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*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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## Neo-Assyrian Diplomatic Marriage and Divination: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

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The corpus of queries and reports which survives from the reign of Esarhaddon and his son, Ashurbanipal, consists of various questions that these two Neo-Assyrian kings asked diviners to place before the sun god *Šamaš* by means of inspection of sacrificial animal entrails, commonly called *extispicy* (Knudtzon 1893; Klauber 1913; Starr 1990=SAA 4). These texts record questions, and occasionally, a summary of the signs observed on the internal organs of the sacrificed animal, but not answers. There are no letters reporting on the final outcome of the practice of extispicy either. It is therefore likely that diviners delivered the final answers to the king face-to-face (Robson 2011: 618, 625). Both the queries and reports draw their omens from standard divination series documents and other extispicy compendia.

Extispicy, as the most expensive Mesopotamian divinatory method from the third millennium onward, retained a high degree of prestige during the Neo-Assyrian period. It provided binary answers, “yes-no” responses to the most critical strategic decisions, and questions of interest to the state. Using this method, diviners observed several signs on different organs of the sacrificed animal, and calculated

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<sup>1</sup>- The present note is extracted from my ongoing DPhil research at the University of Oxford entitled “Ancient Mesopotamian Divination: Between State and Private”, supervised by Prof. Jacob L. Dahl.

an aggregate sum of positive and negative signs; that is, if there were more plusses than minuses, the result was positive, and vice-versa. (*Multābiltu* Tablet 2-3: 145=Koch 2005: 127). If the positive and negative signs cancelled each other out, the result was uncertain, and a follow-up was indicated (*Multābiltu* Tablet 3: 15<sup>5</sup>=Koch 2005: 139). There were two types of signs called *niphu* and *pitruštu* that could change the whole result, even when unfavourable signs were heavily outnumbered by favourable signs<sup>2</sup> (*Multābiltu* Tablet 2-3: 147=Koch 2005: 128). If the diviner was not familiar with the value of a certain omen, he would consult the omen compendia, and the excerpts, to find the related apodosis of the omen, and to see whether it was taken as positive or negative. The query of the king was written on an *imgidda* (i.e. long and thick) tablet. The tablet was placed in front of the god before a ceremony. After having performed the extispicy, the diviner would add a full description of the signs observed onto the part of the tablet which was intentionally left blank. The blank area would likely not have enough space for writing all the signs observed, nor would there be space to record the results of a second extispicy if a follow-up was necessary. As a result, the main part of the query is normally written more expertly and beautifully than the section of omens, which is usually rather squeezed, and seems to be written in a hasty manner. Moreover, considering the length of time taken by this practice (i.e. from sunset to sunrise; cf. BBR 1-20=Zimmern 1901), it is quite imaginable that the tablet could gradually have dried during the ceremony, causing difficulties when attempting to write on a semi-dried tablet. Sometimes, the queries did not include omens at all; and, in most cases, the omens are not accompanied by their relevant apodoses, and do not clarify whether their value was favourable<sup>3</sup>. Except for a few reports, most reports and queries are silent about the ultimate result of the extispicy. Lack of this information is an important lacuna in our understanding of the actual outcome of divinatory consultations: what answer did a Babylonian or Assyrian diviner deliver to the king?

The Neo-Assyrian queries reflect military and political problems with which Esarhaddon and his son Assurbanipal were struggling. As can be gathered from the queries, by the time of Esarhaddon, a strategic alliance of Medians, Cimmerians, Mannaeans, and occasionally, Scythians was coming together against the Assyrian territories. A fragmentary tablet of a query (SAA 4 42) suggests that the ringleader was one *Kaštaritu*, the city lord of *Kār-kaššî* whose identity has been much discussed, and it has been suggested that he was identical to the Median *Fravartiš* known from “The Histories” of Herodotus (Starr 1990: LX-LXI). Another query asks if *Mamitiaršu* of Media and *Kaštaritu* of *Kār-kaššî* will become allies (SAA 4 41). The query records two extispicies with a majority of positive answers, which alludes to a successful alliance between the two leaders (SAA 4 41 re.9-12). A third party, a certain *Dusanni*, the leader of *Saparta*, also joined the rebellion (SAA 4 45, 50, 51). It not only ceased to pay regular tributes to the Assyrian palace (SAA 4 64, 65, 66, 71), but also began to launch military campaigns against Assyrian cities and borders. The alliance called by the general term “enemy” (*nakru*) managed to besiege the city *Šiṣṣirtu*, a fortress of *Harhar* located on the border of *Ellipi*, to cut off a vital entrance to the Zagros Mountains – and in fact to the Median territories altogether (SAA 4: 77; see also Dandamayev and Medvedskaya 2006). In such an insecure situation, Esarhaddon could gain great advantage and peace of mind from a strategic crack in this strong alliance.

