Maybe it's a Sign: Observation and Doubt in a Mesopotamian Omen Series

Madeline Ouimet
The University of Chicago
maddie.ouimet@gmail.com

Abstract

Focused on the liminal zone where physical landscapes meet supernatural perception, the Akkadian omen text *Šumma Ālu* theorizes an emic, subjective imagery and interpretation for archaeologically-known urban environments of first-millennium Mesopotamia. Throughout 120 tablets, omens with explicit 'observers' are juxtaposed with those in which the portent is merely present. By contrast, at least some of these omens are, implicitly, unobserved. The paradox of a sign beyond sight yet within concern of the omen system complicates the role of the senses and of observer-agents in forming ominous meaning. Omens in practice could only have dealt with observed phenomena. Why, then, would the solely theoretical category of unobserved signs exist in the compendia, a text to inform practice? I offer that unobserved signs assert the emic existence of an external, objective—in Mesopotamian terms—reality at the fundament of the omen system, independent of the observer's mechanical liabilities and doubts. Observed omens then integrate this certain systemic basis with uncertain human action and thought, generating meanings which *can* be doubted. Although paradoxical, coexistence yet distinction between uncertainty localized in the observer and certainty grounded in the system is what allows incongruities between predicted and real outcomes to accumulate without undermining the perceived value of divination. Incongruities do, however, perpetuate doubt of the self, but even the observer's self-doubt is productive, maintaining the very anxiety which fuels appeal for augury. Not merely a catalog of ominous images, the purposeful constructions of this text thus mediate Mesopotamian participants' perception of the ominous system

as a whole while negotiating its own expanded definitions of the nature, observability, and discontents of 'image.'

The Ominous World of *Šumma Ālu*[1]

From wailing demons and the waking dead to flaming rivers and cannibalistic sheep, the signs which populate the first-millennium terrestrial omen series *Šumma Ālu* puncture the membrane of mundane life, jolting observers into parallel planes of thought where prediction precipitates from the liminal fringes of possibility (Guinan 2002: 7). However, besides those which assault the senses, other signs rift the fabric of normalcy in ways less obvious, like ants in a gateway (37:93). Conversely, a shocking light-flash, which in 43 preceding variants portended affliction, "should not" even be "take[n] as an omen" (*ana itti lā iṣabbat*) if seen "from afar" (20:44). Not only must a Mesopotamian observer be able to identify what images qualify as signs categorically but also where lies the inflection point at which the unremarkable crests over into the strange—just how many twins constitute a normal versus "numerous" population? The ruin of cities is at stake (1: 80, 90).

Throughout the minimally 120 tablets of *Šumma Ālu,* the definition of these ominous categories and thresholds is necessarily negotiated and ambiguated by the interfering actions, limited sensory faculties, and interpretive filters of observers and diviners (Freedman 1998: 2). However, omens with explicit "observers" are juxtaposed with those in which the same portent is merely present. For example, the protasis in which "a ghost cries out" (*eṭemmu issi...*) is followed by: "if a ghost cries out and someone hears it" (*...issī-ma šēmû išme...;* 19: 46, 47). By contrast and proximity, the first omen adopts the implication of being unobserved. More rarely, there are even signs explicitly unseen (44:17'). The paradox of a sign simultaneously beyond the ambit of observability yet also within the interests of the omen system poses questions regarding the role of sensory perception as process and of the observer as agent

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1 All transliterations come from S. Freedman with my normalization and translation based upon her work; given remote research, I do not have access to the tablets to collate.

in the formation of ominous meaning as derived from images, seen and unseen.

