

# REVIEWS

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## THE ANCIENT WORLD

W. G. LAMBERT:

*Babylonian Oracle Questions.*

(Mesopotamian Civilizations, 13.) xiv, 216 pp., 57 pls. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007. \$49.50. ISBN 978 1 57506 136 8.

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The system of *bārîtu*, extispicy or sacrificial divination, was a favoured means of royal and private decision making in ancient Mesopotamia for over two millennia. Typically, one or more diviners would put a yes/no question in writing to Šamaš the sun-god, and often also Adad the weather-god, while sacrificing a sheep, lamb or ram. They then read the gods' answers by examining the animal's internal organs for particular features, configurations, and anomalies that were considered propitious, unpropitious, or deceitful according to a long and complex literary tradition.

Extispicy is first alluded to in the mid-third millennium, for instance in the year names of the Sargonic dynasty, while its final witnesses come from the temple libraries of Uruk and Babylon of the last few centuries BC. On the one hand letters, divinatory queries, and reports from royal diviners, especially from eighteenth-century Mari and seventh-century Nineveh, shed light on extispicy in practice and the senior diviners' high-status roles at court. Ritual instructions, clay models of ominous organs, and references to divination in other contexts are also vital for understanding how the diviners acted. On the other hand, huge compendia of *bārîtu* omens and learned commentaries on them, found in many second- and first-millennium cities, capture the profundities and complexities of the system in its idealized, theoretical form.

Yet despite its enduring centrality to the intellectual and political thought of Sumer, Assyria and Babylonia, extispicy remains a deeply unfashionable subject. Gradually, however, editions and translations of the various divinatory genres are beginning to provide the raw materials that will open up extispicy to new historical research (see Maul in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 10 (2003–05), 69–82 for a thorough overview and succinct bibliography; also Koch, *Secrets of Extispicy* (Münster, 2005), with extensive further literature).

This handsome and eagerly awaited volume presents an edition of all known *tamîtus*, a key genre of divinatory writings that bridge the divide between offering table and library. As explained in the introduction (p. 5), *tamîtus* are essentially the questions that the diviner put to Šamaš and Adad. But they are not the ad hoc queries, written hastily during particular acts of divination, that are attested from at least Old Babylonian times to the Neo-Assyrian period (e.g. Richardson in *FS Walker* (Dresden, 2002), 229–44; Starr, *Queries to the Sungod* (Helsinki, 1990), nos. 1–278). Rather, they are carefully copied library versions, often with labels (e.g., “A *tamîtu* for the safety of the fort”, p. 35), and sometimes collected into series (“Tablet VII of petitionary *tamîtus*. Tablet of Banūnu, the exorcist”, p. 41). However, they range across the same general subject matter as the queries: personal safety and health; military campaigns; cultic and courtly appointments; legal, agricultural, and family matters. Several purport to concern political events of the late third and early second millennium BC (e.g., 1a, “A *tamîtu* concerning Hammurabi's going on campaign to seize Kasalluhhu”; 3c, mentioning Abi-ešuh;

4b, on campaigning against the Lullubu). The author addresses the relationship(s) between the queries and the *tamītus* very briefly on page 8 – noting, for instance, that the Neo-Assyrian queries are invariably addressed to Šamaš alone – but there is potential for a much more detailed comparison of the two corpora.

Indeed, there is still basic analytical work to do on the *tamītus* themselves. The author presents them in 26 chapters, which – it turns out – comprise thematic groupings largely of the author’s own devising, plus eight further fragments. He lists some 90 pieces of tablet, each with its own museum or excavation number, on pages xiii–xiv, and presents admirably clear copies of them across 57 plates. But nowhere does he state how many textually distinct *tamītus* or how many original tablets are represented in the book. After much painstaking deconstruction and reconstruction, I estimate that it deals with at least 67 *tamītus* (excluding duplicates) on 45 tablets, plus the eight fragments (of which four may not be *tamītus* at all).

Some interesting patterns now emerge. As the author notes (p. 10), the two large collective tablets from Nimrud represent Tablets VII and IX of a series that was originally at least ten Tablets long. But the many Nineveh sources duplicate only Tablet VII. (Here I follow the convention whereby “tablet” represents a physical object of clay and “Tablet” represents a formal chapter-like textual division; the two are often identical in practice.) Small clusters of two or three *tamītus* are found on other Nineveh tablets but again generally without duplication. There are no *tamītu* tablets from Sultantepe and only known so far one from Assur. The smaller northern Babylonian corpus (eight tablets, including one from Nippur) does not duplicate the Assyrian one at all, except for the lone Assur tablet. The “historical” *tamītus* are all from Nimrud and Nineveh. Thus, the author’s statement that “there was no generally accepted edition of *tamītus* in the first millennium BC” (p. 12) can be substantially strengthened: there is virtually no duplication across libraries, with the exception of the Nimrud Tablet VII mentioned above. A tablet-by-tablet presentation that clarified those discontinuities would have made for a much more user-friendly book.

Nevertheless, this volume is a welcome addition to the slowly growing corpus of divinatory material from Mesopotamia which provides rich raw material for further historical analysis. The author is to be congratulated for his careful and thorough critical edition of these fascinating texts.

**Eleanor Robson**

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THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

RUDI PAUL LINDNER:

*Explorations in Ottoman Prehistory.*

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We all have ancestors. Most of us also have family stories which bring life to the faces in old photographs: the tragic accident, the midnight elopement, the émigré uncle whose fortune was dissipated by his solicitors, etc. In all family lore, there is usually a significant grain of truth, no matter how distorted the later story has