Mutual Validation in Mesopotamian Divination

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Introduction

This paper explores the early development of proto-scientific method as demonstrated in the use of mutual validation between divinatory techniques in the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia. It contends that Babylonian and Assyrian thought and method were key influences on Hellenistic thought, which in turn has had a substantial influence on European thought. It focuses primarily on astrology and hepatoscopy being the dominant forms of divination in Mesopotamia. Despite this influence, Rochberg (1999, p. 561) notes that contemporary opinion typically does not include Mesopotamian divination as part of the early history of science, hence the application of the term proto-science.

Divination is a highly debated term with numerous contended definitions. For the purpose of this paper it refers to the techniques used by Mesopotamian scholars, scribes and priests to either predict what might happen, or to explain how and why things have happened.

Mesopotamia comprised Assyria in the north, and Babylonia in the south, it corresponds `roughly to present-day Iraq` according to Campion (2012, p. 124). Mesopotamia was established in the 23rd century BCE, rose to prominence as a regional power in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE, and subsided in significance after the invasions by the Persians under Cyrus and then the Greeks under Alexander. Mesopotamian culture continued to influence thought and research approaches during the Hellenistic period, which encompasses the years between the death of Alexander the Great and the Roman conquest of Egypt (323-30 BC). Hellenistic thought and culture went on to be propagated over a wide geo-political area, and came into contact with many other potential cultural and philosophical influences. Therein elements of Mesopotamian culture have filtered through history and remain relevant. Campion (2008, p. 129) cautions that the relationship between Mesopotamian culture and Hellenistic culture `defies simplification` and is not a one-way affair.

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Rochberg-Halton focuses on one of these influences: Babylonian astrology. She contends that astrology originated in Babylon, and that there are 'integral parts of Greek astrological divination' that are 'demonstrably Babylonian' (Rochberg-Halton, 1988, p. 51). She identifies and describes in intricate detail three particular elements of Babylonian astrology that seem to have reached the Hellenistic tradition. According to Rochberg-Halton (1988, pp. 53-57), the first is Planetary Exaltations: the possibility of knowing the will of the gods by way of scrutinizing the motion of the planets. Within this motion is the Micro-Zodiac, or Dodekatemoria. This takes the principles of the twelve signs of the Zodiac and sub-divides each one into a further twelve segments thus allowing for greater divinatory precision (Rochberg-Halton, 1988, pp. 57-59). The third area of distinctly common ground is that of the Trine Aspect. This serves the role in both astrologies of factoring in the relative influence of astral bodies on each other and on terrestrial affairs (Rochberg-Halton, 1988, pp. 60-61).

Assyria was Babylonia’s northern Mesopotamian neighbour, and they shared a certain amount of culture and traditions including their extensive use of both astrology and hepatoscopy. Hepatoscopy is, according to Jastrow (1908, p. 646), divination through the examination of sheep livers. Jastrow discusses at length the populist roots of hepatoscopy and how this form of divination came to be supplemented by the more institutionalized astrology (Jastrow, 1908, pp. 653-656). Although there were other forms of divination employed throughout Mesopotamia, Jastrow (1908, p. 648) identifies these as 'the two chief methods of divination, forming part of the official cult’. Jastrow (1908, p. 649) also emphasizes that the 'inspectors' focused on the general welfare of the society. The only individual who they would divine for would be the king and that when doing so they maintained a strict practice that, according to Jastrow (1908, p. 651), 'They did not hesitate to announce to the kings an unfavourable result'. This had the consequence of bringing into existence what Lehoux (2006, pp. 117-118) explains as the ritual of the substitute king, whereby in the event of threatening predictions, the king may temporarily hand his rule over to an expendable peasant to suffer the consequences on his behalf (often to the extent of not only death, but possibly ritual murder). Jastrow (1908, p. 675) goes on to suggest that this integrity (of always telling the truth even if it would cause trouble) began to erode as the skills were exported to the Greco-Roman world. At points, divination was a life or death matter in Mesopotamia.

The Babylonians and Assyrians compiled extensive records of their divinations which were then used for mutual validation of the findings of different diviners (Jastrow, 1908, pp. 661-662). Rochberg-Halton (1999, p. 566) describes them as 'the arrangement and codification of a wealth of past experience'. This archive of divinatory predictions and omens is the foundation upon which the cross-referencing and mutual validation of claims could be built. The diviners would check their own findings against those on record (for their type of divination), and the King and court could compare their findings to those of the other diviners consulted in any given instance.

Weaving together the respective accounts of Jastrow and Rochberg-Halton a timeline for the development and emergence of this process seems to emerge. It begins with what Jastrow (1908, p. 648) describes as hepatoscopy’s early domination over its divinatory competitors such dream interpretation, animal observation and the casting
of oil into water. In time astrology gained favour and joined hepatoscopy as part of the official cult. Jastrow (1908, p. 662) claims that within Babylonian usage the two were intertwined and essentially used for cross-referencing and validation of omens. Omens accomplish divination by the reading of signs, be they in a liver or in the stars. According to Rochberg-Halton (1988, p. 52), predictions could be made and questions answered by looking for indications of the plans and will of the gods as indicated in these omens.