In this paper, to investigate the relation of signs to observers, I typologize terrestrial omens by examining the intersection of observation and action. Although heuristic, these types illustrate that the formation of ominous meaning is a participatory process in which observer and observed interact and negotiate their respective contributions; the structure of the text at sentence level and across omens thus constructs an eclectic Mesopotamian meaning for 'image,' at least in a divinatory context, as an assemblage of experiential, interactive, even embodied axes of intensity. At one extreme, unexperienced signs completely circumnavigate the observer, their meaning derived from sources removed from human interference. Yet, omens in daily practice could only have dealt with observed phenomena. Why, then, would this solely theoretical category of signs exist in the compendia, a text to inform practice? I offer that the pervasive distribution of unobserved signs throughout *Šumma Ālu* asserts the emic existence of an external and therefore objective reality—objective in Mesopotamian terms—at the fundament of the omen system, independent not only of the observer's mechanical liabilities but also his doubts. Observed omens integrate this certain systemic basis with uncertain human action and thought, generating new meaning but meaning which can be doubted. Although paradoxical, this constructed coexistence yet distinction between uncertainty localized in the observer and certainty in system is what allows incongruities between predicted and real outcomes to accumulate without undermining the perceived value of divination. These incongruities do perpetuate doubt of the self, but even the omen observer's self-doubt is unexpectedly productive, maintaining the very anxiety which fuels the need for augury and its textual elaboration.

Typology of Action

Mesopotamian divination is often divided into two subgroups, provoked and unprovoked, by specificity of the question posed for augury. Provoked divination seeks godly guidance for a particular query; the gods are 'provoked' to respond promptly with a specific answer whether in sheep entrails or swirls

of oil (Ellis 1989: 145; Maul 2007: 361-362, 364). While extispicy is the exemplar of provoked augury, terrestrial omens are traditionally lumped into the unprovoked category, materializing to the surprise rather than the summoning of their onlookers (Maul 2007: 368). Unprovoked omens arise from the gods' will to send a message, coded as image, into the physical world and not in response to any previously posited question (Koch 2010b: 45). However, this label 'unprovoked' applies a mask of homogeneity, even passivity, over the actual variety in terrestrial omen formation (Ellis 1989: 155, 158; Maul 2007: 364). Perhaps the 'black cat' cannot be called at will, but the degree to which a person subsequently interacts with the cat—and cat with person—changes the predictive outcome. Not only can objects, animals, and states be signs but so can actions and inactions, both accidental and intentional; the text thus defines 'signs' as more than just those bold icons with clear visual bounds (e.g., the black cat) but rather blurs the notion of image iconicity and clarity by encompassing also spatially and temporally *un*bounded actions and conditions. For example, the king fulfilling rituals on a cyclical basis or a man digging a well counter the typical notion of 'unprovoked' omens as discrete signs simply sent at the gods' behest for which observers must wait.

To illustrate the range of pathways which generate terrestrial signs, I discuss five types of interaction between observer, observed, and observation as the process by which sign and signified may attach:

1. A sign passively exists and is observed
DIŠ EME.ŠID *ša₂* 2 KUN.MEŠ-*šu₂* u *ša₂* ZAG GID₂.DA *ina* E₂ [NA IGI DIN]GIR.ŠA₃.DIB.BA *ana* LU₂ [ŠUB.MEŠ]
If[2] a lizard with two tails and the right one (being) long **is seen** in the house of a [man, divine] wrath will [repeatedly befall] the man (Nineveh 32:2').

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2 There are debates as to the best normalization/translation of DIŠ in *Šumma Ālu* and other omen series. Semantically, "if" makes sense, but DIŠ may not have been rendered in speech as *šumma* but rather served like a 'bullet point' to mark the start of each entry, with "if" implied (see Rochberg 2010 for DIŠ debate and her "P implies Q" omen formatting). For this essay, I normalize omens beginning with *šumma* to communicate the concept of the conditional statement, the fundamental structure of the text.

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2. A sign performs an action and is observed

DIŠ EME.ŠID MUŠ KU₂-*ma ina* E₂ NA IGI *ana* E₂ BI <SU>.KU₂ ŠUB-*su*

If a lizard **eats** a snake **and is seen** in the house of a man, famine will befall that house (Nineveh 32:50').

3. A sign performs an action and is (possibly) unobserved

DIŠ EME.ŠID *ina tal-lak-ti* E₂ NA [U₃.TU] ŠUB E₂

If a lizard [**gives birth**] in the walkway of the house of a man, downfall of the house (Nineveh 32:53').

4. A sign acts upon the observer

DIŠ EME.ŠID *ana* UGU GIR₃ NA E₁₁ *i-ḫad-du*

If a lizard **climbs onto** the foot of a man, he will rejoice (Nineveh 32:17').

