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## Divination and Politics in the Late Assyrian Empire

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People have always tried to discover the unknown and the unknowable by non-rational means. Even today, when rational scientific methods have reached a degree of effectiveness unknown in the past, individuals may still seek the answer to questions science cannot settle by turning to ancient methods which have long been consigned to the sphere of superstition. There is a simple psychological explanation of this phenomenon. Scientific knowledge is attained gradually and relatively slowly, while human life is short; those who are unable or unwilling to bear the uncertainties inherent in human existence will always turn to the irrational.

Any human society must impose some order on the world in which it exists, an order which enables it to orient itself in that world and which is therefore essential for its existence. In the societies of the ancient world, where the level of rational thinking was still very low, the various systems of polytheistic religion provided such an order. They were based on the belief that the world of nature and of man was created by the gods and ruled by their will. Knowledge about the world was knowledge about the will of the gods, and different forms of divination were employed to reach that knowledge. Divination was thus a way of communication with the supernatural forces which man believed were willing to reveal their intentions through all kinds of omens. The recognition and correct interpretation of these omens could divert possible catastrophe from the individual and from the society.

It was believed that although the gods had created evil, they had also given men the means of deflecting its course. These means belonged to the realm of magic. Divination and magic, in most religious systems of the ancient world, formed a body of highly elaborate rules, adherence to which was more important than the ethical and moral content of the religion. Divination and magic formed "a body of purely practical acts, performed as a means to an end."<sup>1</sup>

In the ancient world divination and magic were not the province of the individual, but primarily that of the state, an inseparable part of the political ideology and the practical politics of the state. The distinction between the rational and the irrational, between reality and illusion, was obliterated until the birth of Greek philosophy. Illusion guided the actions which shaped and changed reality.

The significant role of divination and magic in the life of ancient societies is nowhere better attested than in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamian texts date from

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<sup>1</sup> B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, New York 1954, p. 70.

the beginning of the Old Babylonian period right up to the end of the Seleucid era, and reveal that divination in Mesopotamia was not only "an essential means of orientation in life but also an arena for the display of intellectual endeavors and aspirations."<sup>2</sup>

Divine omens and their interpretations were carefully written down, collected, and systemized in series and collections. The experts who arranged and used this literature on divination and magic (*ummānu*) were the intellectual élite of Mesopotamian society. It was they who created the intellectual ambience in which the rest of Mesopotamian literature grew. Divination was also an integral element in a cultural-political tradition which lived through all the political and ethnic changes of thousands of years of Mesopotamian history. It must be remembered, of course, that the bearers of this tradition were always the ruling strata of society, every new monarch taking over the traditions of his predecessor. For this reason the traditions are firmly bound up with the political system, with the state and its ideology, that is to say, the religion.

This symbiosis of religious and political ideology is characteristic not only of Mesopotamia, but of all the states in the ancient Near East. Although the various ideologies differ in a number of respects, they are all founded on the belief that the real ruler of the state was the god, and that the earthly ruler was the god's representative.<sup>3</sup> The primary consequence of this view of political power was the assumption that the ruler was responsible only to the god for his actions, and not to the society over which he ruled. And it was divination, the careful study of omens revealing the approval or the disapproval of the god, which assured him that he had not offended the gods.

Mesopotamian civilization had recourse to many divination techniques, but basically they can be grouped under two headings: inductive divination—the interpretation of omens, i. e. extraordinary natural phenomena or unusual human behaviour; and intuitive divination—the god speaking to man directly, through prophetic ecstasy. The latter did not appear until the late Assyrian Empire, probably under Aramean influence.<sup>4</sup>

At the turn of the second to the first millennium B. C. prophecy based on observation of the heavenly bodies came to the fore, i. e. astrology. These ob-

<sup>2</sup> A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, Chicago 1968, (third impression), p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. W. Ahlström, *Royal Administration and National Religion in Ancient Palestine*, Leiden 1982, Foreword: "Religion was an expression of the life of a community and therefore constituted a part of the political system, the basic premise being that of the god as the ruler of the nation."

<sup>4</sup> Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 221: "... the Mesopotamian civilization — only rarely and rather reluctantly — admits that the deity can use man as a vehicle for the expression of divine intentions..." Intuitive divination was popular in Syria, Palestine and above all in Greece. Plato (Phaidros) condemns inductive divination, but considers prophetic ecstasy as beneficent. He believes that apart from rational thinking there exists a faculty for intuitive knowledge which the gods have granted to a few men and women. This intuitive faculty is so far removed from rational thinking that it can only function during a temporary loss of reason. In addition to the ecstasy experienced by diviners, Plato gives three other forms of this state: initiation into the mysteries, poetic inspiration, and the raptures of love. Plato's view of divination, of course, dates from the time when the Greeks had already learned to distinguish between the rational and irrational, between the sphere of faith and religion, and that of reason. The civilization of Mesopotamia never attained that distinction.



