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What's Eating You? Hepatoscopy in Etruria and the Near East

In *De Divinatione*, Cicero, in his spat with his brother Quintus, remarks against the practice of divination: “Now can anybody be induced to believe that the things said to be predicted by means of entrails were learned by the soothsayers through long-constituted observation? How long, pray, did the observations last? How could the observations have continued for a long time? How did the soothsayers manage to agree among themselves what part of the entrails was unfavourable and what part favourable; or what cleft in the liver indicated danger and what promised some advantage? Are the soothsayers of Etruria, Elis, Egypt, and of Carthage in accord on these matters?”¹

Indeed, it is the intention of this paper to address the issues raised by Cicero. There are three fundamental questions Cicero raises which we shall attempt to answer: namely:

1. Was there a body of work for diviners to refer to as a guide for interpretation?
2. If so, can principles of divination be deduced from this body of work?
3. Are the various societies practicing divination in agreement with these principles?

For the purposes of this paper, we will restrict our focus to Etruria and the Ancient Near East, particularly the interpretive methods of the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hittites, and to the practice of hepatoscopy in both regions in order to complete our inquiry.

First, it must be determined what evidence is available on which we can base our comparison. Most of our information about divination in the Ancient Near East has arrived to us through primary sources – specifically from the efforts of archaeology. There is quite a corpus of extant information. Starr in his work on the rituals of Mesopotamian divination notes, “Students of one major aspect thereof, divination, are

¹ Cicero, *de Div.*, 2.28.

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fortunate...in having at their disposal the primary sources essential for such an investigation, the actual manuals and compendia of the Mesopotamian diviner, materials spanning close to two millennia.”² For our purposes, the library of Assurbanipal provides the most plentiful examples of recorded data on hepatoscopy in the Ancient Near East. Built by one of the most powerful kings of Assyria in the mid 7th Century BC (668-627BC) at Ninevah, the library was the first systematically assembled archive of international ancient knowledge and is comprised of texts from locations throughout the Assyrian empire, including Assur, Harran, Nipur, Ur, Babylon, and Borsippa.³

For the Classical World, however, we must rely almost exclusively on secondary sources. The most comprehensive ancient work on the subject, the now lost *disciplina Etrusca*, comes to us largely in quotations or commentaries from the writers of Rome; consisting of the voices of Cicero, Pliny, Seneca, and Varro. Dumezil comments, “Frequently they rethought, extended, or warped the tradition which they were using or which they wished to save. It is necessary to make a constant critical effort to place ourselves at this crossroads of the world which the former fief of the Tarquins had become.”⁴

The voices, attitudes, and historical contexts behind these secondary sources are important when considering hepatoscopy and its place in the Classical world. What was the Roman view of hepatoscopy? What value, if any, did it have for these writers? In other words, we must consider Cicero’s skeptical remarks in their historical context regarding divination - which are opposed to the views expressed by those of Ancient Near Eastern cultures. For Cicero, divination held political significance and was devoid

² Starr, p.1.

³ Oppenheim, p. 15.

⁴ Dumezil, p. 626.

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of religious meaning. While for the ancient Near East, divination served as a means to detect what was best for the common good and was reinforced with religious significance. Starr cites one example: Shulgi, king of the Ur III dynasty, described himself with praise as a diviner.⁵

For now, it is necessary to use the available evidence in order to examine the significance of the liver in both Etruria and the Ancient Near East. Is there a traceable, shared value placed on the liver itself?

There have been, throughout history, three major organs designated with the seat of the soul – the heart, the brain, and the liver. Due to the discovery and evaluation of these organs, the properties of the soul were shuffled between these various organs. It is through a progression of anatomical knowledge, Jastrow suggests, that these organs became rotated in this way.⁶

The liver was quite early on associated with the soul. One suggestion is because blood, incidentally, was readily found in the organ of the liver. Since the functions of the heart were not understood until much later, the associations of life with the liver would be all too apparent upon simple observation. It should be noted that in the case of humans and animals, the liver contains roughly 1/6th the body's supply of blood and demands ¼ of the blood pumped by the heart each minute.

