REVIEW

YORAM COHEN:
The Babylonian šumma immeru *Omens: Transmission, Reception, and Text Production*.
(Dubsar 9.) xxiv, 406 pp. Münster: Zaphon, 2020. ISBN 978 3 96327 042 0.
doi:10.1017/S0041977X2100015X

New studies of Mesopotamian divination are always welcome, since much of this large text genre remains unpublished or requires further study. This useful monograph tackles a thematic group of divination texts which has long been familiar to omen specialists but never edited in its entirety, to include all text witnesses from the second and first millennia BCE, as well as ancient hermeneutical commentaries and comparisons with other divination genres. The present volume serves as a model for publications of Mesopotamian divination, although there are a few problems and questions that need to be addressed.

The advantage of having a limited corpus is that one can see how the theory and practice of sheep divination developed over time. One feature of the *šumma immeru* omens from different periods is how they differ from each other in terms of detailed content, despite general thematic similarities. The omens are divided into periodic corpora, beginning with those of the Old Babylonian period (roughly 1800–1600 BCE), then Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian periods (roughly covering the remainder of the second millennium), and finally the first millennium texts which became standardized into a widely agreed fixed corpus often referred to as "canonical". The *šumma immeru* omens focus on the sheep in three phases of the divinatory process, describing physiognomic characteristics before, during, and after slaughter, while noting any voluntary and involuntary movements which the animal makes during the process. Like all such divination genres, it is counterintuitive for modern sensibilities to be able to work out logical relationships between the protases and apodoses. Yoram Cohen makes an attempt to bridge this logical gap by proposing double meanings and suggestive puns in the protases which might suggestively lead to the apodoses; this approach (also applied to *Šumma izbu* omens dealing with birth anomalies) cannot adequately explain the divinatory logic. For one thing, verbal forms in omen apodoses are generally modal, requiring a translation of "may", "might", "could", etc., rather than "will", and this slight change in translation significantly transforms the meaning of an omen. This was previously pointed out by Francesca Rochberg in her 2009 article, "Conditions, inference, and possibility in Ancient Mesopotamian science" (*Science in Context* 22, 5–25). Second, an attempt to connect omen protases and apodoses via language requires a degree of speculation, e.g. that the sheep's gnashing its teeth forecasts a wife's infidelity, since exposing hidden body parts symbolizes exposure of genitals and hence fornication (p. 69). This type of explanation can miss some of the complex semiotics of divination, since it implies that structures or schemes were consciously and creatively written into the literary forms of divination, rather than reflecting observations which are somehow associated with potential future events based on memory of past experience (i.e. gnashing of teeth had previously been recorded as associated with promiscuity). So far, no one has successfully cracked the codes, since a common but simplistic explanation of omens being messages from gods does not go far enough in elucidating

how the system actually operated and why divination became increasingly technical and complex over time.

Another factor which colours how we understand omens are references to the sheep as a "sacrificial animal" (p. 39 *et passim*). A "sacrifice" (like Hebrew *qorban*) is something which has to take place in a cultic or temple setting. However, like his colleague, the *asû*-physician, the *bārû*-diviner was a layman and not a priest, which means that their professions were not normally in receipt of temple prebends, and they should not have been able to venture into temple precincts (as an *ēreb bīti*, a priest being "one entering the temple"). In fact, one interesting feature is that the *bārû*-diviner and *asû*-physician shared a common Sumerian designation, A.ZU (p. 177), which may reflect a similar status. Furthermore, the client of the *šumma immeru* omens is either referred to as *amēlu* "principal" or *bēl immeri* "sheep-owner", but never as a priest, nor does any apodosis refer to a temple or its welfare. Since priests were generally not shy regarding their own self-interest, if these were "sacrificial animals" from temple cults, one would have expected something in the apodoses to reflect this. Moreover, the special *ikrib*-prayer and ritual accompanying the slaughter of sheep for divination purposes is not necessarily "cultic", since incantation-prayers could also accompany medical rituals, and *ikrib*-prayers were also employed with oracle questions (so-called *tāmītu*-texts), which have no known connection with temple cults. It is a fundamental misconception, driven by our terminology, to think of divination (itself a loaded term) as a temple enterprise. The message from the gods was important, but actually less and less central to the complex mechanisms of divination as it developed in later first millennium texts, by which time *šumma immeru* had become marginalized as "extraneous" or "non-canonical" (*ahû*) traditions, which Cohen has explained in admirable clarity and detail (pp. 329–39).

Although many interesting features of these omens cannot be adequately treated in a brief review, one aspect of this literature merits attention, since it has been overlooked. It would be reasonable to assume that a divination genre relegated to the secondary status of "extraneous" (*ahû*) literature ~~were~~ continuously copied and studied within the academy for general pedagogical purposes other than for the actual practice of sheep divination. One possibility might be that omens from sheep continued to be studied because of exotic anatomical vocabulary, since much of the human body was inaccessible for study because of taboos against vivisection or post-mortem autopsy. There is an unnoticed late parallel to *šumma immeru* in the Mishnah Chullin, commented upon in the Babylonian Talmud, which also deals with slaughtered animals and which imperfections in animal bodies disqualified the carcass ~~from~~ human consumption; this information was also useful for anatomical terminology. The list in the Mishnah Chullin chapter 3 bears some reasonable similarities with *šumma immeru* omens (although the text is in Hebrew rather than Aramaic):

> *ṭrpwt bbhmh nqwbt hwwšṭ wpswqt hgrgrt nyqb qrwm šl mwḥ nyqb hlb lbyt ḥllw nšbrh hšdrh wnpsq hḥwṭ šlh nyṭl hkbd wl' nštyyr hymnw klwm*
> Disqualifications in an animal: (if there is a) perforation of the gullet and a severing of the throat; (if) the membrane of the brain is perforated, (if) the "heart" (or "stomach") is perforated towards its "cavity-housing"; (if) the spinal column is broken and its cord was cut, (if) the liver is gone and nothing at all remains of it.

There are some indicative similarities in this passage with *šumma immeru* and related omens, such as frequent descriptions of the animal viscera being perforated

(*pališ*), the "cover of the heart" (*kutmu libbi*) mentioned in an Akkadian–Hittite list, general interest in the spinal column (*eṣemṣēru*) and the animal's liver being "missing" (*amūtu halqat,* p. 166). These parallels clearly warrant further investigation.

M.J. Geller Q1
University College London **Q2**