servations were collected in the series *Enūma Anu Enlil*.<sup>5</sup> Systematic arrangement of the astrological omens in a canon began in the late second millennium B. C. in the astrological schools. Weidner<sup>6</sup> has distinguished five such schools altogether: Babylon and Borsippa, Aššur, Kalach, Ninive, Uruk. The series comprised between six and seven thousand omens and was still in use in Seleucid times, as shown by a catalogue found in Uruk, dating from 194 B. C. T. Bauer divided this series into several different groups of texts:<sup>7</sup> 1) the series itself, consisting of omens without commentary; 2) a selection from the series, *rikis girri Enūma Anu Enlil*, serving easier orientation; 3) excerpts giving quotations from the series; 4) a factual commentary, *mukalimtu*; 5) a linguistic commentary; 6) a supplement with commentary, *Sin ina tamartišu*. The series begins with lunar omens, followed by solar omens, meteorological omens, and finally omens connected with the fixed stars and the planets. The copies of this series which have survived are from the library of Aššurbanipal, which fits in with the important place given to astrology at the court of the Sargonid dynasty. It was at this period that astrology began to supplant other techniques of divination, particularly extispicy. This tendency reached its height in the Seleucid period, when also scientific mathematical astronomy was born.<sup>8</sup> In Sargonid times, astrology was used exclusively for the ruler's benefit,<sup>9</sup> for it was his privilege to receive the divine message. The concept of the king's responsibility towards the gods, a sense of intimacy in their relationship, was greatly intensified during this period.<sup>10</sup>

However, the most widely-known technique of divination, and the one elaborated in the greatest detail, extispicy, was also practised at the Assyrian royal court. A collection of extispicy oracles has survived in which the god Šamaš answered questions concerning state affairs and the royal family, through the omens read from the exta of sacrificial animals.<sup>11</sup> The pertinent answers are binary in form: yes or no, favourable or unfavourable. Records of intuitive divination have also been preserved, the oracles again having been primarily addressed to the king.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the experts (*ummānu*) in various methods of divination enjoyed an important position at the court of the last Assyrian kings. This was reflected

<sup>5</sup> E. F. Weidner, *Die astrologische Serie Enūma Anu Enlil*, Archiv für Orientforschung XIV, 1941–44, pp. 172–194.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>7</sup> T. Bauer, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 43, p. 313 ff.

<sup>8</sup> G. J. P. McEwan, *Priest and Temple in Hellenistic Babylonia*, Freiburger Altorientalische Studien, Wiesbaden, 1981, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> The drawing up of individual horoscopes did not become widespread until the Hellenistic period, cf. O. Neugebauer, H. B. van Hoese, *Greek Horoscopes*, Philadelphia 1959.

<sup>10</sup> For this manner of expression, for example in letters to the gods and in prayers, cf. Sargon's letter to the god Aššur (F. Thureau-Dangin, *Une Relation de la Huitième Campagne de Sargon*, Textes Cunéiformes, Musée du Louvre, 3) or Aššurbanipal's prayer to the god Nabū (J. Craig, *Assyrian and Babylonian Religious Texts I*, 6, Leipzig 1885, p. 87).

<sup>11</sup> J. Knudtzon, *Assyrische Gebete an den Sonnengott für Staat und Königliches Haus aus der Zeit Assarhaddons und Assurbanipals*, Leipzig 1893; E. Klauber, *Politisch-religiöse Texte aus der Sargonidenzeit*, Leipzig 1913.

<sup>12</sup> M. Weippert, *Assyrischen Prophetien der Zeit Assarhaddons und Assurbanipals*, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological and Historical Analysis* (ed. F. M. Fales), Rome 1981, p. 71 ff.

later in the Hellenistic tradition according to which every ruler had his learned counsellor, the *ummānu*.<sup>13</sup> A unique collection of texts preserved in the royal archives of Nineveh throws remarkable light on the work of the *ummānu*, their social standing, education, and their attitude to their kings. These texts are letters written by these scholars to King Asarhaddon and King Aššurbanipal.<sup>14</sup>

Parpola's chronological analysis of these letters brought to light a very interesting fact: most of the letters date from between 675 and 666 B. C., that is to say, the last seven years of the reign of Asarhaddon and the first three years of that of Aššurbanipal; 80 % of the correspondence pertains to the earlier period. This is an unfortunate situation typical of cuneiform sources. It is often impossible to say for certain whether the body of texts reflects a normal or an unusual situation, because the sources are never complete. Nevertheless it is safe to assume that similar letters were currently written during the reigns of other Sargonid kings as well.<sup>15</sup> Their letters were probably destroyed, perhaps already in ancient times, or else they have not yet been discovered.

The fact that such a large number of scholarly letters were addressed to Asarhaddon has of course not escaped the notice of modern scholars. This king has been labelled exceptionally superstitious and under "the ghastly control of his priestly advisers."<sup>16</sup> This interpretation, however, is based on the false assumption that Assyrian scholars represented autonomous political interests which they were capable of furthering through their influence on the king. The explanation is more likely to lie in the involved situation of the Assyrian Empire both at home and abroad. Asarhaddon came to the throne at a time of serious internal crisis caused by conflicts within the ruling class, a crisis which culminated in the assassination of Asarhaddon's father, Sinacherib. He appears to have been put out the way because of his efforts to prevent further expansion of the Empire.<sup>17</sup> Asarhaddon succeeded in suppressing this revolt, but he was nevertheless forced to give in to the highest ranks of the administration and agree to the further expansion — the annexation of Egypt. The conquest of Egypt placed an enormous burden on the economy and the military resources of the Empire, whose north-eastern frontier was under constant threat from attacks of the Cimmerians, Scythians and Medes. Nor did

<sup>13</sup> A tablet with a list of the *ummānu* of the Assyrian and Babylonian kings, from Seleucid Uruk, has survived (cf. M. I. Dandamajev, *Vavilonskie pisci* (The Babylonian Scribes), Moscow 1983, p. 82); an Aramaeic papyrus from Elephantine gives the earliest (Achaemenid) version of the legend of the sage Ahīqar, counsellor to King Sinacherib and King Asarhaddon, a legend which was widespread both in classical and in medieval times.

