of positive moral and religious values such as justice, rectitude and purity. The left symbolizes antithetic values and stands for the inauspicious, the sinister, and the impure. The right often represents aspects of reality that can be clearly understood; it articulates what is unambiguous, certain, and verifiable. The left can express perceptions more difficult to penetrate. It evokes the shady, the unstable, the mutable — the imaginative.

It has been observed over and over that cultures express right/left symbolism consistently, although the values symbolized obviously vary⁵. If one proposes the not so daring hypothesis that right/left symbolism is consistent in Mesopotamian divination and that a general system of interpretation is based on it, then the apparent discrepancy in *Šumma Izbu* must be resolved. An explanation must be found for the fact that a sign on the right results in an inauspicious prediction and that one on the left was auspicious. In a divinatory procedure which judges physical malformations to be either auspicious or inauspicious a defect on the right is bound to be considered threatening and conversely, a defect on the left, which leaves the right side unaffected, must be the auspicious component.

In the following omens one can see the standard right/left symbolic associations operating in spite of the superficial transposition:

“If an anomaly has no right ear — the reign of the king will come to an end; his palace will be scattered; overthrow of the elders of the city; the

⁴) Starr, *cit.*, pp. 17-18.

⁵) The original analysis of right and left symbolism and its association with abstract values is Robert Hertz's famous essay of 1909, *La prééminence de la main droite, sociologie religieuse et folklore*, Paris 1970. For studies relating to this symbolic classification in a variety of world cultures see R. Needham (Ed.), *Right and Left: Essays on Symbolic Classification*, Chicago 1973.

king will have no advisors; the mood of the land will change; the herds of the land will decrease; you will make a promise to the enemy.”⁶

“If an anomaly has no left ear — the god has heard the prayer of the king, the king will take the land of his enemy, the palace of the enemy will be scattered, the enemy will have no advisors, you will decrease the herd of the enemy, he will make a promise to you.”⁷

“If an anomaly’s right ear is split — that ox-fold will be scattered.”⁸

“If an anomaly’s left ear is split — that ox-fold will expand; the ox-fold of the enemy will be scattered.”⁹

The system whereby double occurrences transform the prediction can also be explained. Double occurrences are based on additional features and augment the strength of the side on which they occur. For example:

“If an anomaly has two ears on the left and none on the right — the enemy will take your border city, your adversary will prevail over you.”¹⁰

“If an anomaly has two ears on the right and one on the left — the land will live under one command.”¹¹

“If an anomaly’s horns are on the right — the prince will have auxiliary troops.”¹²

“If an anomaly’s horns are on the left — the enemy: the equivalent.”¹³

“If an anomaly has two eyes on the left (and) one on the right — uprising, strife.”¹⁴

Thus a consistent principle of divinatory interpretation underlies both extispicy and *Šumma Izbu*. It is based on the analogical association of pairs of opposites, whose positive and negative values are well established. This consistent symbolic pattern reveals the binary nature of divination, in general, but does little by itself to elucidate

⁶) BE *iz-bu* GEŠTU 15-šú NU GÁL BALÁ LUGAL TIL É.GAL-šú BIR ŠUB-tim ši-bu-ut URU LUGAL *ma-li-ku* NU TUK-ši UMUŠ KUR NIŠ-ni bu-ul KUR TUR *ana* KÚR *qá-ba-a* GAR-an (CT 27, 37, 1; Leichty, TCS IV, 131, 1). For the expression *tēmu šanū* meaning “to change loyalty”, see CAD Š/I s.v. *šanū* B, p. 405.

⁷) BE *iz-bu* GEŠTU 150-šú NU GÁL DINGIR *te-es-lit* LUGAL *iš-me* LUGAL KUR KÚR-šú TI-qí É.GAL BIR-ah KÚR *ma-li-ku* NU TUK *bu-ul* KUR KÚR *tu-ša-ḥir-ma qá-ba-a-am* GAR-ku (CT 27, 37, 2; Leichty, TCS IV, 131, 2).

