In her 1985 monograph on Babylonian poetry, Erica Reiner said, “the Assyriologist knows that it is too early to attempt to write a history of Babylonian literature. In fact, he has so often said it—involving the force of tradition responsible for preserving and perpetuating texts over hundreds, and possibly thousands, of years and thus allowing no real development—that he has been generally believed. Yet Babylonian literature is not as static and immutable as might be suggested by finds of nearly identical copies of some composition written down hundreds of years apart—a frequent phenomenon that is the despair of the historian but a boon to the philologist who can use similar exemplars to reconstruct a fragmentary text. In what measure identical exemplars reflect the immutability of tradition and, conversely, in what measure changes observed between an earlier and a later exemplar are indicators of a change in taste and interest are important questions for the interpretation of Babylonian literary history that only much painstaking philological work will elucidate.”

The divination corpus is aptly characterized by Reiner’s statement, and in my view, omen texts are the equal of other more “literary” genres for examining aspects of construction such as authorship, stabilization of a textus receptus, transmission, and the limits of textual variation. In short, divination provides a rewarding context for examining the tensility of Babylonian traditionalism. In the following discussion, I will focus on the celestial omen texts, approaching this corpus from two sides, so to speak, from outside and inside. By “outside” I mean the history of the celestial divination tradition as we have reconstructed it, based upon the literary product of that tradition, the text Enūma Anu Enlil. Such an “external history,” outlines the chronological development of its manuscript tradition, as far as we can establish it on the basis of extant texts. The “origins” of formal written celestial divination,

according to our external history, are to be placed in the Old Babylonian period. If we look, however, at the origin of the discipline as well as of the text, from the scribes’ own “internal” perspective, we enter the hoary age of the gods themselves; or in another version, we look back to prediluvian times, when gods communicated directly to the *apkallu*-sages, such as the famous fish-man, Oannes. I will, therefore, consider whether the notion of “divine authorship” presumed by some for *Enûma Anu Enlil* is relevant to the origins of the text according to its internal literary history. Finally, I will consider whether the idea of the divine origin of celestial divination was in fact relevant to the scribes’ commitment to the basic permanence and unalterability of the content of the omen series, that is, their commitment to textual continuity over change.

*External Literary History of Celestial Divination*

The literary history of Mesopotamian divination has not yet been examined in any detail, either on the basis of a single series, much less in any comprehensive study. The obstacles to such research are easy to enumerate. On the one hand, the relatively small number of extant Old Babylonian omen texts as against the voluminous mass of later sources make a “history of Babylonian scholarly divination” difficult to formulate; on the other hand, because sources for omen collections in Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian periods are equally if not more limited than their Old Babylonian relatives, the continuity of tradition from Old Babylonian versions to the standardized recensions preserved in seventh century copies is not always apparent. Moreover, whether the various compositions comprising the core of the scholarly divination can be said to have shared in a common process of literary/textual development beginning in the Old Babylonian period is extremely difficult to assess since extispicy, for example, apparently had an extensive Old Babylonian tradition, while *šumma ıżbu, šumma ālu*, and the celestial omina seem to be poorly represented in Old Babylonian sources.²

² It is noteworthy that Old Babylonian celestial omens not identifiable in the standard Neo-Assyrian edition are known, for example those published by W. Śileiko, “Mondlaufprognosen aus der Zeit der ersten babylonischen Dynastie,” *Comptes-Rendus de l’Academie des Sciences de l’URSS* (1927), pp. 125–8 and republished by Th. Bauer in