<sup>14</sup> S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (LAS), Part I, Texts, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, Band 5/1, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1970; Part II, Commentary and Appendices, Band 5/2, 1983.

<sup>15</sup> In ABL 1216 (L. Waterman, *Royal Correspondence of the Assyrian Empire*, Ann Arbor 1930–1936) one Kalbu is mentioned, an *ummānu* of Sinacherib. He and his colleagues decided to keep the king in ignorance of unfavourable omens. Cf. also Parpola's commentary on LAS 41, and A. L. Oppenheim, *Divination and Celestial Observations in the last Assyrian Empire*, *Centaurus* 14, p. 120 ff.

<sup>16</sup> A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria*, Chicago 1968 (third impression), p. 347; W. von Soden is of the same opinion, in his *Herrscher im alten Orient*, Göttingen-Heidelberg 1954, p. 125 ff., as is R. Labat, *Fischer-Weltgeschichte* 4, 1967, p. 81 ff., and many other writers.

<sup>17</sup> S. Parpola, *The Murder of Sennacherib*, in: *Death in Mesopotamia*, XXVI<sup>e</sup> Rencontre assyriologique internationale (ed. B. Alster), *Mesopotamia* 8, Copenhagen 1980, p. 171 ff.



Asarhaddon succeed in settling the internal conflicts within the ruling class, and in 670 B. C. he had another revolt to put down.<sup>18</sup> It is no wonder that in this troubled political situation Asarhaddon sought support in the tradition which symbolized the stability of royal power and which at the same time could reassure him that his actions were in accordance with the wishes of the gods. Indeed this endeavour to find support in tradition at a time when the royal authority was weakening, and with it the stability of the Empire, may have been one of the reasons for the collection of texts preserving the traditions of Mesopotamia for thousands of years, to form the library of Aššurbanipal.

The *ummānu*, learned in these traditions and the guardians of them, had their special and non-interchangeable functions at the royal court. There were five groups of them:<sup>19</sup> the *tupšarru* (scribes), experts in the arts of astrology, the calendar, and omens connected with days and months; the *bārū* (haruspices), experts in the field of extispicy; the *āšipu* (exorcists), experts in magic; the *asū* (physicians), experts in practical medicine; the *kalū* (chanters), experts in the art of soothing the gods with chants and lamentations.

Modern writers sometimes refer to these experts as "priests", but the term is highly problematical, since there was no function in Mesopotamia that fully corresponds to the meaning of the word. Officials of the Assyrian and Babylonian temples played a certain part in the cult, but their function was primarily an administrative and economic one. The Assyrian *ummānu* had neither an administrative nor an economic role; nevertheless they, too, were primarily royal officials, and the machinery by which they were appointed and remunerated was the same as for other royal officials. The writers of the letters were among the privileged élite of the royal officials;<sup>20</sup> they were regularly called upon to answer the king's questions, and sometimes were even granted private audience. Thus in LAS 34, the astrologer Balasī thanks Asarhaddon for admitting him to the royal entourage: Obv. 5—14: "What the king, my lord, wrote to me: 'From now on you will stay in my entourage; is there something you want to say?' There is nothing. May the great gods of heaven and earth give long-lasting days of life to the king, my lord!" Finally Balasī expresses the hope that he will see the king soon: Rev. 12—13: "I look forward to seeing (the king, my lord, (soon) again)."

The astrologer Akkullānu (LAS 98—316), who was *erīb bīti* of the temple of Aššur at Aššur, was directly connected with the temple. Mār-Ištar (LAS 75—197) was entrusted by Asarhaddon with the task of reorganizing the temples of Babylonia. B. Menzel<sup>21</sup> found only two texts attesting that the Assyrian temples had their own *ummānu*. Both documents refer to the temple of Aššur in Aššur, the largest and most important Assyrian shrine; they attest the activi-

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the hints in LAS 247 and 133, and the report in a Babylonian chronicle (a. K. Gryason, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, Locust Valley, New York 1975, p. 127, Chr. 14, 27): MU Xīkām šarru (ina<sup>kur</sup>) Aš-šur lūrabūti meš — sú ma-da-tu (giškakki iddu)k.

<sup>19</sup> LAS II, XII.

<sup>20</sup> LAS II, XVI — about sixteen of the highest-ranking scholars at court were close to the king, forming an "inner circle". In addition there were scholars in the big cities, the "outer circle".

<sup>21</sup> B. Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel*, Band I, Rome 1981, pp. 233 and 247.

ties of a *kalū* and an *āšipu* in the temple.<sup>22</sup> In the letters of the royal scholars is an occasional mention of temple matters: they determine which days are favourable for the building or decoration of the temple and the statues of the gods and refer to various rituals (e. g. LAS 7, 8, 19, 25, 57, 58, etc.).

