

A Comparison of the Similarities and Differences between the Divination Practices of the Yin People and the Mesopotamians

Zimeng Zhang

Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Abstract: *Despite the vast distance between the Shang Dynasty civilization and the ancient Mesopotamian civilization, they exhibit astonishing similarities and differences in divination and religious systems. By exploring the commonalities and distinctions in divination practices within these two ancient civilizations, we can better understand their development in the field of divination, and further reveal the interrelationships between divination systems, religious beliefs, and social structures under different civilizations.*

Keywords: Divination, Shang Dynasty civilization, Mesopotamian civilization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ancient Chinese adage, “Throughout the Shang dynasty, the veneration of spirits was paramount; the affairs of state lay in sacrifices and warfare,” underscores the profound significance of divination and ritual ceremonies in Shang-Zhou society. Whether addressing matters of state sacrifice, military campaigns, agricultural yields, or quotidian concerns such as health and daily activities, decisions were invariably preceded by divinatory practices. Similarly, Mesopotamian civilization—a pivotal ancient Near Eastern society—exhibited analogous characteristics, wherein divination and religious rites constituted fundamental components of sociopolitical decision-making. For instance, city-states such as Babylon and Assyria relied on celestial omens, extispicy (the examination of animal entrails), and analogous methods to prognosticate future events and solicit divine counsel.

Thus, these divinatory traditions were deeply entrenched in the religious frameworks and quotidian existence of both regions, serving as indispensable mechanisms for rulers and commoners alike to navigate uncertainty. A comparative analysis of Shang-Zhou and Mesopotamian divinatory practices reveals both striking parallels and distinctions. Both civilizations accorded paramount importance to agriculture, employing divination to guide agrarian activities, and both elevated women to prominent roles within religious and divinatory contexts. Nevertheless, their methodologies diverged significantly: Shang-Zhou society predominantly utilized oracle bone inscriptions to record and interpret divinatory outcomes, whereas Mesopotamia employed a broader array of techniques, including astral observation and hepatoscopy (liver divination). Furthermore, disparities existed in the transmission and interpretation of omens. These convergences and divergences illuminate the distinct strategies each culture adopted to confront uncertainty, as well as the underlying theological paradigms that shaped their respective worldviews.

2. COMMONALITIES BETWEEN THE TWO CIVILIZATIONS

2.1 Emphasis on Agricultural Production

Both the Shang civilization and Mesopotamian societies demonstrated profound reverence for agricultural matters in their divinatory practices, a characteristic rooted in their shared origins as agrarian civilizations.

Within the sociocultural framework of the Shang dynasty, agriculture constituted not merely the fundamental basis of quotidian subsistence for the populace, but moreover served as the cornerstone of the state’s economic infrastructure. The extant corpus of oracle bone inscriptions meticulously documents a plethora of agricultural concerns, encompassing both pragmatic cultivation activities - including but not limited to “petitioning for cereal crops” (求禾), “supplicating for abundant harvests” (求年), “field inspections” (省田), “grassland management” (菑), “land reclamation” (垦田), “communal farming” (脅田), and “land allocation” (受田) - as well as the concomitant ritual sacrifices and divinatory practices pertaining to agrarian production.

This comprehensive documentation unequivocally demonstrates that the Shang civilization systematically employed scapulimantic divination as a sophisticated mechanism for prognosticating various facets of agricultural productivity. Through these ritualized practices, the Shang administration sought to optimize agrarian management protocols, thereby ensuring both the sustenance of societal nutritional requirements and the perpetuation of sustainable economic development.

Furthermore, the Shang people believed that the deities safeguarding them possessed agricultural attributes. Itō Michio pointed out in **The Formation of Ancient Chinese Dynasties** that the “Xian Gong” (former dukes) of the Shang period exhibited divine characteristics associated with agriculture and climatic conditions [13]. This perspective was endorsed by Wang Hui, who noted: “The content of sacrifices offered to the Xian Gong was particularly distinctive, primarily concerning natural harvests, wind, and rainfall—such as prayers for rain, blessings for the year, supplications for a bountiful harvest, reporting the arrival of autumn, ensuring peaceful autumn seasons, invoking the deity of autumn, seeking favorable harvests, calming winds, calming rains, and even appeals against poor harvests or excessive rains.”[14] Chen Mengjia further categorized these ancestral figures as objects of prayer for favorable harvests and rainfall, observing that “among those invoked for such purposes, ancestors such as Gaozu, He, and Wang Hai constituted the majority, whereas the ‘Xian Wang’ (former kings), ‘Xian Bi’ (former consorts), and old ministers were comparatively fewer in number.”[3] These records collectively indicate that the Shang people believed ancestral spirits had the power to influence weather patterns and agricultural outcomes, prompting frequent divinatory practices and sacrificial rituals aimed at securing favorable harvests and precipitation.

