CHAPTER 11

Mesopotamian Lunar Omens in Justinian’s Constantinople

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1 Introduction

There is broad recognition of a relationship between the Greek and Mesopotamian celestial sciences, especially in the areas of mathematical astronomy and horoscopic astrology. In the former area, shared numerical coefficients and at least one broader predictive scheme can be identified, and in the latter, although there is limited survival of Mesopotamian horoscopes per se, the later Greek horoscopic tradition incorporates several concepts that can be shown to have Mesopotamian predecessors. A somewhat less-studied area is the circulation of universal celestial omens, which constitute a major part of the Mesopotamian scholarly tradition as a whole but are less common in the Greek material. These omens associate a particular celestial phenomenon with an outcome relevant for a region as a whole, rather than a single individual.

The fundamental work on the relationship between Mesopotamian and Greek omen texts of this sort is Bezold and Boll’s 1911 paper “Reflexe Astrologischer Keilinschriften bei Griechischen Schriftstellern”, where the authors make a very broad case for the existence of such a relationship. Bezold and Boll consider the Greek corpus as a whole, rather than the place of any individual text or author. However, the Greek corpus is not in fact a unified whole; Greek texts were produced in a wide variety of different locations and contexts over a long period of time, and by considering their individual contexts and creators, we

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1 For a brief overview, cf. Pingree (1965), or Pingree (1997: 21–29) for the astrological and divinatory material in particular.
2 For the former, cf. Aaboe (1955); for the latter, Jones (1997).
3 The standard edition of the horoscope texts, Rochberg (1998), contains only 32.
5 There is in fact an abundance of this sort of material in the extensive Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum, but it forms a much smaller part of the overall corpus of Greek astrological texts than the comparable Mesopotamian material in the Mesopotamian corpus.
can gain much more insight into the texts themselves. Bezold and Boll do focus on a single context and time period for the Mesopotamian material, namely the Neo-Assyrian palace context of the seventh century BCE. They draw primarily upon two types of text produced by scholars associated with the palace: the celestial omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil* and the reports sent by scholars to the king. Tablets containing lunar omens of the type that appear in *Enūma Anu Enlil* date back to the Old Babylonian period (early second millennium BCE), and *Enūma Anu Enlil* itself continued to be copied into the Hellenistic period. In other words, omens of this type formed an important part of the Mesopotamian tradition over an extended period of time. Both for this reason and because the circulation of universal omens has been less studied than the circulation of other astronomical/astrological material, the following investigation will focus particularly on omens of the *Enūma Anu Enlil* type, as represented in the abundant Neo-Assyrian material.

On the Greek side, one text that has attracted particular attention for its similarities to Mesopotamian omen material is the “moon book” included in a compilation of ominous works by John Lydus, a bureaucrat working in Constantinople at the time of Justinian (r. 527–565). Even without the Mesopotamian connection, this text forms a promising object of study because we are fortunate enough to have abundant evidence concerning the life of John Lydus and the intellectual atmosphere of the eastern Roman empire under Justinian. At a time when Neoplatonist philosophers were reportedly leaving Athens for the more welcoming Persian empire, and a newly-promulgated law code reaffirmed various sanctions against astrologers, it is all the more striking that an imperial bureaucrat, and holder of an imperial teaching post that was at least nominally restricted to Christians, should proudly offer up a collection of ancient divinatory wisdom of a sort that (he claims) was often met with skepticism in his day. Lydus’ expressed motivation for creating this work, along with his general claims about the causes and validity of omens, will be examined more closely in what follows.

In addition to the contextualizing benefits of looking closely at a single Greek text, our focus on a single work will enable us to be more precise than Bezold and Boll about the text’s relationship to the Mesopotamian material and the certainty with which we can assert the existence of this relationship. In the

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7 Hunger-Pingree (1999: 14).
8 The compilation as a whole is known as *De Ostentis (On Celestial Signs)*, abbreviated *De Ost*. 