Babylonian astrology could therefore be said to have been a refinement of the already popular hepatoscopy. Jastrow (1908, p. 656) remarks repeatedly that astrology seems institutionalized and scholarly in a way that hepatoscopy was not: 'astrology represents a system devised in the schools, and that very artificial character is indicative of it being "scientific" and not a "popular" product.' This position is supported by Roy Willis (2004, p. 22) who sees it as 'specifically designed by the male priesthood'. Campion (2012, p.125) elaborates on this design process which began with arbitrary omen readings based upon the state of the sky at the time of the divination but proceeded from there with what 'the accumulation of empirical data, based on the recording of events that coincided with particular celestial patterns'. While this meticulous tracking of coincidences may not satisfy current definitions of empirical evidence it was a firm attempt to systematize divination in a logical way rather than having it be based exclusively on intuition and tradition.

When the Greeks adopted astrology and began to adapt it, there was both alteration and (arguably) refinement. Jastrow (1908, pp. 669-670) states that under the Greeks astrology was a matter of science, whereas in Babylonia it had been a scientific element of the religious oligarchy. Cumont (1912, p. 57) notes that 'centres of Greek science were established in the heart of Mesopotamia'.

In the same way that the Babylonians used astrology to add precision to their hepatoscopy divinations through mutual validation, the Greeks sought greater precision through the development of the Micro-zodiac, or dodekatemoria. Under Greek scrutiny, and based off of astronomical considerations, the existing twelve subdivisions of each Babylonian zodiac was tripled. Rochberg-Halton (1988, p. 57) states that each zodiac featured thirty six segments each offering subtle shifts in interpretive meaning.

Another factor that would influence the outcome of any given astrological reading under the Greek system versus under the Babylonian system is the fundamental difference between causation and omens. According to Rochberg-Halton (1988, p. 52) 'In Mesopotamia, the prediction of future events from celestial phenomena was obtained not on the presumption of stellar influence, but rather, celestial phenomena were regarded as signs which could indicate impending mundane events.' Jastrow (1908, pp. 658-659) goes on to say that astrology was for them 'a means of entering into the workshop of the divine will and intention. Through the planets and stars or rather in the planets and stars one sees the gods at work'. For the Greeks, the motion of the planets and stars were causative not indicative (Rochberg-Halton, 1988, p.52). Astrology, astronomy, physics, and mathematics combined to contribute cause and influence on terrestrial affairs (Jastrow, 1908, p. 668). In line with Aristotelian thought and physics Rochberg-Halton (1988, p. 53) notes that 'the celestial bodies were not only indications but actual
(efficient) causes of change on earth’. This is a stark difference between the two astronomies: on the one hand, the Mesopotamian sky gave a window into the gods and their plans, on the other hand the motion of the Universe made things directly happen to the Greeks.

It is perhaps on the basis that all are subject to the motions of the stars and planets, that horoscopes become a prominent part of Greek astrology. In particular Jastrow (1908, p. 669) points to ‘the casting of the individual horoscope from the position of the stars at the time of an individual’s birth’ as a distinctly Greek contribution. Babylonian astrology on the other hand was not concerned with how astrology impacted the individual, other than when that individual was in a key position to affect wider society or the nation as a whole. Jastrow (1908, pp. 649, 660, 662) points out multiple times that in Mesopotamia this would almost exclusively be the king. This represents a significant difference between the respective traditions.

Conclusion

Although these divinatory traditions used each other for validation, accumulating data, and engaged in ongoing scrutiny and refinement of their systems, that does not make them forms of science in anything approaching a modern sense of the term. Rochberg-Halton (1999, p. 567) highlights the key difference that keeps the two approaches apart: divination at its core begins not only with observation, but also intuition, imagination and interpretation. Divination is considered successful when these tools are applied to beneficial effect. Science is not devoid of these things, but they are an afterthought once logic, rationality and evidence have been satisfied. It seems reasonable to conclude that divination is no more a form of science, than science is a form of divination. This paper has leaned heavily on Rochberg-Halton and Jastrow to briefly highlight the ways in which certain forms of divination were developed and refined first in Mesopotamia and then later in Hellenic Greece and Rome. Further consideration would be required to illustrate the passage from late antiquity through to the Enlightenment and thus show ways in which these proto-sciences contributed to contemporary science.

References


【Abstract】
メソポタミアの占いにおける相互検証

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古代メソポタミアの宗教指導者たちは、広範囲に占いを使用した。彼らはある占いのシステムを相互に検証するために使用した。このエッセイは、古代メソポタミアでのプロト科学の検証方法の発展を検討する。
キーワード：メソポタミア、バビロン、アッシリア、占い、占星術、肝臓占い、相互検証、古典科学、プロト科学

Divination was a vital tool extensively employed by the religious and political leaders of ancient Mesopotamia. Due to the significance of divinatory systems within Mesopotamia, mutual validation methods were developed by the Assyrians and Babylonians. This paper examines the history and development of Mesopotamian divination, particularly in relation to astrology and hepatoscopy, and with a focus on the use of mutual validation within that development. It also considers the contributions of Mesopotamian diviners to the eventual development of early science.

Keywords: Mesopotamia, Babylon, Assyria, divination, astrology, hepatoscopy, mutual validation, early science, proto-science

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