⁸) BE *iz-bu* GEŠTU 15-šú *pa-ar-sà-at* TÜR.BI BIR-ah (CT 27, 37, 5; Leichty, TCS IV, 131, 3).

⁹) BE *iz-bu* GEŠTU 150-šú *pa-ar-sà-at* TÜR.BI DAGAL-iš TÜR KÚR BIR-ah (CT 27, 37, 6; Leichty, TCS IV, 131, 4).

¹⁰) BE *iz-bu* 2 GEŠTU.MEŠ-šú *ina* 150 GAR.MEŠ-*ma šá* 15 NU GÁL URU ZAG-*ka* KÚR TI EN KA-*ka* UGU-*ka* GUB-[az] (Leichty, TCS IV 139, 116’).

¹¹) BE *iz-bu* 2 GEŠTU.MEŠ-šú *ina* 15 GAR.MEŠ-*ma* 1 *ina* 150 GAR-*at ana* INIM 1-*en* DÚR-*ab* (Leichty, TCS IV 139, 117’).

¹²) BE [*iz-bu* S]L.MEŠ-šú *ina* ZAG-šú GAR.MEŠ NUN *til-la-a-tú* TUK-ši (Leichty, TCS IV, 118, 49’).

¹³) [BE *iz-bu* S]L.MEŠ-šú *ina* GÜB-šú GAR.MEŠ KÚR GABA.RI (Leichty, TCS IV, 119, 50’).

¹⁴) BE *iz-bu* 2 IGI.MEŠ-šú *ina* 150 1 *ina* 15 GAR ZI.GA *taš-nin-tum* (Leichty, TCS IV, 127, 66’).

the deeper imaginative patterns. The value of right/left symbolism lies neither in the validity nor consistency of its occurrence, but rather when the patterns are unexpectedly reversed.

In the omen series *Šumma Alu*, transposition of right/left occurs frequently. In general it is an auspicious omen when an animal crosses from the right to the left.

“If a snake crosses from the right of a man to the left of a man — he will have a good name.”¹⁵

“If a snake crosses from the left of a man to the right of a man — he will have a bad name.”¹⁶

“If a man starts out on an undertaking and a falcon crosses from the man’s right to the man’s left — his undertaking will be successful.”¹⁷

However, when a man sees a crow on the right at the start of a journey, the journey will not achieve its goals. Because of this we are able to determine that the crow has a negative symbolic value as an ominous sign:

“If a man starts out on an undertaking and a crow hovers and caws on the man’s left — he will go where he is established, he will enjoy profit.”¹⁸

“If a man starts a journey and a crow hovers on the right and caws — that man will not go where he is established, he will be unhappy.”¹⁹

Reversals of right/left symbolism become an interpretive tool when they simply open our eyes to broader imaginative patterns. The sleep omens of *Šumma Alu* (Tablet 84b)²⁰ begin with omens based on the position of the sleeper. If he sleeps on his right side, it is inauspicious²¹.

15) [DIŠ] MUŠ TA ZAG NA *ana* GÙB NA DIB-*iq* MU-šú ‘SIG₅’-*tim* TUK-š*i* (KAR 386, 10).

16) [DIŠ] MUŠ TA GÙB NA *ana* ZAG NA DIB-*iq* MU-šú HUL ‘TUK’-š*i* (KAR 386, 11).

17) DIŠ NA *ana* Á.ÁŠ-šú ZI-*ma* SÚR.DÙ.MUŠEN TA 15 NA *ana* 150 NA *i-te-eq* Á.ÁŠ-*su* KUR-*ad* (CT 40, 48, 1).

18) DIŠ NA KI.MIN (= Á.ÁŠ-šú ZI-*ma*) UGA.MUŠEN GUB-*ma* GÙB NA KA-*si* NA.BI KI IGI.MEŠ-šú GAR-*nu* DU-*ma* HA.LA KÚ (CT 40, 48, 3).

