

Glassner, Jean-Jacques.

*Le Devin historien en Mésopotamie* (Ancient Magic and Divination 16). Leiden, Netherlands: Brill. 2019. ISBN 978-90-04-39005-8. pp. 606.

*Le Devin historien en Mésopotamie* is the latest addition to Brill's AMD volumes dedicated to Ancient Magic and Divination. In AMD 16, Jean-Jacques Glassner presents divination in ancient Mesopotamia by examining omens written in cuneiform across the ancient Near East between the second and first millennium BCE, with a focus on a specific type of omens referred to as 'historical omens' in Assyriology. The volume develops two parallel discussions. One explores the origin of the narratives that omens record by plunging into the legends and history to which they refer. The other, as the title of the volume suggests, proceeds on the premise that diviners built 'a science of the possible' by investigating the past in ways that are similar to the methodologies of historians. For the author, four principles anchor the act of the diviner and the act of the historian to a similar intellectual practice. Both engage with social and political events, and for both, contemporary events that resonate with the past become the opportunity to use history as a resource for finding direction in a problematic present. These scholars' interest is also time and its fluctuations, with diviner and historian committed to making the sequence of events coherent (Introduction, pp.7-14). This argument, central to the author's treatment, is embedded in the body of a book built on three axes of discussions, *La fabrique des signes* (The production of signs), *La fabrique du sens* (The production of meaning), and *La production de l'histoire* (The production of history) that in turn examine the conception, structure, and content of omens. The first axis concentrates on the use of cuneiform signs as visual cues that diviners create to decrypt and encrypt the gods' messages (chapters 2 to 4), while the second axis describes the construction of omen sentences and the syntactical and stylistic patterns on which they appear to be built. As indicated in the section on paradigms, readers interested in the generative patterns of omens will greatly benefit from consulting Winitzer 2017's extended research on this topic - AMD 12 in the same series.

The core of the author's parallel between historian and diviner is to be found in the third section of the book, in chapters 10 to 15, with chapter 11 especially noteworthy for its presentation of 385 historical omens, with transliteration, translation, and core bibliography, taken from compendia that date to c. 2,000 BCE to 200 BCE. This corpus, explicitly built from Jean Nougayrol's own count (106 in 1946 including duplicates), divides omens according to the content of their apodosis, separating those expressed in the perfective (*accompli*) from those in the imperfective (*inaccompli*). Apodoses that are built as noun phrases, or whose verbs are in the subjunctive, or in the imperative, will be found in the first group. Within this division, omens are arranged in the chronological order of the royal dynasties to which their apodosis alludes. This arrangement, as the author remarks, shows that over two thirds of the omens collected mention historical or legendary dynasties from the third millennium (276 omens in total). This focus on content leads to an analysis of the connections that apodotic narratives have with epics, proverbs, myths, and royal correspondence (chapter 12-13), and their portrayal of royal figures and their recurring character traits (chapter 14). Especially enjoyable is chapter 15 dedicated to narratives of disasters (*La hantise de la catastrophe*).

Linking the role of the diviner to that of a historian inevitably raises the question of the factual value of the stories and histories that omens recount, and as the author notes this

issue has been the subject of enduring debates in Assyriology. To engage with arguments for and against the historicity of 'historical omens', the author retraces the genesis of modern scholars' interpretations with a spectrum of views (chapter 10, pp.254-256), from those who understand them as evidence to the beginning of an empirically-based divination, those who see them as the product of Babylonian literary creation, or who do not associate them to facts because the stories they tell could not have occurred. Views that question the modern criteria used to define the veracity of historical references in omens close this review by raising the issue of the 'historical omen' category itself, and our modern definition of historical facticity. It is on this premise that the author then presents his own insights, and argues for interpreting omens as factual hypotheses whose conditional tense is used to bring the addressee into the realm of the possible (p.592). For the diviner, the event recorded in an omen was always held true even if it was not factual, with no difference drawn between the characters of legends, and actors in history (p.258). In the case of Mesopotamia, the author cautions against our ability to distinguish at a distance of 4,000 years "*between what in fact happened and what was legend*" (p.258), reminding that History is not an objective knowledge but a scholarly reconstruction based on a relative science, and the prose of the historian records only one possibility among many reconstructions of the past.

AMD 16's examination of how "*history guided the action of the living*" (p.270) and diviners' compositions functions both as an additional tool for specialists and as an enriching point of entry into ancient Mesopotamian divination and history for readers new to the subject. The author's corpus of historical omens, together with extensive citation of primary data spread throughout the book, that give updated readings of reference omens and insight into as yet unpublished omens (see for example omen 43 taken from a sentence in the unpublished text BM36302, or omen 121 based on K15100) provide new material with which to continue exploring divination in ancient Mesopotamia.

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