The liver's importance, then, is tied to the associative properties blood has with life. We can even see this notion in the literary examples depicting the dead. The necromancy practiced by Odysseus when consulting Tiresias and the other dead attests to

⁵ Starr, p. 6.

⁶ Jastrow, *Aspects.*, p. 150ff.

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this as it was blood that animated the dead, brought them to life, and spoke to Odysseus.⁷ In Aeschylus' *Psuchagogoi*, blood serves as a "drink for the lifeless".⁸ (It should also be noted that this form of necromancy is another form of divination as well.)

Jastrow cites several literary examples in the Near East as vestiges of the idea of the liver as an early candidate for the seat of the soul. From Hebrew, to early Arabic, and even to ancient Greek, there are examples where the word for "liver" can be exchanged for our modern understanding of "heart".⁹ Even as late as the classical period in Greece the liver was not wholly dismissed. Plato makes use of all three major organs when considering the tripartite soul and even describes the liver in the *Timaeus* as an organ which the gods "set the center of divination here".¹⁰ Its 'reflective surface' was used by the higher self as a mirror to scare the appetitive part into submission.

After establishing the importance of the liver, we need to investigate how the liver was read. In order to achieve such a treatment, we must begin with the textual evidence in the ancient Near East itself. Thus, a body of work will be established from which principles of interpretation can be deduced.

As noted earlier, the textual evidence of the ancient Near East is quite extensive and largely with omen texts - most of which were found in the library of Assurbanipal. These were written with cuneiform script in Akkadian, and ranging in date from the late Old Babylonian period (after Hammurabi) up to the Seleucid kings – or approximately 1749-311BC.¹¹ It seems the reason for such an extensive collection of omen texts is due to the belief system in place in the Ancient Near East. As Starr notes, in Mesopotamia

⁷ *Ody.* Bk.11.

⁸ Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, p. 48ff.

⁹ Jastrow, *Aspects.*, p. 151-153.

¹⁰ *Timaeus*, 71e. Trans. Zeyl.

¹¹ Oppenheim, p. 206.

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the “ominous significance of reality did not lie in the normally functioning universe, but in the deviations from it”.¹² Due to all the possibilities for variation with the liver, and in order to distinguish the ‘normal’ signs from the ‘ominous’ ones, such large collections of clay tablets were kept and recorded these variations as well as their outcomes.

Each entry contains a protasis, a condition, and an apodosis, which contains the consequence of that condition. The protasis is dependent upon the physical condition of the organ while the apodosis describes the consequence that would arise from such an occurrence. Gradually, the omens were classified according to their corresponding organs: we have several series dealing with the lungs, intestines, the liver, and other organs found in the exta.¹³ This systemization and tabulation of omina, as Nougayrol and Starr hypothesize, indicates that such a development most likely came at the end of an evolutionary process.

In fact, such an undertaking would imply an empirical, scholastic approach. Such a stage would have been pre-dated by a stage characterized, by Oppenheim, as “folklore divination”.¹⁴ This particular form of divination would have been typified by a binary method, a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, that would have been reached by the ritual. It is on the edge of this ‘folklore divination’ that we have the beginnings of a more empirical process exhibited by clay liver models. As Starr describes, most of the evidence for such a paradigm shift comes from models found at Mari and livers from Sinid-dinam of Larsa, both dating to the early Old Babylonian period.¹⁵ Clay livers from Hattushash also support this notion.

¹² Starr, p. 3.

¹³ Starr, p. 6.

¹⁴ Oppenheim, p. 214. Starr, p. 7.

¹⁵ Starr, p. 7-8.

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In the view of Oppenheim, this makes sense. He theorizes that it is hepatoscopy that precedes the later, more evolved form of divination which examines all the organs of the *exta*.¹⁶ Oppenheim remarks, “This proposed division into an older level-hepatoscopy-and a secondary, later level-exstispicy-seems to be borne out by the following considerations: the later omen literature mentions specific historic events that had occurred in olden times after the observation of extraordinary formations of the *exta*. These observations always concerned the liver of the sacrificial animal. In fact, such omens are expressly called ‘liver omens’.”¹⁷

What then results is a distinction between the empirical and theoretical methods of extispicy. The empirical would be illustrated by the clay liver models, which contain a protasis and apodosis formed from a particular feature on the liver itself. The appearance of the liver would have been created in order to illustrate what such an omen looked like. Thus, the clay liver was modeled after such an omen. These models would have also served as a snapshot for such a prediction, serving either to instruct or to report.