The majority of the royal scholars came from a few prominent families who had monopolized important offices at court for many generations.<sup>23</sup> The sources refer to the family of Nabū-zuqup-kēn, scribe and astrologer at the courts of Sargon II and Sinacherib, who was active in Kalach. His signature is found on a number of astrological texts, among them Enūma Anu Enlil.<sup>24</sup> He was the son of the scribe Marduk-šumu-iqīša and descendant of Gabbi-ilāni-ēreš, scribe to Aššurnasirpal II. One of his sons, Nabū-zēru-līšir, was the chief scribe of Asarhaddon, and another, Adad-šumu-usur, was the exorcist of Asarhaddon and Aššurbanipal. Ištar-šumu-ēreš, the son of Nabū-zēr-līšir, was the chief scribe of Asarhaddon and Aššurbanipal, while his second son, Šumāju, was an exorcist. Urad-Gula, the son of Adad-šumu-usur, was an exorcist and deputy chief physician.<sup>25</sup>

Colophons attest the family of the *āšipu* of the temple of Aššur (Baba-šuma-ibni, his son Nabū-bessun with two sons, Kisir-Aššur and Šamaš-ibni, and grandson Kisir-Nabū).<sup>26</sup>

The existence of these families is not surprising, for only in the family could adepts acquire the necessary education. These families possessed considerable libraries of texts, collected, copied and arranged by generation after generation. The sons learned from their father or grandfather. There is an interesting comment by Nabū-zuqup-kēn in the third section of the series i-nam giš-hur an-ki-: "liginnu-tablet with mathematical tables, by Nabū-zuqup-kēn, son of Marduk-šumu-iqīša, the scribe (... y the exorcist). For the perusal of my grandson Ištar-šumu-ēreš..."<sup>27</sup>

Thus from generation to generation the sum of knowledge grew, to form the basis of the authoritative tradition: "Neo-Assyrian scribes evolved a system of standardized 'canonical' texts that were relied on and transmitted as sources of all kinds of information necessary for the fulfilment of their duties"<sup>28</sup>.

The posts were not automatically hereditary, of course; the king had to approve them. Every king appointed his own *ummānu*, even though they always

<sup>22</sup> The practice in Babylonia differed; there, the *ummānu* were part of the temple personnel and shared in the temple revenues or held temple prebends. This situation is attested for Seleucid Babylon and Uruk (McEwan, *op. cit.*, p. 8 ff.), but can be assumed for earlier times, as well.

<sup>23</sup> A similar situation is again attested for Seleucid Babylonia. In Uruk, for example, there were several ancestral clans from which many of the *āšipu* and *kalū* came (cf. W. G. Lambert, *Ancestors, Authors and Canonicity*, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 11, 1957, p. 3; McEwan, *op. cit.*, p. 21).

<sup>24</sup> Weidner, *op. cit.*, p. 173; H. Hunger, *Babylonische und assyrische Kolophone*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, 2, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1968, Nos. 293–313.

<sup>25</sup> LAS II, XIX.

<sup>26</sup> Hunger, *op. cit.*, p. 19, Nos. 191–220.

<sup>27</sup> LAS II, p. 451, cf. also Hunger, *op. cit.*, Nos. 351–374, which are the work of apprentice-scribes (*šamāllu*) who came exclusively from scribal families.

<sup>28</sup> Y. Elman, *The Authoritative Oral Tradition in Neo-Assyrian Scribal Circles*, *Journal of the Ancient Near East Society of Columbia University*, 7, 1975, p. 23.



came from a limited number of families. The criterion for the appointment of these experts, as of all other officials, was not only that of scholarly qualifications, but real or pretended devotion to the ruler. It is known, for instance, from a letter by the chief scribe Ištar-šumu-ēreš to Aššurbanipal, that the king granted private audience to no one who had not come to pay his respects when he was still crown prince (LAS 18). After the death of his father, Aššurbanipal reorganized the administration and not all the *ummānu* found a place at the new court. And even so important a figure as Adad-šumu-usur had to beg the king's favour for his son Urad-Gula, who had lost his post (LAS 120, 121). LAS 121 throws interesting light on the manner in which Assyrian courtiers could seek favour: Rev. 14—19: "None of those who stay in the palace like me; there is not a single friend of mine among them, whom I could give a present, (who) would accept (it and) speak for me." It would appear that bribery is one of the oldest benefits of civilization. It is clear from LAS 122 that the king granted Adad-šumu-usur's request, but whether this happened with the help of a bribe or not the letter does not tell.

Like other officials, the scholars received an allotment of land in return for their services. In LAS 36 Balasī complains about a high official (*rab šaqī*) who was governor of the province where his allotted land lay. The *rab šaqī* had seized his fields and driven his people away. A similar complaint, this time against a governor of the province Barhalzi, is contained in LAS 114, written by the chief haruspex, Marduk-šumu-usur. His letter supplies interesting information: the size of his field was 20 acres and the duration of tenure 14 years. Unless he was exaggerating, this land was his only source of subsistence, cf. Rev. 7—9: "May the king do me justice, may I not die of hunger." These two complaints suggest that the social standing of the experts was not as high as that of the highest officials in the Assyrian administration, or the two officials concerned would not have presumed to seize their land. The complaints are also further evidence of the weakening of the royal authority.

Land tenure was linked to the discharging of labour and military duties (*ilku* and *tupšikku*). It is possible that these duties were of a professional nature in the case of the élite among the scholars.<sup>29</sup> *Ilku* duties are mentioned in a letter by Asarhaddon's physician, Urad-Nanā (LAS 248). The scribes of Kalzi complained as a body to the king, saying that the fulfilment of their *ilku* and *tupšikku* duties prevented them from carrying out their professional duties (LAS 85).

