

REVIEWS

THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

ULLA SUSANNE KOCH:

Secrets of Extispicy: The Chapter Multābiltu of the Babylonian Extispicy Series and Niširti Bārūti Texts Mainly from Aššurbanipal's Library.

(Alter Orient und Altes Testament.) x, 630 pp., 54 pls. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005. ISBN 3 934628 67 2.

This book continues Ulla Koch's pioneering modern publication of the compendia of extispicial omens preserved mainly on Assyrian and Babylonian tablets from the seventh-century BC royal libraries at Nineveh. Omen compendia form part of the huge and almost unmanageable body of primary sources for divinatory practice and theory that survives from two-thousand years of ancient Mesopotamian civilization. Much of this material was organized into standardized editions in antiquity, but modern scholarship has been overwhelmed by the mass of manuscripts: several thousand tablets, not all published, even in cuneiform, and few properly edited and translated.

Koch's work began with her book *Babylonian Liver Omens*, a monumental edition of chapters 3–5 of the main extispicy series, *bārūtu*. That book, published in 2000 and reviewed in *BSOAS* 65/2, pp. 379–80, concentrated on omen compendia themselves: texts that organize portents and predictions into systematic lists of protases and apodoses. This second book moves on to chapter 10 of the series *bārūtu* and related compositions. As before, Koch's editions are prefaced by an informative introduction and supplemented by a very useful index of words. Drawn facsimiles ("handcopies") of cuneiform texts fill the fifty-four plates. The book is another significant contribution and will be gratefully received in Assyriology and divination studies.

The group of texts under study mostly exhibit the same format and structure as the earlier chapters of the extispicy series but, according to Koch, they have a more theoretical interest. Babylonian scientific enquiry usually produced lists that present data but draw no conclusions, but she finds something more in the material published in this book: "These texts can be viewed as a step towards more abstract thinking, though still couched in traditional list form". The suspicion is that the abstraction of underlying theory was always a matter for oral instruction. What is special about these texts is not, I think, that they reveal an evolution in thought. Rather they show that this oral aspect of Babylonian science could creep into the written lore.

Koch declines to engage in the debate on whether ancient Mesopotamian scholarly enquiry is science, as we understand it, preferring to deal with it on its own terms. She repeats the common view that the Babylonian divinatory corpus "represents a systematic, scientific treatment of the subject", but adds that it also exhibits a "way of thought related to talmudic hermeneutics". This is a key insight, for it reminds us that the work of Babylonian scholars was informed by an understanding of the world as subject to the will of the gods, and carried out using methods developed for theological purposes. But this is

no disqualification, for the history of science shows that scientific enquiry has until very recently been, more often than not, no pure and autonomous discipline but motivated by religious and theological ideologies.

The Babylonians, who inhabited a world where the gods left, constantly and everywhere, portents for decoding as signs of their intentions, could not do otherwise than include the study of these portents in their attempts to organize and advance their knowledge of the world around them. And in seeking to understand such signs they could not do otherwise than employ the hermeneutic tools that they customarily used in their search for deeper understanding, for example of the names of gods and temples. For them this was the method that offered the best hope of revealing how signs and portents, as well as names, conveyed meaning. They also employed analogy. Many of the basic analogical principles that underlie Babylonian divination are self-evident, for example the convention by which right = *pars familiaris* and left = *pars hostilis*. But because the signs were god-given, it was taken for granted that they often transcended human understanding, and that sometimes their exact significance necessarily defied complete explanation by the rational mind. Ultimately, any scientific exploration of Babylonian divination in search of underlying principles is then doomed to find a shortage of consistent rules, but Koch's texts show that ancient minds grappled with theory as rigorously as modern scholars.

A. R. George

DANIEL SCHWEMER:

Abwehrzauber und Behexung: Studien zum Schadenzauberglauben im alten Mesopotamien.

xix, 330 pp. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007. €58. ISBN 978 3 447 05640 3.

This important book is a convenient and insightful survey of all Akkadian, Sumerian and Hittite texts relating to witchcraft, based upon published and unpublished sources.

As comprehensive as this book is, one can legitimately wonder about the psychology behind witchcraft; Schwemer makes some comments in this direction, but more could be said. The crucial point is that one need not have witches in order to have witchcraft. We have little evidence for any cuneiform witchcraft vademecum or comprehensive textbook explaining exactly how one bewitches an adversary or rival. We have a few love incantations which try to help one seduce a lady, but this is as close as we come to black magic. Our textual evidence concentrates predominantly on the danger posed by witches and witchcraft and how to protect oneself against it. In all of these cases, there is a psychological aspect to incantations and rituals which needs to be considered, rather than simply accepting the descriptions of witches and witchcraft at face value. Each of these colourful depictions of witches, as well as the dramatic peregrinations of anti-witchcraft rituals, were calculated to have a predetermined impact upon the patient's psyche, which is the real explanation for why and how this magic is used and becomes effective. The use of figurines, for instance, allowed the patient to transfer his or her fear or loathing of witchcraft (whatever it represents) onto an object which could then