5. An observer acts upon the sign

DIŠ NA *ina* NU ZU EME.DIR KI.U[Š] NU UG₇ N[A BI] A₂.TUK TUK-*ši*

If a man unwittingly **treads upon a lizard** (but) does not kill it, [that] man will acquire gain (Assur 32:16').

In types one and two, the observer initiates construction of sign-significance by witnessing a static condition or entity, like a two-tailed lizard, or an active event, like a lizard eating a snake, which he recognizes as a 'sign' (Guinan 2002: 22). Without recognition, the image either does not exist as a sign or takes a different apodosis. In type five, such as a man stepping on a lizard, the observer participates further, his own action in part constituting the interactive event as a sign. The example specifies that the action was performed "unwittingly" whereas other type-five omens not having this designation as well as via content appear intentionally executed (e.g., 22:36). This illustrates internal variation within types. In all three aforementioned types, the observer either takes his own active verb in the protasis or his role is implied by the stative construction "is seen" (IGI-*ir*; *amir*). In contrast, a sign in a type-three omen is its own agent. A lizard giving birth in a pathway has self-activating meaning, presaging abandonment of a house despite that no observer explicitly enters the picture. Lastly, in type-four omens such as a lizard scaling someone's foot, the observer is present but not so much an agent as an object of the sign's action. The repetitive use and juxtaposition of these structural combinations indicates that syntax and verb form are not insignificant precipitates of the

text's content but conscious choices which themselves create meaning for the images described; the purposefully diverse and even contradictory conditions for these images' constitution as omens (observation, observability, lack of observation, interaction, etc.) together interlock as the paradoxical resilience of the system, both the abstract system of divinatory ontology and epistemology and its systemic textual manifestation.

Two points of clarification are in order. First, although its stem is a verb of observation, the stative construction "is seen" (*amir*) could be understood as describing an inherent quality of the sign rather than implying the silent presence of an observer. However, some omens offer the explicit addition of a human actor in conjunction with the passive-voice "is seen," clarifying that this frequent omission does not delete but merely delegates his presence to assumption:

> [If... i]s seen, that marsh will lack reeds; **its eye-witness**[3] will become rich (63:58').

This combination of stative observation with an explicit noun for "eye-witness" (*āmiru*) suggests that omen types one and two are both observed, whether expressed by the stative or the rarer "an observer sees it" active phrase or variants.

This observation begs the question: why do only some omens with stative constructions receive "observer" addendums in their apodoses? The distinc-

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3 IGI.LA$_2$.BI, which I translated "eye-witness," has multiple options for normalization and translation. This compound is in some texts equivalent to *awirānu* or "stagnant water" (CAD A/2 *amirānu*: 63). Within the context of this omen, this translation appears valid. However, Freedman translates as "its observer." I agree with Freedman's translation—IGI.LA$_2$ corresponds also to *āmiru* or *āmirānu*, while BI represents "its" or *-šu* (or "that"). I also prefer this reading given the verb "becoming wealthy" aligning well with a human subject. Alternatively, stagnant waters could be "rich" as in "abundant." However, the verb *šarû* is almost exclusively attested with human participants or an extension of the human (e.g., household) in the CAD (Š/2 *šarû*: 131-132).

tion appears to be one not of absence of an act of observation but rather regards the identity of the persons affected by the omen's outcome, indicating an element of effective directionality for the concept of 'image' in this text. For instance:

> [If a turtle] is seen [in] the city square, that street will become silent; a great person of the city will die (63:63').

This example illustrates the contrast in ominous content between an omen with an explicit observer and one lacking such. Whereas the former type sees the predictive power of the sign focused on the observer himself, the latter type has no need to expressly write an "observer" into the prediction. If the observer is not the affectee of the omen outcome (but instead a different figure like the "great person" above), his role initiating sign significance can be abbreviated as an implication of *amir*.

