

Doctoral School of History  
Dr. Sándor Óze DSc  
professor

History of Ideas Program  
Dr. Ida Fröhlich DSc  
professor

The Theses of the Dissertation

**Secrets from the Deep:  
Internal Structure and Systems of Interpretation in the Omen**  
Series *Šumma izbu*

supervisors:  
Dr. habil. András Bácskay  
associate professor  
Dr. habil. Gábor Kalla  
associate professor

Macska Viktorné  
Esztári Réka Mária

Budapest  
2018

## INTRODUCTION

*la na-bu-ú li-in-da-bar-ú-'in-ni*  
May the ones without names receive  
(all this) from me!  
(after SpTU 5, 248 obv. 9)

The present thesis aims to analyse—actually, for the first time in Assyriology—the interpretative system and the organizing principles of a lengthy textual unit from a Mesopotamian omen collection. The source in question is the introductory part of the teratological series known as *Šumma izbu*, which originally constituted an individual composition—and as such, was considered as a work inspired, or more properly revealed by Enki/Ea, the Mesopotamian god of wisdom (see Lambert 1962: 64, “Catalogue of Texts and Authors”). Indeed, this ancient scientific work of art proved to be unique thus far, since, as the present study intends to demonstrate, the associations of its interpretative system do not only effect the internal correlations of the omen entries, but rather, the whole structure of the text, insomuch that it can be proved that each and every entry was generated from the former along specific associative principles (which were formerly called “hermeneutic associations” in scholarly literature but will be labelled as “written code” in here, since in fact they are based on the “Science of Writing,” on the later definition see Veldhuis 1991: 137–146). In other words, the present study aims to prove that this composition as a whole, although for untrained eyes or scribes may seem to be an omen text listing various (but mostly rather odd) ominous phenomena, is an abstract, theoretical treatise which, as contemporary science could not be separated from religion, aims to reveal the unknown parts of the cosmic system by means of the wisdom originating from the *Apsû* (also known as the “Deep”, the abode of Enki/Ea).

If these assertions stand the proof, we may assume that the present study reveals a formerly unknown phenomenon, the description of which required wholly new methods and terminology. As such, it also aims to be a starting point which marks the beginning of a different kind of structural analysis—which should concentrate, in the first place, on the other works attributed to the god of wisdom.

### PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO MESOPOTAMIAN OMEN INTERPRETATION

As for the former contributions in the field of omen interpretation, several minor and larger studies have been published, most of them, however, concentrated on the detection of various possible types of associations between the *protasis* (sign) and *apodosis* (interpretation) of given independent omen entries—entries from omen series falling under various different sub-disciplines of divination, actually rived away both from their wider and immediate context (see e.g. Guinan 1989 and 1996; Noegel 1995; Greaves 2000; Bilbija 2008; Annus 2010; Frahm 2010; Noegel 2010; and also de Zorzi 2011). Nevertheless, these contributions were essential and necessary, since they paved

the way for a paradigmatic change in the approach to Mesopotamian omen literature as a whole, a change which can best be hallmarked by the ground-breaking study of David Brown (Brown 2000). Upon analysing the entries of the astrological series *Enūma Anu Enlil*, Brown thoroughly demonstrated that those omens which were previously considered as actual descriptions of celestial phenomena and related, mundane events (appearing in the *apodoses*), that is, as records of empirical observations, are *in most cases* in fact “invented”, or, more properly: generated (the *protases* were generated from each other on the basis of simple principles, and the *apodoses*, in turn, were generated from the respective *protases*). Their internal associations and their organization reflect and thus based on the ingenuous associative methods of Mesopotamian scientists. These associations on the inner-omen level were in a large measure related to the peculiarities and possibilities of the cuneiform writing system. Although Brown’s study signifies a real turning point in the approach towards omen interpretation, as a pioneering work concentrating on a defined corpus, it cannot and possibly haven’t even aimed to be exhaustive—in spite that in a way it classifies the various interpretative methods which worked in the inner-omen level, it does not intend to give a synthesis and represent them as various coefficient layers of a single (but rather complex) system. Practically, it also holds true for the more recent works on divination: the excellent overview of Marc van de Mieroop, for example (van de Mieroop 2016: 114–140), although it applies the theory of omen generation and to some extent even the terminology introduced by Brown, represents the various associative methods (related to the various “codes” of the present work) in omen entries as individual, and in fact optional links between the *protases* and *apodoses*. Finally, the latest essay of Eckart Frahm on the working principles of Mesopotamian scientific thinking labelled, in general, the inner-omen associations nothing else but the manifestations of an arbitrary, “anything goes type of approach” (Frahm 2018: esp. 14).

