

Sumerian Divination

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Sumerian and Divination

Adam Falkenstein began his seminal article on divination: “Wohl in keinem Gebiet der babylonischen Überlieferung ist der Unterschied zwischen der sumerischen und der akkadischen Tradition so ausgeprägt wie in dem Sektor ... dem der ‘divination’, umschrieben wird” (Falkenstein 1966: 45). Now, more than fifty years since this article was published, the sentiment behind Falkenstein’s statement remains true. Whereas Falkenstein explored the traces of divinatory practice in Sumerian texts, I am more interested in the issue of language use. As far as the language of divination in the extant cuneiform texts from the ancient Near East, Akkadian is exclusive—or at least nearly so. This contribution discusses the exceptions, the rare examples of unilingual Sumerian or bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian divination. Although we share many common philosophical and linguistic interests, it is rare that my work on multilingualism perfectly intersects with Chessie Rochberg’s interests in the history of astronomical sciences and cuneiform divination. It is fortunate that I have the opportunity to offer this singularity to her, a wonderful teacher, champion, and intellectual—almost as fortunate as I am to have been her student.

Divination undoubtedly had a long history in the region of Mesopotamia before it was ever textualized (Falkenstein 1966; Richardson 2010). Less clear, however, are the languages that tradition was conducted in or associated with—maybe Sumerian, possibly some Semitic languages including forms of Akkadian, perhaps others. Divination is referenced in Sumerian texts such as the Gudea cylinders and Šulgi B or in Ur III year names (see Michalowski 2006: 247–250; Koch 2015: 59–63). Presumably, divination began as some sort

* I had the pleasure of reading divinatory and astronomical texts with Chessie Rochberg while I was a student at Berkeley. I hope that this attempt reflects well upon her training and insight. Many thanks to Wayne Horowitz for insights on certain points and to Ulla Koch for reading and commenting upon early drafts. I also thank the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to publish K.2241+ here and the staff of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies for allowing me to collate the tablets mentioned here. All errors in fact or interpretation are mine alone.

of oral tradition, although, as S. Richardson argues, the relationship between these traditions and the scholarly divination that emerges in the early second millennium is suspect (Richardson 2010: 226–239). But we need not dive into divinatory traditions or origins here. My focus is on language use, specifically, language use that we can observe and analyze in texts.

When divination became textualized in the early second millennium, when omen reports were written down, and when serialized lists of omens became compendia of sorts, these were written in Akkadian rather than Sumerian, the traditional language of listing scholarship, such as the lexical lists. Divinatory texts are markedly Akkadian. It seems as though Sumerian is deliberately excluded from divinatory scholarship. Although the reasons for this possibly linguistic ideologically driven output are unclear, Richardson's recent proposal connecting the creation of divinatory literature directly to political concerns at the end of the Old Babylonian period provides major clues for consideration.¹ Whatever the reasons, textualized divination is nearly always written in Akkadian.

The Beginnings of a Written Sumerianized Divination Tradition

In the *Festschrift* honoring Erle Leichty, Piotr Michalowski discussed the possibility of an omen report written in Sumerian. Michalowski argues convincingly that this represented some scribal attempt to render technical Akkadian extispicy terminology into Sumerian. That report is attested on two different tablets and treated slightly differently in each.

- 37 X1 igi niĝ₂-sa₆-^rga¹-ni ĝa₂-ra mu-un-ši-in-ni-bar
 X2 *omits*
- 38 X1 ša₃-ne-ša₄-ĝu₁₀ šag₄ kug₃-bi-še₃ mu-un-ĝar
 X2 *omits*
- 39 X1 kiĝ₂-gi₄-a-ĝu₁₀ uzu silim-ma-ke₄ ma-an-ĝar
 X2 [kiĝ₂-gi₄-a]-^rĝu₁₀¹ uzu silim-ma im-ma-an-ĝar

1 Richardson goes so far as to argue that “the divinatory craft was appropriated by competing Amorite courts, hungry for legitimizing devices” and further that “The project to deliberately encode and control this common culture form enabled Old Babylonian kings to define alternative access to divine knowledge” (Richardson 2010: 239). This argument strongly suggests that the use of Akkadian as opposed to Sumerian would underscore the otherness of this literature in contrast to the more prevalent Sumerian scholarly/literary form. Richardson's argument remains quite provocative.