Similarly, the Mesopotamian civilization demonstrated a strong emphasis on agriculture within its divinatory practices. Diviners interpreted natural phenomena—such as celestial occurrences and climatic variations—to forecast the abundance or scarcity of agricultural yields. For example, during the Assyrian Empire, astrologers systematically reported their astronomical observations to the king and utilized these findings to predict agricultural prospects. One recorded omen stated: “If thunder occurs in the month of Ayar (approximately May), grain and vegetable harvests will be poor; if thunder is heard in the month of Shabat (approximately February), a locust infestation will follow; and if thunder recurs in the same month, hailfall may be expected.”

Underlying these divination practices was the Mesopotamians’ deep understanding of the interconnection between natural phenomena and agricultural production. Through prolonged observation, they formulated empirical correlations—such as the influence of seasonal weather fluctuations on crop development. The integration of such experiential knowledge with symbolic interpretation enabled diviners to offer predictive warnings and practical guidance to both rulers and the general populace, thereby enhancing societal resilience to natural calamities.

Moreover, the Mesopotamians believed that the deities who safeguarded them possessed agricultural attributes, with many divine figures directly overseeing agrarian affairs. The goddess Ninhursag was venerated as the “Mother of the Earth” and presided over all terrestrial resources; Enki, the god of subterranean waters, governed water-related domains; and Ninurta, regarded as an agricultural protector deity, was honored as the patron of farming and the son of Enlil, the supreme god of the Mesopotamian pantheon.

Even within the Assyrian Empire, a civilization renowned for its military prowess, rulers frequently emphasized their achievements in agricultural development and the provisioning of their populace. Royal inscriptions prominently highlighted these accomplishments, often with exaggerated rhetoric. For example, Tiglath-Pileser I proclaimed: “I plowed the entire land of Assyria and cultivated it, thereby accumulating greater grain reserves than my forebears. From the spoils of war—lands I conquered with the divine favor of my lord Ashur—I established herds of horses, cattle, and donkeys.” This indicates that, despite the empire’s militaristic orientation, agriculture remained a cornerstone for sustaining social order and economic prosperity.

In summary, both the Shang culture and the Mesopotamian civilization placed significant emphasis on agriculture within their divinatory traditions. While their approaches to divination differed—the Shang relied predominantly on ancestral and spiritual intercession, whereas the Mesopotamians focused on interpreting natural phenomena such as celestial signs to foresee agricultural outcomes and state affairs—both civilizations employed divination as a mystical yet pragmatic tool to express and manage their deep dependence on agricultural productivity.

2.2 The Role of Women in Religion and Divination


Within the religious and divinatory systems of Mesopotamia, women—particularly female deities and female

practitioners such as healers and diviners—occupied prominent roles. Historical records indicate that Bau, one of the earliest Sumerian deities associated with medicine, was a female figure endowed with supernatural healing abilities. As the daughter of the sky god An and the consort of the war god Ninurta, she held a distinguished position in the Mesopotamian pantheon. During the Isin Dynasty and the Babylonian period, Bau was also venerated under the names Gula and Ninisina.

A hymn from the Larsa Dynasty extolled Bau in elevated terms: “The goddess, filled with awe-inspiring power, whose greatness is acknowledged in both heaven and earth, how perfectly noble! Mother Bau, foremost among the goddesses, warrior... mighty goddess, fully commanding terrifying divine forces, exalted goddess... great sage!” These epithets underscore the significant functions of female deities within Mesopotamian society, particularly in the domains of healing and religious rites. Female deities were expected not only to command incantations with precision but also to embody profound wisdom, thereby occupying a uniquely revered status.

This veneration of female deities reflects the deep respect for feminine divine authority in Mesopotamian culture. They were perceived as intermediaries between the divine and human realms, wielding influence over life and death. Consequently, in practices such as divination, sacrifice, and medical rituals, women were not merely participants but often served as ritual leaders. Their wisdom and spiritual potency were widely acknowledged and held in high esteem.