### **THE NEW RECONSTRUCTION OF A COMPLEX INTERPRETATIVE SYSTEM I. INNER-OMEN ASSOCIATIONS: SYNTAGMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN *PROTASES* AND *APODOSES* IN *ŠUMMA IZBU***

Therefore, first of all the present study had to clarify the basic principles of interpretation, at first in the inner-omen level—by reconstructing a system with strict rules, and introducing a new categorization and terminology (Chapter 2). After the discussion of the simplest, and so to say basic associations appearing in each sub-discipline (“simple code”), and consequently the discipline-related associatory methods (“disciplinary code”, with special emphasis on that of extispicy, which, as it will also be demonstrated, made a huge impact on the interpretative apparatus of *Šumma izbu*), I analysed those associations which were interdisciplinary in nature and based on the characteristic features of the writing system (graphic principles, homophony, polysemy, and so on, in other words, the expertise of the “Science of Writing”, labelled as “written code” in the present study). After this overall summary, by means of examples and case studies I demonstrated that in fact each and every omen entry has to contain, and had indeed represented associations related to *all* these three “codes”—it was obligatory and not the matter of “either–or”. Upon defining the correct

interpretation of a given omen, all three of the code-systems discussed in this chapter has and had to be taken into consideration. While the simple code defines certain values, and incidentally the actors and/or the events involved, and the disciplinary code provides further clues regarding the latter, it is the written code which determines the exact meaning and even the wording of the *apodosis*.

### ON SHEEP, LIONS, AND HORNS: A CASE STUDY

Based on the results of Chapter 2, **Chapter 3** contains a larger case study: the analysis of a lengthy omen sequence from *Šumma izbu* Tablet V. The examination of a longer textual unit as a whole is, again, a novelty in Assyriological literature although, as Chapter 3 aims to demonstrate, such enterprises may prove to be rather fruitful. The sequence from Tablet V was chosen for various reasons. On the one hand, as the most archaic section of the series, Tablet V, as compared to other parts, represents rather clear associations for those who are familiar with the simple code and the disciplinary code of extispicy (and thus it confirmed that the latter formed the basis of the interpretative apparatus of *Šumma izbu*). On the other hand, beyond that it perfectly illustrates the simple methods of omen generation on the vertical axis, the throughout analysis has shed light to another, thus far unique phenomenon in the field of inter-omen correlations—related to the remarkably different Assyrian and Babylonian versions of the text. Although the very existence and nature of the latter seemed rather problematic to Nicola de Zorzi, the re-editor of the series (de Zorzi 2014: 462–463), their relatedness and differences have proved to be clearly explainable. There were indeed two versions or more properly traditions, a Babylonian and an Assyrian one, the latter, however, differs only in respect of its characteristic method of redaction: it excerpted the entries from the initial section of the traditional Babylonian text and inserted them to the thematically-related section borders. However, the reason behind these insertions goes well beyond an Assyrian type of “Ordnungswille”—only such entries were used which, by means of correlations based on external texts, *šātu*-type equations, and finally phonetic similarities, that is, on various elements of the written code, were apt to serve as catchlines in which the subsequent entry was in fact decoded (sometimes both in the *protasis* and the *apodosis*). In other words, it turned out that the selected passage provides an excellent introduction to the next chapter in which the inter-omen relations of the introductory part of *Šumma izbu* are discussed—as the latter also show a remarkable affinity with the written code.