Most of the letters are matter-of-fact in content, dry and sober in style. There is relatively little flattery, and what there is tends to emphasize the king's wisdom (the king is as wise as Adapa, and so on).<sup>30</sup> Petitions form an ex-

<sup>29</sup> Oppenheim, *Centaurus* 14, p. 155 ff., believes that the estates of the *ummānu* were tax-exempted, and that their *ilku* duties were carried out in the palace itself. Cf. further LAS II, p. 244, especially note 432.

<sup>30</sup> The reports sent by Assyrian scholars to Asarhaddon and Aššurbanipal were similarly professional in content. Many names known from letters are found again as authors of these reports (R. C. Thompson, *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Niniveh and Babylonia*, London 1900).



ception; here the style is florid and colourful, and there is no sparing of flattery. The petition of Adad-šumu-usur (LAS 121), already quoted, can serve as an example; it contains a eulogy of Aššurbanipal which is almost identical with a passage in the introduction to this ruler's inscriptions. This suggests the possibility that these experts were directly employed in the composition of the inscriptions,<sup>31</sup> or else that they were very well acquainted with them, in which case the royal inscription must have been read at the court.

Although these letters were written by professionals to an amateur (the king must, of course, have had some education in divination and magic in order to see his way in these complicated matters), they are subordinated in tone. All information is presented in the form of suggestions, never as an authoritative statement; the ultimate decision rests with the king. The writers sometimes stress the vast gulf between themselves and the king (I am but a dog at the feet of my lord, and so forth); they assure him of their devotion and careful carrying out of their duties. The contemporary political scene is only hinted at; the king apparently never asked for counsel on political matters, or at any rate, not in writing. If the writers were so prudent in their answers concerning matters in which they were expert, they would be even less likely to be bold enough to advise the king on the running of his kingdom. They had to exert their political influence indirectly, and it concerned largely the ideological context in which practical political decisions had to be taken. A brief survey of the contents of the letters makes this clear.

The most important figures among the scribes-astrologers<sup>32</sup> were the chief scribe Nabū-zēru-līšir (LAS 30–33), his son the chief scribe Ištar-šumu-ēreš (LAS 1–29), Balasī (LAS 34–58) and Nabū-ahhē-erība (LAS 59–76). Most of their letters report their observations of the sun, the moon and the planets. Foremost in importance were Jupiter, the royal star, and Mercury, the star of the crown prince. Great attention was also paid to observation of Venus and Saturn. It was also duty of the astrologers to observe and competently interpret unusual natural phenomena such as earthquakes (LAS 16, 35) or lightning (LAS 38). The eclipse of the moon was regarded as particularly ominous, for it foretold the death of the king. If the eclipse was total, or hid that quarter of the moon relevant to Assyria, and if the royal star Jupiter was invisible, a substitute king (*šar pūhi*) had to be chosen.<sup>33</sup> After a certain period (usually 100 days) the *šar pūhi* was put to death and ritually buried. A significant part of the proceedings were complicated rites in which the *šar pūhi* took upon himself all the evil omens which threatened the real king. The *šar pūhi* ritual is re-

<sup>31</sup> ADD 709 (C. H. Johns, *Assyrian Deeds and Documents*, Cambridge 1898–1923) is a fragment of the draft of a royal inscription; the last line of the text includes the name (signature?) of Adad-šumu-usur, cf. LAS II, p. 450.

<sup>32</sup> In Hellenistic Babylonia the astrologer was entitled *tupšar Enūma Anu Enlil* (cf. McEwan, *op. cit.*, p. 15). The title was already in use in Neo-Assyrian times. ADD 851 is a list of the scholars at the court of Aššurbanipal, with seven *tupšar Enūma Anu Enlil* as the first of them (including Ištar-šumu-ēreš and Nergal-šumu-iddina, authors of the letters); cf. LAS II, p. 456.

<sup>33</sup> Assyrian astrologers divided the moon into lunar quadrants, each symbolizing part of the world as it was then known (Elam, Akkad-Babylonia, Subartu-Assyria, and Amurru-Syria with Egypt); cf. LAS II, p. 406 ff., and the excurses about the substitute king on p. XXII. There is a wealth of literature about this ritual, but it is mostly out of date.

corded in the letters seven times during the reign of Asarhaddon and once for Aššurbanipal.

The astrologers also determined which days would be favourable for important undertakings. LAS 10 names a day favourable for a royal journey and LAS 17, 45–47, 69–72, 145–146, 148 favourable days for audience of the king's sons. The astrologers had also to remind the king that an intercalary month was due (LAS 38).

The astrologers did their best to interpret omens as favourably as possible. In LAS 13 Ištar-šumu-ēreš defends himself against the king's accusation that he intentionally omitted evil omens. LAS 38 (written by Balasī) reveals that the collections of Šumma āli omens was prettied up so as not upset the king. A special hemerology, Inbu Bēl Arhi, was drawn up for him, giving a large number of favourable days.<sup>34</sup> ABL 1216 shows that also the *ummānu* of Sinacherib kept evil omens from the king.