Secondly, not all "observers" need be human nor signs inhuman. Tablet 22 provides numerous examples of when "a snake sees a man" (MUŠ NA IGI; *ṣerru amēla īmur*) with no mention of that man seeing the snake (22:26-32). Whether such role-reversal omens should count as type-one with snake as observer and human as image or type-three with the snake as unobserved sign matters less than the recognition that in these omens, human sensory faculties which filter external observation into internal perception cannot, at least rhetorically, be the means by which meaning is formed. Unlike other omen types, the semantic glue securing sign to signified is not observation but observability.

Observables Unobserved

For the purposes of this paper, I define observation as the actual event of mobilizing the senses to gather and internalize information from the exterior world (Larsen 1987: 212). Observability, rather, involves encultured understandings of what is possible to perceive through the senses (Guinan 2002: 10; Rochberg 2010: 376, 388). This category of possibles may exceed, overlap, or fall short of (biologically) real experience (Larsen 1987: 213; Maul 2007: 361;

Rochberg 1999: 562-565; Rochberg 2010: 389). Even if a first-millennium Mesopotamian might never see a *šedu*-demon with his own eyes in a biological sense (although indeed with encultured eyes of a psychological sense), the demon is still an observable in that observation is considered possible (*amir*) according to *Šumma Ālu*.

I use the example of the demon to illustrate definitions. However, an omen in which a *šedu*-demon "is seen" in fact relies on both principles of observation (theoretically) and observability to make meaningful the prediction (19: 34'; Guinan 2002: 29). This is due to the nature of the sign—the observable demon—in conjunction with the nature of how the sign is known—observation. Real sight (*amāru*) is explicitly invoked as the meaningful application of the senses which constitutes this micro-narrative as ominous. The notion of observation of 'image,' at least ominous images, is thus not related in a biological sense to only those omens which are truly possible to see, hear, or smell (natural versus supernatural), but rather concerns what *Šumma Ālu* as a theoretical, scholarly text *itself* identifies as situations of observation—the text determining (observed) 'image' (Rochberg 2010: 388).

Observability becomes the sole principle of meaning-making only in unwitnessed omens, unhinged from observation. Although the observer is excluded from the scene, the sign still predicts an outcome; these images exist independent of observation, but only in the textual and theoretical dimensions of the omen system, not in discrete events of practice. "If a mongoose gives birth in the lower courses of the city-gate," even if no one watches, "the dispersal of the city" is nevertheless anticipated (34:1 [DIŠ ᵈNIN.KI]LIM *ina a-su-re-e* [KA₂].GAL U₃.TU BIR-*aḫ* URU). Despite lack of observation, the protasis remains an emic observable—the mongoose is understood as 'seeable' if only an observer were present at the precise time and place. Observability without actual observation links sign and significance (Koch 2010a: 129).

However, in the example above, the text is ambiguous as to whether the sign *must* be observed or unobserved to proffer the specific outcome. Given the simplicity of attaching a brief *amir* (IGI) to the protasis, omission of any reference to observation appears purposeful. This is not to say that this omen

must go unobserved. Rather, the act of observation seems here irrelevant to the nature of the outcome. This opens the door, then, with ambiguous type-three omens teetering on the threshold, to the realm of unobserved omina, imagery beyond human experience.

While it could be argued that such types of omens lacking verbs or nouns of observation merely delegate this act to assumption, other omens in which the sign is explicitly "not seen" demonstrate concretely the existence of phenomena that not only can but must occur beyond the ambit of the senses:

> If an animal of the mountains, in a city whose city-wall is intact, city-gate is fast, and population(?)[4] has left(?), goes out of its city-gate and **is not seen** (NU IGI-*er*; *lā amir*), the people of the city will be thwa[rted], that city will be abandoned, and its governors will be removed (44:17').

This does not prove that omens such as 34:1 above similarly require a lack of observation. To the contrary, as I have argued that the lack of *amir* or other vocabulary in a clause is a conscious omission, lack of *lā amir* is as well. What such examples of explicitly unobserved omens do attest is that the ambiguity of type-three omens is an intentional construction. If *Šumma Ālu* only evidenced explicitly observed omens and ambiguous type-three omens, we may have no reason to assume that ambiguous omens are not merely operating with the assumption of unexpressed observation. However, since *Šumma Ālu* offers both forms of explicit omens (explicitly observed, explicitly unobserved), this means the *possibility* of type-three omens to take either condition is real.