### THE NEW RECONSTRUCTION OF A COMPLEX INTERPRETATIVE SYSTEM II. INTER-OMEN ASSOCIATIONS: THE CLASSIFICATION OF METAPHORIC CORRELATIONS

The inter-omen correlations were examined in **Chapter 4** according to the structuralist model also introduced by David Brown—although, it had to be somewhat modified during the analysis of the

“composition of the god of wisdom”, that is, the introductory part of *Šumma izbu* (SAG ITI NU TIL.LA, “Not completing the months”), since the generative principles, working on both axes at the same time, proved to be much more complex. As the throughout investigation of these principles (based largely on the “written code”) revealed, this text, which may seem to be a regular collection of omens at first glance, containing numerous phenomenon which may seem incomprehensible, but still follow some kind of a thematic order, is actually a wholly artificial composition in which each entry was generated both from the *protasis* and *apodosis* of the previous one.

As such, it should have been considered as a real scribal and scientific feat—the name of its real author, however, is lost for eternity. Bearing this in mind and taking into consideration the specific worldview and methods of thinking which can be traced back from the scientific texts (omens and lexical compositions) treated on the pages of the present work, one may suppose that this anonymity was not at all accidental. According to his own concepts, the author wasn’t creating something which was conceived in his own mind, but rather, he was *revealing*—revealing a perfect, and thus divinely system, a system encoded in cuneiform and originating directly from the *Apsû*, the abode of Enki/Ea.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS: THE NEW GENERATION OF OMEN INTERPRETATION**

The throughout analyses carried out in Chapters 3 and 4 indeed confirmed the complexity and the strict rules of the formerly reconstructed underlying framework of Mesopotamian omen texts, whether in case of interpretation, or generation. Therefore, at this point it can and has to be assumed that this framework consists of three correlating interpretative sub-systems, labelled in here as simple, disciplinary, and written codes, and if one intends to find the correct explanations or correspondences either in individual omen entries, or even within lengthy textual units, each of these “codes” has to be taken into consideration. Moreover, as it became evident from the analysis of Tablet V, and then especially that of SAG ITI NU TIL.LA, a given text may carry many different hallmarks and represent several trends, whether discipline-related ones or those characteristic to the various scholarly circles of its time. The latter, all at once, are especially relevant with regard to the use of the written code, which may unfold the scholarly, or at times even the social or familial background of their author.

Still, we cannot say that we have already seen the Deep, “read” and unravelled every secret of the whole *Apsû*—rather, the analysis of the underlying structure of SAG ITI NU TIL.LA provided only a short glimpse to a previously unknown level of Mesopotamian science and scientific thinking—showing an entire ocean in a drop. Therefore, the present work does not aim to provide strict conclusions, but guidelines—that is, it tends to pave and make way for a fresh start of a new trend (or generation) in omen interpretation. According to the basic principle of this new method we have to reject the previous aims of randomly examining de-contextualised entries, desperately seeking for single correlations. Instead, we have to analyse coherent textual units, taking each of the

code-systems into consideration, both in inner- and inter-omen level—starting, at first with the other works inspired by the God of Wisdom. As it could be seen, in the light of such an investigation, however painstaking it seems at times, the individual entries will become interrelated elements of a complex network, and as such, they indeed reveal the underlying structure of these scientific compositions, unfolding, all at once, the specific cognitive system of their authors.

