

Knowledge About the Future: Thoughts on the Status of Divination in the Ancient Near East

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Cuneiform sources from two millennia show us that in the ancient Near East kings and their counselors did not rely exclusively on their own professional expertise when there were political decisions to be made. They held off, rather, on putting a plan into action until its feasibility had been examined and confirmed by an independent “expert advisory board.”

Yet the means by which such evaluations were made seem at least from the perspective of our current worldview wrongheaded and downright absurd. Since over the course of centuries the future prospects of political and military decisions were regularly determined from the color and shape of the liver of a sheep that had been slaughtered for this very purpose.

Such an examination procedure, having developed into a form of »science«, is a stumbling block to the modern contemporary, above all because it is blatantly unconcerned with the content and purpose of the decision in question. Nonetheless we must state that Mesopotamians themselves, as well as their neighbors, saw the mastery of such divinatory procedures as a decisive reason for the lasting cultural and geopolitical success of Babylonia and Assyria. Mesopotamia’s three-thousand-year-long political and cultural domination of the entire Near East seems to prove the effectiveness of their form of political decision-making. In the present paper we go further into the question why divination obviously didn’t obstruct reasonable politics even though the basis of the Mesopotamian divinatory evaluation process seems to be completely unreasonable.