19) DIŠ NA *ana* KASKAL ZI-*ma* UGA.MUŠEN *ina* 15 NA GUB-*ma* KA-*si* NA.BI KI IGI.MEŠ-šú GAR-*nu* DU-*ak* ŠÀ.BI NU DÙG.GA (CT 40, 48, 7).

20) The reconstruction of a canonical tablet of sleep omens is based on the preliminary study of the sleep omens by Franz Köcher and A.L. Oppenheim which established the sequence of topics and their general location in the series (“The Old Babylonian Omen Text VAT 7525”, AfO 18 [1957-1958], pp. 62-80). A colophon (K. 15893 + K. 9533 joined to K. 9537+) identifies the text as Tablet 84 of the series *Šumma Alu*. Another text, BM 131656, is also identified by its colophon as Tablet 84 of *Šumma Alu* (E.F. Weidner, AfO 11 [1936-1937], pp. 358ff.). The extant omens of this text (Tablet 84a) are based on behaviour exhibited immediately upon awaking.

21) DIŠ NA *ina* KI.NÁ-šú ZAG *ša-líl* NU KUR ÁŠ / DIŠ GÙB *ša-líl* ŠÀ.BI (K. 9739 + CT 37, 49, 1-2; K. 9537 + CT 37, 45, 1-2; AfO 18 [1957-1958], p. 73, 1-2).

The unexpected reversal catches our attention and points to a larger pattern. Laughing in one's sleep brings sadness²². Muttering insults while asleep brings an outpouring of friendliness²³. If one speaks pleasant words, however, his days will be short²⁴. The whole tablet comes into focus: sleep is portrayed as the mirror world of waking.

Significant information derives from the reversals, but only by first establishing a consistent system are we able to apprehend their internal logic²⁵. The system thus established provides a solid, stable context against which the imaginative patterns work. The mutations of this system show that in many ways divination is left-handed truth.

22) DIŠ *i-ši*(copy *ta*)-*ni-iḫ* ŠA.ḪUL [(K. 9739 + 9; CT 37, 49, 9; AfO 18 [1957-1958], p. 74, 9; [] *iḫ-ši-ni-iḫ* ḪUL ŠA [UŠ.MEŠ]-'šú' (K. 9537+, 11); restorations from Guinan, unpubl. ms. of Tablet 84b). According to an OB omen, "If a man laughs in his sleep — he will become very sick" ([DIŠ LU] *i-na ṣa-la-li-šu iḫ-ṣi-iḫ ma-di-iš i-ma-ra-aṣ* (AfO 18 [1957-1958], p. 62, 39-40). The belief that laughing in one's sleep is a sign of sorrow is widespread and occurs in a variety of historical contexts. For a discussion see AfO 18 [1957-1958], p. 62 n.13 and A.K. Guinan, "The Human Behavioral Omens: On the Threshold of Psychological Inquiry", «Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies» 19 (Toronto, 1990) p. 12.

23) DIŠ *ma-ag-ri-a-tim i-ta-wu* [ZI.GA ṭúb-ba-ti TE-šú] (K. 9537 + 29; AfO 18 [1957-1958], p. 74, 25; restorations from Guinan, unpubl. ms.).

24) DIŠ NA *ina ṣa-la-li-šu* INIM SIG₅-ti[m *iq-bi* UD.ME-šú *i-šu* MAŠ.EN.KAK ḪUL-šú DU] (K. 9537 + 28; AfO 18 [1957-1958], p. 74, 24, restorations from Guinan, unpubl. ms.).

25) For a discussion of symbolic reversals as a rhetorical pattern in *Šumma Alu* see A.K. Guinan, "The Perils of High Living: Divinatory Rhetoric in *Šumma Alu*", in H. Behrens - D. Loding - M.T. Roth (Eds.),