CHAPTER FIFTEEN

OLD BABYLONIAN CELESTIAL DIVINATION

Because celestial divination was part of a wider effort to interpret signs in the physical world as divine warnings of things to come, we see a common rationale for all forms of Mesopotamian divination, linking the various omen series to one another and placing celestial divination within a broader textual and cultural context. In similar fashion to other divinatory series such as Šumma izzu, the Dreambook, or the repertoire of the haruspex, Bārītu, the earliest collections of celestial omens emerge in the Old Babylonian period, and reflect a purely Akkadian genre. That no Sumerian proto-types are known has been observed before, although, as already noted by A. Falkenstein, the practice of divination in some form as early as the Early Dynastic period is indicated by a number of professional titles in the Early Dynastic lexical list Lu, such as ugula.azu, màš.šu. gid.gid and ugula màš.šu. gid.gid.1 We must admit, though, that we do not know what this amounts to. Urnanshe consults the ugula.azu in connection with building a temple.2 Otherwise, Sumerian terms for cultic functionaries associated with divination and dream incubation are known in Ur III economic texts.3 Late third millennium Sumerian literature also attests to the association of divination and cult. In the Hymn to Enlil is an enumeration of clergy, beginning with ē-a en-bi-im ē-da mú-a “the en priest of the house was a diviner.”4 Perhaps the best, or only

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3 As cited in CAD sub bāru discussion section, p. 125, màš.šu. gid.gid.da in Ur III texts may be found in A.L. Oppenheim, Eames Coll., p. 37f. Cf. màš.šu. gid.gid ITT 2/2 3108 rev. 2 and màš.šu. gi, gi Nikolski 2 83:6. Later, of course, in Old Babylonian, these professions are better attested, as outlined in detail by Renger, “Untersuchungen,” and even occur in omen protases: “If he sees a diviner(bārītu)/an exorcist (āšpu)/a physician(asū).”
intelligible, example is Cylinder A of Gudea of Lagash, which suggests some acquaintance with dream omens, extispicy, and even celestial signs, and places divination in the context of a temple building ritual.\(^5\)

The poetic inscription describing Gudea’s building of Ningirsu’s temple Eninnu refers to the goddess Nisaba consulting a tablet, dub mul-an “the tablet ‘stars of heaven,’” which rests on her knee.\(^6\) Also in the Sumerian composition “The Blessing of Nisaba,” the goddess consults a tablet, there described as made of lapis-lazuli.\(^7\) Whether the blue tablet and the tablet of heavenly stars “mul-an” refer to the same object is, however, not clear, but in both contexts, Nisaba’s tablet appears to be a symbol of learning and wisdom.\(^8\) Thorkild Jacobsen translated the latter as “a tablet (treating) of the stars above,”\(^9\) W. Horowitz suggested it is a “replica or chart” of the sky, conceived of as a big blue cosmic tablet, taking the lapis lazuli tablet as referring to the same. Å. Sjöberg suggested a translation of this mul as “script,” thus “the tablet of heavenly writing.”\(^10\) An insightful interpretation when we think that Mesopotamian literati of the middle of the first millennium expressed the notion of the patterns of stars covering the sky as a celestial script. The poetic metaphor of the “heavenly writing” (šiṭir šamē or šiṭirti šamāmē) appears on occasion in later Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions to refer to temples made beautiful “like the stars” (kīma

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\(^6\) Gudea Cyl.A iv 26 and v 23, see Edzard, Gudea, p. 72.


\(^8\) See the passage TCL 16 88 v 20–24, cited in A. Sjöberg and E. Bergmann, Sumerian Temple Hymns, p. 148, note to line 538.