This brings us to the liver models of Etruria. These models make for a ready comparison to those examples found in the Ancient Near East. Dumezil characterizes this tendency as ‘natural’ for people studying the practice of divination but expresses reasons for concern.¹⁸ This tendency is usually characterized by the hope of learning more through examining Hittite hepatoscopy. This attempt to re-discover the hepatoscopy of the Tyrrhenians of Herodotus is blocked by one crucial fact: that Hittite hepatoscopy, Dumezil reminds, is largely indebted to the Hurrians.¹⁹ The Hittites,

¹⁶ Oppenheim, p. 213.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁸ Dumezil, p. 656.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 656. Cites Laroche.

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learning from their Hurrian neighbors, who themselves learned it from Mesopotamian cultures, then infused this practice with their own terminology and inserted their own alterations. Laroche concurs with this notion and also claims that such a theory is fraught with complications: “If we acknowledge a closer kinship between the Babylonian and the Etruscan soothsaying than between the Babylonian and the Hittite, then the problem of Etruscan haruspicy cannot be solved by the theory of an Anatolian origin.”²⁰ Nougayrol observes, “Assyro-Babylonian haruspicy is a continuous tradition...revealed to us, already ‘fully armed’, on the verge of the second millennium BC...the finest ‘hepatoscopic’ tablets of the Louvre date from the ninetieth to the hundredth year of the Seleucid epoch...In other words, the Etruscan models, wherever one locates them, will always find contemporaries in the East.”²¹

Comparisons of the liver models themselves are most indicative of these concerns. At first glance, the models we have in Etruria do make for apt comparisons with the Ancient Near Eastern models. The terra cotta liver from a sanctuary in Falerii has two incisions on the left lobe. Maggiani comments that they were indicative of a common feature found in Babylonian hepatoscopy.²² Nougayrol agrees, “Every Assyriologist having some acquaintance with the *barutu* [Neo-Assyrian divining handbook] will recognize these and name them immediately: they are the *manzizu* (divine presence) and the *padanu* (road)...fundamental elements in the hepatoscopic picture.”²³ For Dumezil and Nougayrol, this is evidence enough to show that the Etruscan *haruspex* followed the same standard procedures that the Mesopotamian *baru* followed.

²⁰ Laroche, as cited by Dumezil, p. 656.

²¹ Nougayrol, cited by Dumezil, p. 657.

²² Maggiani in Cristofani, p. 145. 3rd cent. BC.

²³ Dumezil, p. 658.

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[Etruscan livers typically have a pyramidal caudate process]

[Also, mention the interesting similarity between *baru* and *haru-spex*.]

But what we see in the Piacenza liver is far different. The convex is rather simple, an incision that divides the two lobes and has inscribed Usils on the right, and Tivr on the left, generally agreed to be the sun and the moon, respectfully.

The concave is much more complicated: there are 40 names of gods, most enclosed in inscribed compartments on the surface of the liver. The periphery is divided into 16 compartments and forms a ring around the edge of the bronze model. Within this banner, the left side is divided into 6 compartments practically forming a wheel and just outside this wheel, 2 more names totaling 8. The right lobe, including gall bladder, has 5 names appearing on the gall bladder and the rest falling around it in a grid pattern.

Using the Piacenza liver for comparison to Ancient Near Eastern models, notably Babylonian and Hittite, is fraught with difficulty, as experienced by Thulin. The models he employs from the British Museum are fairly representative of Mesopotamian models but lack, quite obviously, the details represented on the Piacenza liver. They are more of the 'snapshot type' mentioned earlier, with features noted along with protasis and apodosis. There is no wheel and grid, no border, no direct association with the cosmos or even a placement of gods as there is on the Piacenza liver.

