A Comparison of the Role of Bārû and Mantis in Ancient Warfare

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Divination played a huge role in both the Mesopotamian and Greek civilizations. Diviners were consulted by their clients in all possible situations. The results of divination were especially important during times of war, when associated with the very life of the king along with thousands of others. Divination was a salient characteristic of Mesopotamian civilization; likewise, in Greek politics and warfare, a leader who ignored omens would incur the ominous anger impressions of those by whom he was followed.¹

In this paper I will compare the role and responsibility of diviners in two different civilizations in relation to the affairs of war. What did the Assyrian bārû and the Greek mantis (μάντις) have in common and in what ways did they differ? Could they really decide the course of battles? Would it be possible to describe the skills of the bārû priest in the words of Euripides: “the best mantis is he who guesses well”?²

War

When writing systems first appeared in the history of both Mesopotamian and Greek civilizations, the first written works not only had a codifying-mythological nature, but above all a military character. Weil’s essay, L’Iliade ou le poème de la force holds that “the true hero, the true subject at the centre of the Iliad is force”.³ Homer was the poet of war and the Iliad needs hardly be mentioned. In the case of Mesopotamian civilization, one could refer not only to The Gilgamesh Epic, but also to many other Sumerian, and therefore early texts which have war as a leading motif, such as The Victory of Eanatum

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³ S. Weil, L’Iliade ou le poème de la force, publié dans Les Cahiers du Sud (Marseille) de décembre 1940 à janvier 1941 sous le nom de Émile Novis.
of Lagash, The Victory of Entemena of Lagash over Umma, The Victory of Utuhengal of Unug over Guti, Enmerkar and Ensuhgirana, The Lugalbanda Poems, Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish, Gilgamesh and Huwawa. War was deeply rooted in Mesopotamian culture and it belonged to the gifts offered by the civilization called ME.

In many descriptions of war one can find even the poetic ones; in the myth of Anzu, the Bird Who Stole Destiny, in the description of the struggle between Anzu and the god Ninurta are used the words: “Both were bathed in the sweat of battle”. The Seven (Sebeti) who accompanied the war god Erra (Nergal), told him that war is a very noble profession i.e.: “Going to the field for the young and vigorous is like to a very feast”. The duels between gods were one of the most popular representations in the art of the Akkad period.

According to the royal inscriptions, the Assyrians never lost a battle. In opinion of Holloway, the immanent censorship in the Assyrian visual sources included taboos on any representations of Assyrian military defeats, symptoms of physical weakness on the part of the great king and his army, or scenes revealing the military strength of the opposition (formed battles lines, etc). Each element of every victorious Assyrian campaign was an act of religious imperialism. It exists Mesopotamian tradition of a victory over an enemy in each year. The Assyrian kings asked the gods about whether and how they should go about waging war. The kings wanted assurance from the gods that their weapons and army would prevail. Similarly, during a siege, the kings

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7 *How Erra Wrecked the World*, i, 52 in Foster, *From Distant . . .*, I35; *Erra*, i in *Mity . . .*, 94.