2- Ulla Susanne Koch has labeled the two signs as “jokers”, cf. Koch 2005: 19; Koch 2015: 82.

3- See also Starr 1983: 109-110.

An extispicy query<sup>4</sup> from the reign of Esarhaddon asks whether *Bartatua*, king of the Scythians, will be loyal to the treaty of Esarhaddon<sup>5</sup> if he accepts *Bartatua*'s request concerning his royal daughter, and gives his daughter in marriage to him (SAA 4 20=Starr 1990: 24-26). The main topic of the query focuses on the loyalty of the Scythian king, and the marriage is of secondary importance described as the antecedent: "If Esarhaddon gives him a daughter of the king in marriage, will *Bartatua*, king of the Scythians, truthfully speak with [Esarhaddon, king of Assyria], true and reliable words of peace? Will he guard the treaty of [Esarhaddon, king of Assyria?] Will he do [whatever] is pleasing to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria?" (*kīma aššur-ah-iddina šar māt aššur mārāt šarri ana aššūtu*<sup>6</sup> *ittannaššu bartatua šarru ša iškuza itti aššur-ah-iddina šar māt aššur dibbī kīnūtu šalmūtu ša šulummū ina kittišu idab-bubu adê ša aššur-ah-iddin šar māt aššur inaššara [mimma] ša ana muhhi aššur-ah-iddina šar māt aššur ṭābu ippušu*) (SAA 4 20: 4-9). In this passage, the perfect tense of the verb "*nadānu*" (i.e. *ittanna* "he has given to"), does not refer to an action completed, but concerns a time earlier than the consequent. The formula *kīma*+perfect+present (i.e. durative) is well attested in other queries (cf. SAA 4 90: 4-5). It is therefore likely that the marriage had not been taken place at the time of the practice. Given the difficult political situation Esarhaddon was experiencing, some historians believe that this query may provide more insight to the policy of Esarhaddon (Olmstead 1923; Sulimirski and Taylor 1992: 565): a diplomatic marriage could be a recruitment of new allies, resulting in the debilitation of the rebellious alliance.

The description of signs recorded at the end of the query indicates that the practice was done twice. The omens are not accompanied by their related apodoses, and the value of the signs is not recorded. Nor is the final result attested in the tablet. Thus, two questions may be of interest to a modern scholar: Why did the diviner repeat the practice? And: What was the final result of the extispicy? In what follows, I have searched omen compendia to find the signs observed in both extispicies, and to check their related apodoses against available cuneiform sources. By this method, we are able to apply the result of the survey to the query under study, and thus the speculation of a possible final result, if not a final decision, is feasible.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned above, according to the rules of extispicy, if good signs outnumber bad signs, the extispicy is favourable (*Multābiltu* 3: 7 = Koch 2005: 138). Most of the apodoses related to the signs observed in both extispicies of this query bear positive values, and are provided with favourable predictions (see the Appendix). In the first extispicy, 11 signs out of 14 total observed signs were favourable, so a positive result could have been expected. Despite the majority of good signs, two signs are not positive: 1) The middle of the *manzāzu* is effaced; and 2) The coils of colon are 16<sup>8</sup>. The first sign is listed as *nip̄hu* in a

4- K 11489 + 83-1-18, 534 + 80-7-19,71 + 80-7-19,75=CDLI P236956

5- For the typical form of the Esarhaddon treaties, see Wiseman 1958.

6- Although I am well aware that the Akkadian *ana aššūtu* does not match the Old Babylonian grammar, in transcription, I follow the cuneiform.

7- Jussi Aro has analysed the first four omens of the first extispicy of the query under study (Aro 1966: 137). In his "The Ritual of Diviners", Ivan Starr applied this method to three Old Babylonian extispicy reports. However, he selected those reports in which the final result was asserted by the ancient diviner, c.f. Starr 1983: 114-119.