These last two details are important as well. Dumézil suggests that this 'wheel' and 'grid' system could be compared to the 'round' and the 'square' dualism found in Indo-European societies. There is a Vedic ritual, found in the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda, which calls for a specific arrangement of fire. This ritual calls for two axial fires, one oriented toward the west, which represents "the earth" or "reality", and the other

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towards the east, which represents “the sky” or the “other world”. According to Dumézil, the round represents the present world and is oriented to the west, the square represents the celestial world and is oriented east.²⁴ The similarities between these concepts and the features of the Piacenza liver become immediately noticeable.

Of course, this also conjures up the notion of *pars hostilis* and *pars familiaris*, as mentioned earlier by Cicero. This dichotomy of right and left is important in Mesopotamian extispicy, but there are levels of unfavorable and favorable found based on the language of the apodoses. Starr concludes, “when the advantageous condition is attested on the right: the prediction is favorable to the ‘ego’; when on the left, it is favorable to the enemy.”²⁵ It is the opposite with an unfavorable condition. Weinstock, however, reminds us that this concept was the opposite with the Etruscans, as we see reflected in Roman augury, that the left is favorable and the right unfavorable.²⁶

Then there is the border surrounding the Piacenza liver. It has been discussed, most notably by Weinstock, that these 16 compartments represent the system of the 16 regions of the sky from which the Etruscans drew their prognostications. Using *The Marriage of Mercury and Philologia* by Martianus Capella, Weinstock concludes that the system was entirely Etruscan.²⁷ There is more. Primitive divination, Weinstock recalls, was characterized by the four cardinal points. They were also used in the ancient Near East to demarcate the eight regions of the *octotropos* which was employed by Hellenistic astrologers. Weinstock concludes, “if it is correct to suggest that the sixteen regions

²⁴ Dumézil, p. 652. See p. 312-313.

²⁵ Starr, p. 16.

²⁶ Weinstock, p. 119.

²⁷ Weinstock, p. 115.

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depend on the eight as do the eight on the four, then the Etruscan system had in fact its roots in the divination of the ancient East

Because both these details, the wheel and grid system and the 16 compartments comprising the border, have celestial associations and none of the models from the ancient Near East possess this essential feature, depicting a relationship between the sky and the surface of the (model) liver, we are tempted to conclude that there are no real points of comparison.²⁸ But, when we break down the systems, we see underlying them all similar principles that were used in performing divination.

To conclude, we can bring Cicero back into the conversation. “Now can anybody be induced to believe that the things said to be predicted by means of entrails were learned by the soothsayers through long-constituted observation? How long, pray, did the observations last? How could the observations have continued for a long time?”

In the ancient Near East, we have seen an abundant collection of omen texts that record various omnia and their conditions. Through a standardized system of observation, the data from these rituals were compiled, sorted out, systematized, and frequently referred to and debated about for well over a 1,000 years. These ‘observations’ were carried out in part because of necessity and in part because of organization. As a result, in the Ancient Near East, hepatoscopy was developed into a science. The extant evidence available to us from Etruria indicates a similar tradition, namely that there once existed a tradition of divination that led to scientific observation, record-keeping, and systemization of divinatory principles.

“How did the soothsayers manage to agree among themselves what part of the entrails was unfavourable and what part favourable; or what cleft in the liver indicated

²⁸ Dumezil, p. 654.

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danger and what promised some advantage? Are the soothsayers of Etruria, Elis, Egypt, and of Carthage in accord on these matters?”

The notion that hepatoscopy developed in two distinct regions of the world at two different times does not merit discussion in this paper – after all, hepatoscopy seems to be a universal practice found in many parts of the world throughout history. But what does deserve discussion is how the principles of divination were communicated and utilized within these two distinct regions and how, upon comparison, similar these practices are. The diviners were not in total agreement about the *pars hostilis* and the *pars familiaris* – which has been shown as a debate over right and left. But they did agree that those parts did exist. So, with that, it does seem that the various cultures are in agreement as much as comparative principles can be established.

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