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4 The contextually-appropriate translation of NAM.LU$_2$.U$_{18}$.LU or NAM.LU$_2$.U$_x$.LU (Akkadian *amīlūtu* or *amēlūtu*) is ambiguous. Freedman translated as "population" of the city, a well-attested meaning according to the CAD (A/2 *amīlutu* 1c1': 60). I have followed Freedman's lead. However, other well-attested readings include specifically (status of) free men or workers, retainers, or enslaved people (57-63). These readings could suit the context here, too, especially as a different term for "population" (UN.MEŠ, *nišu*) is used in the apodosis as if referring to a different group than the former NAM.LU$_2$.U$_{18}$.LU.

Yet, predictions produced by the same sign (explicitly) observed and (potentially) unobserved often differ. Therefore, in some cases of the ambiguous type-three omens, we can in fact infer whether the omen demands observation or its lack given other omens in its vicinity:

> If a ghost cries out in the house of a man / cries out in the gateway, dispersal of the house (19:46').[5]

> If a ghost cries out **and someone hears it**, downfall of the house; the man will die, and (there will be) mourning (19: 47').

That the two omens deliver different outcomes while drawing upon the same sign suggests that their conditions of observation must differ. Given that the second omen is explicitly observed (*šēmû išme*), the first cannot be— a kind of image known not visually but only textually, a priori.

The change in outcome that occurs at the moment of observation suggests a Mesopotamian rendition of the "observer effect"; mere observation manipulates phenomena under scrutiny, the Heisenbergian observer necessarily prodding a metaphorical quantum particle out of place to measure its momentum. Thus, observers can expect only some of the possible range of apodoses to arise from the signs they see, because by the very act of seeing, the outcomes for that sign unobserved become inaccessible. For those types of unseen signs paired with observed variants, the outcome can only occur if the sign is utterly unwatched. In these cases, the absence of an observer or verbs of seeing or hearing does not indicate optional observation but demands lack of surveillance to predict the outcome specified.

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5 Slash indicates *Glossenkeil;* read "or."
The interpretation of the *Glossnekeil* for this context (as it can have different meanings between and even within texts) is that it separates two variants for the omen. Either option in the protasis (a ghost crying out in the house *or* a ghost crying out upon the threshold) will result in the same outcome. See U. Gabbay 2016: "The commentaries reveal how some non-verbal features in the text were realized when read out. Thus, the *Glossenkeil* separating variant versions in the base text was probably rendered as *šanîš*" (19).

Unobserved omens permeate this tablet series in non-trivial numbers (although statistical analyses of omen types have not yet been conducted, and artefact damage hinders quantification). Thus, the text and the omen system it expresses clearly invest interest in a rhetorical, theoretical realm of ominous signaling which diverges from divination's daily applications. What use was it to record omens which, although observable in theory, could never be known in practice without mutating their trajectories of prediction?

I offer that the purposeful juxtaposition, wide distribution, and self-generative significance of unobserved signs throughout *Šumma Ālu* asserts the existence of an external and therefore (culturally-subjective perception of) objective reality as the unadulterated basis of the omen system. Unobserved omens exist in their own arena beyond the purview of the human senses and yet predict events pertinent to human society. These signs without observers, observers not only liable to err but whose presence is interference, are assuredly tamper-free and thus so are their outcomes—their predictions take on unique certainty given immunity from the observer effect. This certainty cannot be verified by observation, but paradoxically, it is exactly this lack of observation which allows for certainty. Unobserved omens, then, lend externally-sourced authority not so much to each individual omen in turn but rather to the integrated system of terrestrial divination as a whole. The system is thus bolstered "by removing expected reasons to doubt its veracity"—human interference (Boyer 2020: 103). If, as Boyer outlines, divination's perceived reliability is "a direct function of the perceived reality of detachment" from human biases, then unobserved omens are the epitome of credibility via detachment, even if that credibility in pure form exists only in believers' cognitive maps (104). The text therefore appeals to verisimilitude by cleaving the expected tie between image and observer.