8- For a modern anatomical analysis of the term *tirānu* "the coils of colon", see Temple 1982. For other terms, see Biggs 1969: 159-160, Starr 1990: XL-LV, Liederer 1990, and Koch 2000: 38-70.

broken line of a commentary (CT 30 18: 12=Koch 2005: 266), but not in the main series. Since the beginning of the line is broken, we are not sure whether the categorising of this sign as *niphu* is accurate.<sup>9</sup> But the second sign is apparently listed as *niphu* in the main series of *Multābiltu* (*Multābiltu* Tablet 2-3). This seems to have been quite a strong enough excuse for the diviner to repeat the extispicy. The second extispicy, however, provided a complete set of positive signs, and thus the king could have well received a “firm yes” (*anna kīna*) from the god *Šamaš* as the final verdict (*dīnu*) of the god. It is difficult to guess whether Esarhaddon eventually gave his daughter in marriage to *Bartatua*. Albert Ten Eyck Olmsted took it for granted, and called it a “successful marriage” (Olmsted 1923: 360) arguing that in a second query, the troops of the Scythians are expected to march against *Bīt-Kāri* and *Saparda* in the Median land, the enemies of Assyria (SAA 4 66). Following Olmsted, there is a consensus amongst a number of historians that *Bartatua* kept his oath following his marriage with Esarhaddon’s daughter, since in 653-652 the Assyrians defeated Media, and handed over the country to the Scythians (Sulimirski and Taylor 1992: 565). However, Olmsted’s argument was probably based on a false interpretation of a now outdated edition of the Neo-Assyrian queries. Despite his judgment of the text, that query together with the queries nos. 67-72 (SAA 4), refer to the threat of Scythians at the time that the Assyrian expedition marched into Median territory to collect a tribute of horses (Starr 1990: LXII). As Jossi Aro has pointed out, the typology of the marriage query (e.g. the Babylonian script, lack of the date and names of diviners) imply a date earlier than other queries mentioning Scythians which are mostly written in the Assyrian ductus and contain the names of diviners e.g. SAA 4 23, 35 (Aro 1966: 114). Therefore, even if a marriage happened, later documentation of Scythian hostility against Assyria might imply that the diplomatic marriage did not have an immediate effect on the relationship (Aro 1966: 114). As the only certain point, the fixed rules governing the act of extispicy leave no doubt that the result of the whole practice was favourable. Although we are left in the dark as to whether Esarhaddon really gave his daughter to the Scythian king, the existence of an extispicy with a set of very positive omens makes it tempting to suggest that – at least at the time of the practice – the decision had indeed been taken, and the query was a way to prove it.

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9- In the Appendix, I will explain why it is likely that the diviner did not interpret this sign as a *niphu*.

## Appendix

### First Extispicy:

Omen/Protasis	Interpretation/Apodosis	Value
<p><i>qabal manzāzi pašša</i></p> <p>“The middle of the <i>manzāzu</i> is effaced.”</p>	<p><i>ištar libbāt amīli malât</i> (KAR 423 I: 48=Heeßel 2012: 36=BLO 20: 18)</p> <p>“<i>Ištar</i> will be filled with anger against man.”</p>	Negative ( <i>niphu</i> sign?)
<p><i>padān imitti u šumēli larâ irašši</i></p> <p>“The <i>padānu</i> has a bifurcation on the right and on the left.”</p>	<p><i>nakru šabtūtīya u anāku šabtūssu umaššar</i> (BLO 34: 12, 45: 21)</p> <p>“The enemy will release my prisoners, and I will release his prisoners.”</p>	Positive
<p><i>danānu šakin</i></p> <p>“The <i>danānu</i> is present.”</p>	<p><i>išdān kīnāti šubtu nēhtu</i> (KAR 423 II: 27= Heeßel 2012: 37)</p> <p>“Firm foundations; peaceful dwelling.”</p>	Positive
<p><i>šulum imitti u šumēli šakin</i></p> <p>“The <i>šulmu</i> is ‘present’ on the right side and on the left side.”</p>	<p><i>šulum napišti</i> (KAR 423: 58= Heeßel 2012: 37)</p> <p>“Health of life.”</p>	Positive
<p><i>ina šumēl marti piṭru ana šēpi irakkis šēra iṭṭul</i></p> <p>“In the left of the gall bladder there is a fissure, it is attached to a foot-mark and faces the back.”</p>	<p><i>ummān nakri šummirātīša ul ikaššad</i></p> <p>“The army of the enemy will not reach its goal” (KAR 423 III: 30= Heeßel 2012: 37), also see Starr 1983: 72.</p> <p>For the favourable meaning of <i>rakāsu</i> in extispicy, see Starr 1983: 111.</p>	Positive
<p><i>padān šumēl marti šakin</i></p> <p>“The <i>padānu</i> on the left of the gall bladder is present.”</p>	<p>For the favourable meaning of this feature see Starr 1983: 112.</p>	Positive