As for the latter, the neat motto used as the title of the very first sub-chapter of Marc Van De Mierop's *Philosophy before the Geeks* (van de Mierop 2016), namely **"I read, therefore I am"** perfectly characterises the phenomenon also revealed by this study. Although each code system played an essential role in omen generation/interpretation, it was in fact the written code, the Science of Writing which constituted the alpha and omega of Mesopotamian scholarly activity. Actually, this was already foreshown by the remarkably high percentage of logograms in the omen compendia of the first millennium—as compared to the Old Babylonian, mainly syllabic Akkadian texts. Of course, the latter also offered several inherent "written" correlations, logograms, however, considering their relatedness to the increasing lexical material which, in turn, can well typified by the sign list Aa with its nearly 14 400 entries and at times hundreds of possible Akkadian equivalents for a simple cuneiform sign, clearly multiply these possibilities. And indeed, the Assyrian trends of interpretation, already detected during the analysis of Tablet V and extended to a complex, holistic system which shaped the "hidden" structure of SAG ITI NU TIL.LA—revealing such knowledge which was only accessible to the experts, those "who can see"—clearly signifies the supremacy attributed to the Science of Writing, that is, the decoding of cuneiform. Actually, while the excellent study of Jay Crisostomo (Crisostomo 2014) demonstrated the operations of the written correlations (his "analogical hermeneutics") in the lexical material, the present study has unfold the other side of the coin: the practical appliance of these methods in scientific reasoning.

Reasoning, as a cognitive process can, however, remarkably differ in various cultures and areas. As it was discussed in relation to the written code, the truly holistic system revealed in here, in which every element is interrelated, is in fact quite alien to the generally linear "Western" way of thought (which also tends to categorize things). Therefore, to understand its operation, instead of thinking in "lines," as previously, we have to start thinking in "circles" (see Nisbett 2003). In this light, the examination of the system(s) of thought revealed by Mesopotamian scientific texts can be connected to rather current issues both in cognitive sciences—and everyday life, in general. As for the latter, without being more specific, which of course I cannot be, let's just say that in our present days it is a vital concern of the "West" to understand the way how the "East" thinks.

## WORKS CITED

- Annus, Amar, 2010. On the *Beginnings* and Continuities of Omen *sciences* in the *Ancient World*. In: Annus, A. (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (Oriental Institute Publications 6), Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. 1–18.
- Bilbija, J. 2008. Interpreting the Interpretation Protasis-Apodosis-Strings in the Physiognomic Omen Series Šumma Alamdimmu 3.76-132. In: R. J. van der Spek (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Near Eastern WorldView and Society. Presented to Marten Stol on the occasion of his 65th Birthday*. Bethesda, MA: CDL Press. 19–27.
- Brown, D. 2000, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (CM 18). Groningen: Styx.
- de Zorzi, Nicola 2011. The Omen Series Šumma Izbu: Internal Structure and Hermeneutic Strategies. *KASKAL* 8, 43–75.
- Frahm, E. 2010. Reading the Tablet, the Exta, and the Body: The Hermeneutics of Cuneiform Signs in Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries and Divinatory Texts. In: Annus, A. (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (Oriental Institute Publications 6), Chicago, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. 91–141.
- Frahm, Eckart 2018b. The Perils of Omnisignificance: Language and Reason in Mesopotamian Hermeneutics. *JANEH* 2018, 1–23.
- Greaves, Sheldon W. 2000. Ominous Homophony and Portentous Puns in Akkadian Omens. In: Noegel, Scott B. (ed.), *Puns and Pundits: Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, Bethesda, MD: CDL Press. 103–113.
- Guinan, Ann K. 1989. The Perils of High Living: Divinatory Rhetoric in Summa Alu. In: *DUMU-E2-DUB-BA-A / Sjöberg Åke W.* Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Babylonian Fund, University Museum, Philadelphia. 227-235.
- Guinan, Ann K, 1996. Left/Right Symbolism in Mesopotamian Divination. *SAAB* 10, 5–10.
- Lambert, Wilfred G, 1962. Catalogue of Texts and Authors. *JCS* 16, 59–77.
- Nisbett, Richard E. 2003. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... and Why*. London – New York: The Free Press.
- Noegel, Scott B. 1995. Fox on the Run: Catch a Lamassu by the Pun. *N.A.B.U.* 1995, 101–102.
- Noegel, Scott B. 2010. Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign: Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East. In: Annus, A. (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (Oriental Institute Publications 6). Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. 143–162.
- van de Mieroop, M. 2016, *Philosophy Before the Greeks: The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Veldhuis, N. 1997, *Elementary Education in Nippur: The List of Trees and Wooden Objects*. Groningen: Styx.