Divination's Doubts and Durability

This affirmation of the omen system's objective theoretical foundation suggests, then, recognition and reaction to an undercurrent of doubt coursing through the interface where omens in thought meet omens in practice. Why expend time and tablet surface area elaborating unseen signs—invoking objec-

tivity—if the efficacy of observation was not already subject to skepticism and in need of rhetorical buttressing?

Doubt abounds when omens are observed, intermixing structure and agents. Although the sign itself remains an outgrowth of a certain systemic basis, the sign's meaning becomes malleable at the introduction of human action and thought. A nonprofessional observer of omens is an added filter through which the production of meaning must now pass (Rochberg 1999: 565). Can he be trusted to recognize that the ants in a gateway are indeed a sign or that a light-flash "seen… from afar" is not an omen at all (37:93, 20:44)? The official diviner has his own uncertainties (Maul 2007: 365, 370). Despite his familiarity with the textual corpus, the diviner's ability to determine predictions are muddled by omens with ambivalent outcomes:

> If (of) a city, its rubbish heap is green,[6] that city will flourish / will become desolate (1:42).

We saw earlier a case in which the *Glossenkeil* (slash in translation) marked multiple options for the protasis of an omen (19:46') as opposed to this instance demonstrating ambivalence in apodoses. While the former offers possible enhancement of textual usability by streamlining multiple image inputs to shared output, the latter appears only to tangle the hermeneutic wires of the omen scholar, leaving him at an interpretive standstill and the omen system a (seemingly) self-contradictory and ineffective endeavor.

Thus, not only does doubt reside in the self—in an observer's limited sensorial capacities and diviner's interpretive idiosyncrasies (Boyer 2020: 110). These actors also have the potential to aim their uncertainties at the overarch-

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6 The sign used here for "green" is SIG$_5$. However, SIG$_7$ represents "green" (*arqu*). SIG$_5$ is unexpected and not supported by CAD examples (A/2 *arqu*: 300). However, this could be an instance of a sign with shared pronunciation value representing another. The typical meaning of SIG$_5$ (*damāqu*) does not fit with the content of the omen. Unfortunately, I cannot collate the sign at this time.

ing system based on incongruities between predictions and reality.

In debates surrounding divination in the Near East and other anthropological contexts, interpretations of purpose and effect frequently propose that such practices, especially Mesopotamian divination, sought not so much to predict the future as to provide guidance for actions in the present, to offer a sense of control amid life's usual fog of uncertainty, potentially even to rearrange social structures towards further cohesion or, just as effectively, tension (Boyer 2020: 100, 111; Ellis 1989: 171, 175; Guinan 2002: 25; Koch 2010a: 129, 140-141; Koch 2010b: 44; Maul 2007: 363; Myhre 2006: 313; Rochberg 2010: 378). While I support much of this interpretation, I would like to challenge the reasoning which tends to follow—that accuracy or inaccuracy of specific predictions was of little emic concern or at least less concern than that of textual play upon paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures (Ellis 1989: 172; Rochberg 2010: 378, 387, 391).

As Rochberg states, "the validity of inferences such as are allowed by conditional statements is syntactic not semantic," as theoretical validity derives from the truth-functionality of a conditional's logical construction as opposed to a pragmatic correspondence between an ominous consequent and a real, observed outcome (2010: 393). However, while it elucidates a potential appeal driving scholarly popularity of omen texts, this reasoning does not offer an explanation for divination's popularity with the general populace in concrete situations of omens' application and advisory capabilities, capabilities which would seem to depend on predictions' accuracy to the 'imagery' of outcome. Other forms of argumentation which appeal to a *lack* of emic emphasis on accuracy can, however, explain the persistent appeal of omen systems despite inevitable abrasion of expectation against reality (Guinan 2002: 19). Cross-culturally, self-destruction is said to be averted by participants simply waiving intellectual emphasis away from predictions' veracity or else appealing to confirmation bias to dispel social memories of predictions' discord (Boyer 2020: 100; Larsen 1987: 203-205, 223).