<p><i>nīdi kussī šakin</i></p> <p>“The <i>nīdi kussī</i> is present.”</p>	<p><i>danān [...] išdān ṛ kēnān</i> [<i>šubtu nēhtu</i>] (KAR 423 II 78-79= Heeßel 2012: 38)</p> <p>“Superiority of [...]; ṛ firm foundations; [peaceful dwelling.]”</p>	<p>Positive</p>
<p><i>rēš šēr imitti ubāni šapliš paṭer</i></p> <p>“The top of the right side of the <i>ubānu</i> is split below.”</p>	<p><i>mihīš ṛ qaqqad ummān nakri ṛ gabarah ummān nakri ummān nakri ṣummirāt ummān nakri ul ikaššad</i> (KAR 423 III 37-38= Heeßel 2012: 39)</p> <p>“Complete defeat of the army of the enemy; rebellion of the army of the enemy; the army of the enemy will not reach its goal.”</p>	<p>Positive</p>
<p><i>ina šēr ubāni qablīti šīru zīru</i></p> <p>In the middle surface of the <i>ubānu</i> a piece of flesh is twisted”</p>		<p>Uncertain</p>
<p><i>kak šibti ana šumēli tibi</i></p> <p>“The <i>kakku</i>-sign of the increment rises to the left.”</p>	<p><i>ummānī himsāta ummān nakri ikkal</i> (Babylon Stele XI: 9-10= Schaudig 2001: 522)</p> <p>“My army will devour possessions of the army of the enemy.”</p>	<p>Positive</p>
<p><i>elītu illik</i></p> <p>“The upper part is elevated.”</p>	<p><i>damiq elītu illik</i> (<i>Multābiltu</i> Commentary 4: 49=Koch 2005: 261)</p> <p>“It is favourable the upper part is elevate.”</p>	<p>Positive</p>
<p><i>qablītu išissa uššur</i></p> <p>“The base of the middle part is loose.”</p>	<p><i>uššurtu kašītu</i> (<i>Multābiltu</i> Tablet 1: 3=Koch 2005: 91)</p> <p>“Looseness means success.”</p>	<p>Positive</p>
<p><i>kaskasu ebi</i></p> <p>“The breast bone is thick.”</p>	<p><i>ebītu šubat nēhti</i> (<i>Multābiltu</i> Tablet 1: 13=Koch 2005: 93)</p> <p>“Thickness means dwelling of peace.”</p>	<p>Positive</p>
<p><i>tīrānu 16</i></p> <p>“The coils of colon are 16.”</p>	<p><i>tīrānu 16 lā šalmat</i> (<i>Multābiltu</i> Tablet 2-3: 109=Koch 2005: 123)</p> <p>“The coils of colon are 16: it is unfavourable.”</p>	<p><i>nīphu</i>-sign</p>

14 omens in total: 11 favourable, 1 unfavourable, 1 *niphu* sign, 1 uncertain.