During the Yin-Shang dynasty, women occupied a significant position in the practice of divination and religious rituals, reflecting their influential role within the sociopolitical and spiritual domains of the time.

In oracle bone script, the character for “witch” is represented by , and the depiction of female earrings on either side of a ritual mask suggests that the role of the witch was traditionally associated with women. In the *Jun Shi* chapter of the *Shujing* (*Book of Documents*), the Duke of Zhou refers to *Wu Xian* during the reign of King Da Wu and *Wu Xian* during the reign of King Zu Yi—both were female shamans who played key roles in royal religious affairs. The *Guoyu* (*Discourses of the States*) records: “Male practitioners are called *xi*, while female practitioners are called *wu*.” Further clarification is provided in Xu Shen’s *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Explaining and Analyzing Chinese Characters*) from the Eastern Han Dynasty: “*Wu* denotes a shaman; specifically, a woman who serves unseen forces and invokes spirits through ritual dance. The character resembles a figure dancing with flowing sleeves, sharing etymological roots with *gong* (craftsman). All terms related to witchcraft derive from this root.” Regarding *xi*, it explains: “One who solemnly serves the divine. Male practitioners are termed *xi*, and female practitioners *wu*. The character combines *wu* with *jian* (to perceive or witness).” These historical texts collectively demonstrate that female shamans such as Wu Xian and Wu Xian occupied prominent positions in the political and spiritual life of the Shang Dynasty, underscoring the essential role of female religious officials.

Furthermore, the consorts of the Shang Dynasty actively participated in state governance, wielding significant political authority and occupying prominent administrative roles. They frequently presided over or engaged in major sacrificial rituals and contributed to critical decision-making through oracle bone divination. Oracle inscriptions repeatedly document Queen Fu Hao’s involvement in religious ceremonies, including the *Zhi* sacrifice and the *Fang* sacrifice. Another notable figure was Fu Jing (also referred to as Fu Jing or Fu Jing), one of King Wu Ding’s principal consorts, who was posthumously honored as “Bi Wu” in oracle and bronze inscriptions. Over 200 oracle records mention Fu Jing or Bi Wu, detailing the various sacrificial rites she conducted. For example, she is recorded as having presided over the *Zhi* sacrifice, a ritual dedicated to ancestral worship. Similarly, she was commissioned by the king to oversee the *Yi* sacrifice at Qingjing, a ceremony involving the offering of meat as a sacred oblation [15].

The extensive documentation of women in oracle bone inscriptions provides compelling evidence of their prominent status in Shang society. Far from being mere participants in political and religious affairs, they often served as key figures leading such activities.

To summarize, the two civilizations display notable parallels in terms of agricultural development and the social position of women, with both placing high value on agriculture and assigning women significant and influential roles. Nevertheless, despite these similarities, substantial differences exist in how omens were communicated, the nature of their variability and potential for human intervention, as well as in the specific forms and execution of divinatory practices

3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO CIVILIZATIONS

3.1 The Ways of Conveying Divination Omens.

Within the religious belief system of the Shang Dynasty, “Di” (also referred to as “Shangdi”) occupied the position of the supreme deity worshipped by the Yin people, exerting dominion over all natural phenomena and human affairs. However, direct communication between the Yin people and Shangdi was not possible; instead, they relied on their deceased ancestors—particularly royal ancestors—as intermediaries to convey their petitions and establish a spiritual connection.

As Chen Mengjia noted in **A Comprehensive Review of Oracle Bone Inscriptions**, “Shangdi possesses great authority in oracle bone inscriptions and serves as the sovereign of both nature and the lower world.” He further elaborated that “the Shangdi or Di of the Yin people governs celestial phenomena and presides over a divine court where the sun, moon, wind, and rain function as his ministers and envoys.” The **Dictionary of Oracle Bone Script** similarly states that “Di, also known as Shangdi, is the supreme deity in the conceptual framework of the Yin people, overseeing weather patterns, calamities, and the fortune or misfortune of humankind.”[4] According to these sources, Shangdi not only controls all natural forces—capable of commanding rain, wind, clear skies, and mountains and rivers—but also rules over celestial deities such as the sun, moon, wind, thunder, and snow, as well as terrestrial deities including earth, land, and water. Furthermore, he determines the outcomes of wars and the rise and fall of dynasties. Beyond natural governance, Shangdi also influences various aspects of human life, such as construction, transportation, and trade, and has the power to send death, sustenance, or disasters to the human realm, thereby governing all forms of fortune and misfortune.