However, as discussed above, *Šumma Ālu* itself contemplates and problematizes – not ignores – observation, observability, and objectivity, display-

ing not only awareness but engagement with this interface where real and possible mingle in the concept of image. As Koch and others aver, divination was indeed used as "a practical means of obtaining otherwise inaccessible information… beyond the range of ordinary human understanding" – in which case, accuracy and outcome matter (Koch 2010b: 44). But *Šumma Ālu* is not only a mere how-to manual of terrestrial divination. It grapples with Mesopotamian ontology and epistemology, warranting a closer reassessment of this issue of predictions and their truth.

Discord between outcomes predicted in omen apodoses and those observed would seem to rapidly undermine the efficacy and perceived value of divination. The frequency of such dissonance would seem to erode even the power of confirmation bias in sustaining faith in the system on the tenuous basis of cherry-picked concords. Boyer concurs, "most ethnographic reports suggest that people, far from endorsing all statements produced by divination, often entertain doubts about specific diagnoses or are suspicious of the qualifications of particular diviners" (2020: 102, 109). Observers are thus compelled to doubt, but their doubt need not be an all-encompassing rejection, nor evasion, of prediction. An unexpectedly productive paradox arises: omens can still be trusted, but only if they are *not* to be trusted.

In any predictive practice, whether augury or quantum mechanics, concentrated doses of uncertainty must be introduced in order for participants to accept that observed outputs may defy expectation without necessitating dismissal of the system entirely (Rochberg 1999: 561). When hypotheses differ from experimental results, physicists do not throw their hands in the air and reject science; they question whether assumptions were justified, whether methods require modification, or if data were misinterpreted. In short, observers doubt themselves and thus maintain general trust in the overarching systems in which they operate. This localization of uncertainty is evident in the observed omens of *Šumma Ālu*.

Inquiring into the rhetorical effects of unobserved omens suggested they draw authority from existence external to uncertain observers and that they lend this authoritative baseline to the system as a whole. Interrogation of the

observed omens involves the same question in reverse—why *include* signs which require interaction with an uncertain observer to formulate their predictions? Why envision an entire class of omens where image is muddied and meaning colored with doubt? Just as unobserved omens situate reliability in structure, I argue that observed omens constrain doubt to the role of the intervening human and his bounded ability to observe rather than allow its spread into other or all aspects of the system. By interweaving and contrasting the diverse array of omens typologized above, from signs devoid of observation to acts of intentional disturbance, *Šumma Ālu* constructs coexistence but vivid distinction between certainty of the omen system and uncertainty of the observer. Observers thus doubt themselves and their abilities to assess portentous images while seeking certainty at the systemic level.

Self-doubt renders divination ironically durable. Not only is the inevitability of skepticism offered a limited channel in which to flow without, at least too frequently, flooding into the rest of the system, threatening faith in the utility of omens in the abstract. Self-doubt of the observer, the consumer of omens, additionally sets up a positive feedback loop perpetuating the very unease that omens intend to service, creating steady demand. This tension between trust in the system but uncertainty in an individual's ability to tap into its images could be the very anxious, generative force behind the textual expansion of terrestrial omens from humble precursors in the Old Babylonian Period into the thousands of thematically organized and detailed entries of *Šumma Ālu* known from the mid seventh century BCE (Ellis 1989: 156; Freedman 1998: 2; Koch 2010b: 43; Larsen 1987: 214; Maul 2007: 367; Rochberg 1999: 563).

Conclusion

The interplay of observation, observability, and action throughout *Šumma Ālu* illuminates the ways in which Mesopotamians who saw and interpreted 'signs' dealt with doubt—the doubt pervading existence generally, doubt embodied in the liabilities of observers' senses, and doubt arising from paradoxes in the very predictive system which attempted to assuage it. Certainty and uncertainty are produced by meaningful construction and juxtaposition

of different omen types. Both conditions, simultaneous but separate, are critical to divination's perceived integrity despite ongoing contradictions between propositions internal and observations external. Rather than assuming that the accuracy or inaccuracy of forecasted outcomes was more or less ignored by participants, this analysis of the mechanics internal to *Šumma Ālu* suggests that Mesopotamians who engaged with the divinatory system consciously addressed this issue of prediction and that they did so without dismissing the importance of the images they observed.

Acknowledgements

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