As was discussed, despite the obvious fact that the number of favourable signs outnumbered unfavourable signs to eleven to one, the fact that the last sign here is also listed in *Multābiltu* as a *niphu*-sign could have been a reason that a second extispicy was necessary: “If the Coils of Colon are ʿ16ʿ: it is unfavourable” ([šumma] ʿ16ʿ *tirānu lā šalmat*) (*Multābiltu* Tablets 2-3: 109=Koch 2005: 123); “those are *niphus*” (*annūtu niphātu*) (*Multābiltu* Tablet 2-3: 122=Koch 2005: 125). According to *Multābiltu*, if the good signs are many and the bad signs are few, and a *niphu* sign occurs, then the extispicy should be repeated: “when you perform an extispicy [and its good signs are] many, its bad signs are few, and there is a *niphu*, return to your hand (i.e. check again)” (*têrta* [*teppuš-ma damqūša*] ʿmā duʿ *lemnūša iṣu u niphu šakin ana qātīka tūr*) (*Multābiltu* Tablet 2-3: 147=Koch 2005: 128). The first sign, as mentioned earlier, is listed in a broken line of a commentary as a *niphu* sign: “[...] the middle of the *manzāzu* is effaced: it is *niphu*” ([...] *qabal manzāzi pašta niphu*) (CT 30 18: 12=Koch 2005: 266). We are not quite sure if this is really what was interpreted by the diviner of the extispicy under study as well. First, the beginning of the line has been damaged, and it is not possible to figure out whether the mere existence of this sign was sufficient to call it a *niphu*. Second, according to *Multābiltu*, two *niphus* in a favourable extispicy cancel each other out, and the result is favourable (*Multābiltu* Tablet 2-3: 158= Koch 2005: 129). So it is quite possible that if the diviner had understood the first sign as *niphu*, he would not have managed to do a second extispicy. The fact that this sign is called *niphu* in a commentary, and not in the standard series, may allude to alternative interpretations of ominous signs.

The uncertain omen, *ina šer ubāni qablīti širu zīru*, is not listed as *niphu* or *pitruštu*; so whether it is positive or negative does not have effect on the result.

Second Extispicy:

Omen/Protasis	Interpretation/Apodosis	Value
<i>manzāzu irašši</i> “The <i>manzāzu</i> is present.”	<i>ilu ina nīqi amēlu izziz</i> (KAR 423 I 38= Heeßel 2012: 36) “The god stands in the sacrifice of the man.”	Positive
<i>padānu šakin</i> “The <i>padānu</i> is present.”	<i>kibis šēp šarri itti ili šūšur</i> (KAR 423 I 60= Heeßel 2012: 36 ) “The sole foot of the king will be in harmony with the god.”	Positive
<i>danānu šakin</i> “The <i>danānu</i> is present.”	<i>išdān kīnāti šubtu nēhtu</i> (KAR 423 II: 27= Heeßel 2012: 37) “Firm foundations; peaceful dwelling.”	Positive
<i>šulmu šakin</i> “The <i>šulmu</i> is present.”	<i>ummānīka rēš eqlīša ikaššad</i> (KAR 423 II 48= Heeßel 2012: 37) “Your troops will reach its destination.”	Positive
<i>nīdi kussī šakin</i> “The <i>nīdi kussī</i> is present.”	<i>danān [...] išdān ʿkēnān</i> [šubtu nēhtu] (KAR 423 II 78-79= Heeßel 2012: 38) “Superiority of [...]; ‘firm’ foundations; [peaceful dwelling.]”	Positive
<i>ina išid šēr ʿubān qablīti ʿšēpu šaknat</i> “In the base of the middle <i>ubānu</i> , there is a foot-sign.”	Also attested in JAOS 38 82: 16, and JCS 37 148.	Uncertain
<i>elītu illik</i> “The upper part is elevated.”	<i>damiq elītu illik</i> ( <i>Multābiltu</i> Commentary 4: 49=Koch 2005: 261) “It is favourable, the upper part is elevate.”	Positive
<i>hasisi šakin</i> “The <i>hasisu</i> is present.”	The existence of a main organ of the lamb is universally favourable, see Starr 1974.	Positive

<i>qablītu išissa uššur</i> “The base of the middle part is loose.”	<i>uššurtu kašītu</i> ( <i>Multābiltu</i> Tablet 1: 3=Koch 2005: 91) “Looseness means success.”	Positive
<i>kaskasu ebi</i> “The breast bone is thick.”	<i>ebītu šubat nēhti</i> ( <i>Multābiltu</i> Tablet 1: 13=Koch 2005: 93) “Thickness means dwelling in peace.”	Positive
<i>tīrānu 14</i> “The coils of colon are 14.”	<i>tīrānu 14... šalmat</i> (Koch 2005 35: 74) “The coils of colon are 14: it is favourable.”	Positive
<i>libbi immeri šalim</i> “The heart of the ram is sound.”	<i>Šalāmu</i> is universally favourable.	Positive

12 omens in total: 11 favourable, 1 uncertain.

The omen which is uncertain for us, “in the base of the middle *ubānu*, there is a foot-sign”, is not listed as *nīphu* or *pitruštu*, so it is quite certain that such a majority of favourable signs imply a favourable result.

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