Despite this omnipotence, the Yin people could not directly appeal to Shangdi for favorable conditions or military success. This limitation stemmed from the absence of a direct blood or kinship link between the earthly king and Shangdi, which precluded direct communication. Consequently, ancestral spirits—especially those of former kings—were regarded as essential mediators.

Oracle bone inscriptions provide numerous records of the Shang royal family engaging in divinatory practices through ancestral intercession, such as the phrase “reporting to an ancestor regarding a certain matter.” These examples illustrate how the Yin people viewed their ancestors as vital conduits between themselves and Shangdi, relying on ancestral souls to transmit messages to the supreme deity.

In contrast, the religious tradition of Mesopotamia emphasized a model of direct communication with the gods. The Mesopotamian pantheon was highly structured, with each deity representing specific natural forces or aspects of social life—for instance, Enlil as the god of storms, Shamash as the sun god and divine judge, and Enki as the god of wisdom and water. These deities were believed to influence both cosmic order and human destiny.

Accordingly, Mesopotamians engaged in direct acts of devotion, including prayer, sacrifice, and divination, to seek divine favor, guidance, and protection. This mode of interaction was particularly evident in their divinatory practices, which often involved examining the entrails—especially the liver—of sacrificed animals or interpreting celestial phenomena such as star movements. These observations were understood as direct responses from the gods to human inquiries.

Thus, within the Mesopotamian cultural framework, the relationship between humans and deities was characterized by immediacy and directness, without the need for ancestral mediation as practiced by the Yin people.

3.2 The Variability of Omens and Intervention

The ancient Mesopotamians held the belief that ominous omens were not immutable, but could be averted or altered through ritual intervention. To counteract impending misfortunes, they developed a specific ceremonial practice known as “nam-bur-bi,” which aimed to neutralize negative influences through religious or magical acts intended to “loosen” or dispel evil omens. This concept was later expanded by the Akkadians into what they termed “namburbu,” meaning approximately “[evil] loosening.” This reflects the Mesopotamian worldview in which humans possessed the agency to influence divine messages through appropriate religious practices, thereby altering outcomes and averting disasters.

In contrast, while the Shang people also sought to modify unfavorable omens—evidenced by preserved divination records concerning rainfall—their approach was primarily mediated through ritual specialists and symbolic self-sacrifice. According to the **Shuowen Jiezi**, “Wu (巫) refers to a shaman, particularly a female practitioner who performs rituals; one who invokes spirits through dance without physical representation. The character resembles a figure with outstretched arms dancing.” Another entry explains: “Wu (无), meaning abundance, is composed of the radicals for forest (*lin*) and *shi*. Some interpret *shi* as indicating scale or magnitude.” In **Mozi’s** chapter “Ming Gui,” a passage quoting an edict from King Tang states: “Persistent dancing within the palace is referred to as the shamanic style.” The role of the wu was to perform chanting and dancing to summon spirits and pray for rain. Those who conducted the dances were called *wu*, their actions termed *wu* (舞, dance), and the ritual itself was known as *yu* (雩), a ceremony dedicated to invoking timely rain. As recorded in the **Shuowen Jiezi**: “Yu refers to a summer sacrifice offered to the Red Emperor to pray for timely rain.” The **Yue Ling** (Monthly Orders) further notes: “A grand *yu* ceremony is performed before the Supreme Deity, accompanied by elaborate music.” These sources indicate that different sacrificial rites involved distinct forms of dance, and in the context of oracle bone inscriptions, the use of dance in rain-praying ceremonies is clearly documented [3].

Beyond the professional efforts of shamans, Shang rulers themselves engaged in acts of personal sacrifice to seek divine favor and alter adverse conditions. A well-known account from the **Lüshi Chunqiu: Shun Min** describes how King Tang, after overthrowing the Xia dynasty and establishing his rule, faced a prolonged drought lasting five years. In response, he offered a personal prayer at Sanglin Grove, declaring: “If I alone have sinned, let not the multitude suffer. If the multitude has erred, the blame lies with me. Do not allow my failure to bring harm upon the people through the will of Heaven and the spirits.” He then cut his hair and scarified his hands, offering himself as a sacrificial victim to plead with the gods. Following this act, the people rejoiced and heavy rains fell. This narrative illustrates King Tang’s understanding of the interplay between spiritual forces and human governance.