There are very few references to political matters. In LAS 1, 3, Ištar-šumu-ēreš informs the king that preparations are being made for the *ummānu* to swear the *adū* (oath of loyalty), demanded of them as of all the Assyrian officials and vassals, on the occasion of the nomination of Aššurbanipal as crown prince of Assyria, and that of his elder brother Šamaš-šumu-ukīn as crown prince of Babylonia. In LAS 29 he (along with Adad-šumu-usur and Marduk-šākin-šumi) reported to the king the unfortunate accident which prevented the return of the statue of Marduk to Babylon. The statue had been carried off to Assyria by Sinacherib when he conquered Babylon, and its return was a political act of great significance. The episode may be seen as evidence of Asarhaddon's unwillingness to return the statue, which was the symbol of Babylonian independence. Nabu-zēru-līšir (LAS 30) warns Asarhaddon against the Babylonian official Sallāju; the letter was written at the end of 674 B. C. and in February 673 the Assyrian army was already in action against the Bit-Awukāni tribe, with whom Sallāju had connections.

There are relatively few letters from haruspices (LAS 113–118), which may reflect the declining popularity of extispicy. The chief haruspex Marduk-šumu-usur (LAS 113–117) is also the author of a number of extispicy reports<sup>35</sup> in which Šamaš, reading the omens from the exta of sacrificed animals, answer such questions as: Will the Medes, the Scythians or the Cimmerians attack? Should an army be sent against them? Will the king of Urartu attack the Assyrian province of Šubria? Should this or that official be appointed? Will the king, the crown prince, the king's mother recover from their sickness? The answer had to be yes or no, favourable or unfavourable, and Marduk-šumu-usur had to have a thorough insight into the political situation. Too many mistakes would have cost him his position, at the very least. The questions are extremely interesting as showing how serious the threat was to the north-east frontiers of the Empire, and how profoundly this threat disturbed the king.

<sup>34</sup> LAS II, p. 156, which is evidence "of the enormous prestige of the king vis-à-vis his counsellors" (who preferred to comply with the royal wishes, even though these occasionally clashed with their scientific principles).

<sup>35</sup> Knudtzon; Klauber, *op. cit.*, LAS II, 460 ff.



Almost 45 % of the correspondence between Asarhaddon and his *ummānu* is made up of letters from *āšipu* and *asū*. Asarhaddon was a very sick man, and his concern for his own health and that of his family is understandable.<sup>36</sup> The letters from his physicians are almost exclusively concerned with reports on the state of health of the royal princes, medical prescriptions and advice on the king's own health. In LAS 247, from Asarhaddon's personal physician, we find a reference to the revolt Asarhaddon had put down in 670. The king had written to his physician, complaining that he was not served as devotedly as his predecessors had been. Urad-Nanā reassured him, and concurred in the stern retribution meted out to the rebels. The form of expression he uses is typical for Assyrian political thinking: the god Aššur had delivered the disloyal servants into the hands of the king, because they had committed a heinous crime — they had broken their *adū*.

The letters of the exorcists, too, pay a great deal of attention to the state of health of the royal family. The *asū* worked in close collaboration with the *āšipu*; the former used drugs, potions and balsams in their treatment of sickness, while the *āšipu* used magic. The exorcists' letters thus deal mainly with recommendations to perform various apotropaic and prophylactic rituals, and instructions as to their execution. An important and regularly performed ritual was that against witchcraft (LAS 173). But there were many other rituals, their performance calling for such knowledge of intricate technical rules that only an expert could cope with them. The outstanding royal exorcists were the chief exorcist of Asarhaddon, Marduk-šākin-šumi (LAS 172–202) and Adad-šumu-usur (LAS 119–171). LAS 185, written by Marduk-šākin-šumi, reflects the political atmosphere at the royal court towards the end of Asarhaddon's reign (671). In expectation of an eclipse of the moon, Marduk-šākin-šumi advised the king to nominate a *šar pūhi*, and to take one from among the Babylonians who were nothing but criminals and rebels anyway. This piece of advice certainly reflects clearly what Asarhaddon and his court felt about Babylonia, otherwise Marduk-šākin-šumi would never have dared to suggest it. This is yet further evidence that the myth of Asarhaddon's pro-Babylonian policy, so long maintained in literature, has no basis in fact.<sup>37</sup> The traditional classification of Assyrian policy towards Babylonia as anti-Babylonian (Sinacherib) and pro-Babylonian (Asarhaddon) does not correspond to the reality. The policy towards Babylonia adopted by all the rulers of Assyria was essentially imperialistic in character, and aimed at making Babylonia a permanent part of the Empire. The methods by which the individual kings tried to carry out this policy varied, and were all equally unsuccessful.

<sup>36</sup> LAS II, p. 230 ff. From the symptoms referred to in the letters, Parpola identified the disease from which Asarhaddon suffered as lupus erythematosus disseminatus, a disease of rheumatic origin which is still incurable today.

<sup>37</sup> This myth has already been criticized by B. Landsberger, *Brief des Bischofs von Esagila an König Asarhaddon*, Amsterdam 1965, p. 14. Landsberger is of the opinion that the pro-Assyrian and pro-Babylonian attitudes were the cause of political conflict at the Assyrian court. It is very doubtful, however, that in the historical conditions of the time, political conflicts would take on a national character. The cause of the political crisis in Assyria was more probably the unscrupulous struggles within the ruling class to win a share of the political power, that is to say, the profitable posts at court.



That Adad-šumu-usur was an outstanding personality, and one very close to King Asarhaddon, is already suggested by the large number of his letters. In LAS 171, for example, consoling the king after the death of a child, his tone is truly personal and human, absolutely out of keeping with the style of the Assyrian royal correspondence. LAS 129 is an important letter, the only example of immediate reaction to Asarhaddon's original solution to the question of the succession. Adad-šumu-usur begins by expressing his amazement that the elder prince had been named the future king of Babylonia instead of Assyria, which fell to his younger brother Aššurbanipal. He then promptly praises the wisdom of the king's decision, which brought joy to the Assyrians but made their enemies quake with fear (the delegation from Elam had returned home in terror). Finally he advises the king not to pay any attention to what evil tongues might say about his sons. This letter is interesting from many points of view. It is obvious that only a man very close to the king could have written it, daring to speak so openly. The letter confirms that attempts to sow discord between members of the royal family was a common political weapon used at the Assyrian court. The opposition would try to gain its ends by using the prince to whom the succession had not been granted. From Adad-šumu-usur's letter it would seem that Aššurbanipal was not exaggerating when he said in the introduction to his inscriptions that he was the darling of the gods, of his father and of the whole of Assyria, and that he had therefore been chosen as heir to the throne. On the other hand, it is quite possible that Adad-šumu-usur was not expressing either his own opinion or that of the court, but that he simply did not dare to criticize the king's decision.<sup>38</sup>

LAS 143 and 144 also throw interesting light on the political methods of the Assyrian court. LAS 143 was written in 670, when the king was suffering from an acute attack of his disease and had not eaten or issued from his chambers for several days. Adad-šumu-usur advises the king to break his fast and appear before his courtiers again, clothing his advice in a flattering comparison of the king to the god of the sun, Šamaš: just as the sun in the heavens hides his face for only half of the day, so the sun on earth, the king, should not hide more than half a day. The underlying fear behind these words is that long absence would give support to rumours that the king was seriously ill, and thus perhaps spark off an attempt at rebellion. LAS 144 reflects a similar atmosphere of uncertainty and suspicion; in it, Adad-šumu-usur tells the king that in accordance with his orders, the drugs for the crown prince's medicine will first be tasted by his slaves. Murder by poisoning does not seem to have been excluded from the Assyrian political arsenal.

The scribe and astrolog Mār-Ištar was entrusted with a clearly political task by Asarhaddon; he seems to have enjoyed the king's confidence. He was charged with reorganization of the Babylonian temples and their cult, an important task and also one of great delicacy. The Babylonian temples had suffered a great deal during eight years of anarchy - from the conquest of Babylon by Sinacherib in 689 to the time of his murder in 681. The restoration of

<sup>38</sup> Cf. the discussion of this question in LASS II, p. 116.

the temples and their subordination to royal control was politically highly significant. In Mesopotamia the temples were not only the centres of religious life, but also important socio-economic institutions, and their function was an integral part of the structure of Mesopotamian society. The Assyrian temples were directed and controlled by the state. The king was the chief figure in the cult, ensuring the economic needs of the temples and appointing temple officials. In Babylonia, political centralization was not so tight, and the temples were accordingly to a certain degree independent of the central power. This partial economic and political autonomy was maintained by the Babylonian temples in subsequent periods, too: Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid and Seleucid. Along with the wealthy privileged cities and Aramaeic and Chaldaean tribes, the temples could seriously interfere with the integration of Babylonia into the Assyrian Empire and become one of the principal opponents of the centralizing policy of the Assyrian kings. The main purpose of Mār-Ištar's mission was to try and bring the Babylonian temples under the king's authority.

Landsberger turned Mār-Ištar into a demoniacal figure filled with pathological hatred of all things Babylonian.<sup>39</sup> This is somewhat exaggerated; the attitude of Mār-Ištar towards Babylonia was the official attitude of the Assyrian king, his court and the administration, for whom Babylonia represented a difficult political problem and an unending source of unrest. His letters show that Mār-Ištar really tried to put the affairs of the temples in order. In addition to his reports on the restoration of the cult, his letters are full of complaints about the corrupt and arbitrary behaviour of Babylonian officials. It would not seem that this was defamation, as Landsberger suggests. The years of anarchy had certainly provided plenty of opportunity for the stronger to oppress the weaker and to enrich themselves at their victim's expense. Nor is the great prestige of the monarchy, reflected by so many of the sources, only so much propaganda on the part of those in power; it is also an expression of the objective value of centralized power. The only alternative to monarchy that Mesopotamia knew was anarchy, and for the greater part of society anarchy was a greater evil than a despotic royal government.

In LAS 276 Mār-Ištar accused the governor of Babylon of increasing taxes of his own accord and of throwing innocent people into prison. In LAS 281 he explained to the king why the cult of the god Nabū was not being practised in Borsippa; deliveries of sacrificial animals for the cult had ceased, because the shepherds who provided them as part of their tax payments had bribed the officials and kept their beasts for themselves. Yet it was more evidence of corruption among Babylonian officials. This was probably also the reason for the reorganization of the temple staff in Sippar, Kutha and Hursagkalama, reported by Mār-Ištar in LAS 291.<sup>40</sup> In LAS 299 he complains of governors who had

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 38 ff.

<sup>40</sup> This is the matter referred to in Report No. 272 (Thompson, *op. cit.*, rev. 13 ff.); translated in LAS II, p. 266: "The noblemen which your royal father had installed in Akkad destroyed Babylon and carried away the valuables of Babylon; that is why these evil signs have appeared. Let the king's troops come and seize them, and place others in their stead..."



stolen temple property and thus robbed the royal treasury. LAS 280 includes a report on the death and burial of a *šar pūhi* (incidentally the only existing description of this ceremony found so far). The *šar pūhi* in this case was one Damqī, the son of a high temple official (*šatammu*) in Akkad, and Mār-Ištar warns the king of the horrified reaction of the people of Akkad to his death, because of his high social standing. He very reasonably advises the king to choose someone from the common people for the next *šar pūhi*, for his death would then offend no one. A characteristic view of the value of human life — a value determined by social standing alone.

Thus Mār-Ištar attempted to introduce the Assyrian administration into Babylonia, and to entrench it firmly, in the spirit of the well-proved imperialist principle laid down several centuries later by the Roman emperor Tiberius in such apt terms: "A good shepherd shears his flock, he does not skin them."

Akkullānu (LAS 298—316), from the subjects of his letters a specialist in astrology, was *erīb bīti* of the temple of Aššur; his reports of the problems faced by some of the Assyrian temples at the beginning of Aššurbanipal's reign are further evidence of the constant decline of the royal authority. Not only were high Assyrian officials failing in their duties towards the temples; they did not hesitate to enrich themselves at the expense of temple property. In LAS 309 Akkullānu gives a list of governors and other *lārabāni* who had failed to deliver sacrificial animals and other temple dues to the temple of Aššur. In LAS 315 he told the king of a big corruption scandal concerning the theft of gold from the treasury of the temple of Aššur and involving a number of highly-placed people. LAS 310 provides an interesting piece of information: Akkullānu advises the king to appoint the son of a certain temple official to take his deceased father's place. Temple offices, it seems, were also drawn from certain families in which they passed down from one generation to the next. Here, too, of course, the final decision rested with the king.

Political decisions were arbitrary in character and not governed by any laws or generally acknowledged and accepted rules. This of course laid the way open for all kinds machinations and intrigues behind the scenes, the typical political atmosphere of the Assyrian court. Neither birth, wealth nor exceptional ability gave anyone the right to a share in political power. That, and the economic advantages that accrued from it, were only the king's to grant. This uncertainty and the effort to maintain their position in such conditions must have had a profound effect on the political behaviour of the Assyrian upper class, which included the *ummānu* as well.

The political influence wielded by the *ummānu* was only an indirect one and found expression mainly in the sphere of ideology. They tried to persuade the king and his sons to adapt their actions to fit the context of the religio-political tradition of Assyria. The principal task of the scholars was to protect the king and his family from the anger of the gods, which could be roused by faulty behaviour or by wrong-doing. This guilt did not have a moral or ethical content, as a rule, but consisted in going against or neglecting some of the innumerable ritual regulations and commands. The neglect of a warning omen, not practising the cult or ritual ceremonies laid down, could threaten not only



the king but the whole state. It was the duty of the experts in the different fields of divination and magic to see that this did not happen. In carrying out this task, they relied on tradition as preserved in the authoritative texts. It was their intellectual creed that the gods had set a certain quantity of limited knowledge before humanity, long ago in the times before the Flood, in the times when also all social institutions and above all the kingship had been created. All scholars therefore refer to the relevant traditions and authoritative texts in their letters. This might of course have been natural prudence, in case they were proved wrong by events, but above all it was their conviction that only what had been handed down from the past was right.

All the king's scholars were not only thoroughly educated in their own field, but were also learned in all other spheres of Mesopotamian knowledge. Thus Nabū-zuqup-kēn copied mathematical tables for his grandson, and other scholars included proverbs or quotations from Mesopotamian literature in their letters. In LAS 12 Ištar-šumu-ēreš quoted a Sumerian proverb and in LAS 288 Mār-Ištar quoted from Enūma eliš.

The scholars of Mesopotamia amassed a considerable amount of empirical information in different fields of knowledge and yet their learning never led to a rational, scientific way of thinking. Their minds worked only within the limits of a strict religio-political dogma. Were any part of this dogma to be disturbed, the result would be a chain reaction which would end in the complete collapse not only of the ideology but of the whole political system of their society. It was thus the political system of Mesopotamian society that was the principal brake on the evolution of scientific attitudes.

The birth of science came with the birth of a new political system — that of the Greek *polis*. Many historians writing of the ancient Near East are insistent that the Greeks learned so much from Mesopotamian and other Near Eastern civilizations. Certainly they learned a great deal, but that is not the real point. What matters is how the Greeks made use of what they learned. The Greek philosophers, for the first time in history, crossed the boundaries of knowledge laid down by religious dogma.

While it is true that the foundations of modern science were laid in Greece, this does not mean that the Greeks were more talented or more competent intellectually than were the Mesopotamians or the Egyptians. The explanation of the advance they made must be sought in the political structure of the *polis*, a society made up of equal citizens whose right and duty it was to take their part in the running of the state. Only where the individual has the right to decide his own future and that of his society can he attain intellectual self-confidence. This self-confidence is essential if he is to question dogmas handed down for centuries and accepted as final. Without this questioning approach, science can neither come into existence nor advance.

In the despotic societies of the Near East people were the passive subjects of political decision-making. A tiny minority, the privileged ruling class, governed the vast majority of the population condemned to political and intellectual passivity.