This historical episode illustrates that the drought was perceived as a consequence of the king’s personal transgression. In response, the king sought divine forgiveness and endeavored to alter the earthly calamity through an act of self-sacrifice [5].

While such acts of self-sacrifice represented attempts to influence the Mandate of Heaven, they were more commonly expressions of desperate supplication in response to ongoing or already manifested disasters, rather than proactive preventive measures. In most cases, when confronted with an irresistible cosmic decree, the Shang people maintained the belief that the will of the spirits and deities was immutable, leaving them with no recourse other than evasion or adaptation. For example, the **Shangshu: Pan Geng** records: “The former kings had their prescribed attire and remained reverently cautious in observing the Mandate of Heaven,” and “May Heaven prolong our lives in this new city.” Oracle bone inscriptions such as “In attacking the Lu region, may the Lord grant us victory” and “Divinatory inquiry: Will the Lord heal the king?” further illustrate the Shang people’s sense of powerlessness before divine will and heavenly fate.

The Shang viewed all natural phenomena as manifestations of divine arrangement. Consequently, during the early phase of the dynasty, they made no attempt to construct defenses against the recurring floods of the Yellow River, opting instead for frequent relocations. After the establishment of the Shang dynasty, from King Tang to King Pan Geng, the royal court relocated five times. The ruling elite interpreted these migrations as decreed by Heaven, as reflected in the statement: “Though we diligently follow the Mandate of Heaven, peace remains elusive; our capital has moved five times, for stability is not ours to command.”[1]

Overall, the Mesopotamians held the belief that omens were not fixed but could be altered through specific ritual practices, thereby preventing potential disasters. In contrast, while the Shang people also engaged in efforts to avert calamities, their approach was more characterized by submission to and avoidance of Heaven’s will, reflecting a worldview in which divine decrees were largely beyond human control.

3.3 Forms and Practices of Divination

The establishment of the divination system in the Shang Dynasty was primarily aimed at maintaining the harmonious functioning of both the spiritual and human realms. As one scholar observes, “divination constituted a crucial source of political authority during the late Shang period, approximately from 1250 to 1046 BCE.” [6] The inscriptions found on oracle bones illustrate the intrinsic link between writing and power, thereby endowing Shang

dynasty script with a unique ritualistic and symbolic function. It can be concluded that the religious and cosmological knowledge of the late Shang was transmitted and preserved to the present day through practices such as divination, sacrificial rituals, and the oracle bone inscription system.

Turtle-based divination primarily relies on the interpretation of color variations and crack patterns observed on animal scapulae to foresee future events. This practice is broadly categorized into two types: cold divination (apyro-scapulimancy), which involves examining unheated bones in their natural state, and hot divination (pyro-scapulimancy), which entails analyzing cracks formed after the bones are subjected to heat. Turtle and bone divination during the Shang Dynasty belonged to the category of pyro-scapulimancy. However, this ritualistic practice predates the Shang period. Archaeological evidence from the Fuhegoumen site in Balin Left Banner, Inner Mongolia—excavated in 1962—revealed unmodified lower bones bearing scorch marks without drill holes, dating back to approximately 3350 BCE [7]. In the subsequent Northern Longshan Culture, the use of domestic animal scapulae—particularly those of pigs, cattle, and sheep—for divinatory purposes became increasingly prevalent. The Shang culture, which maintained close cultural connections with these earlier traditions, adopted and further refined this practice [8].

The selection of tortoise shells as the primary medium for divination can be attributed to two principal factors. First, in the practice of divination, practitioners observed a high degree of accuracy in the omens derived from what was referred to as the “divine tortoise,” thereby establishing the tortoise’s status as an auspicious and sacred creature. This belief is supported by historical texts documenting the concept of the divine tortoise during the Shang Dynasty.

For instance, in the *Yi* section of the *Zhouyi*, it is stated: “The first nine: abandon your divine tortoise, observe my full cheeks—this is ominous.” Kong Yingda’s *Justice* further explains: “The divine tortoise refers to the omen of a tortoise possessing supernatural insight, symbolizing one’s own moral virtue.” [9] Similarly, the *Baihu Tong·Zhuo Gu* records: “Among dry grasses and withered bones, many are not unique. Why then do we rely on the tortoise? Because it is among the longest-lived beings in heaven and earth, thus worthy of consultation [10]. The term ‘gu’ (卜) implies longevity, and ‘zhuo’ (著) implies age. Longevity signifies enduring wisdom.”

Collectively, these sources indicate that ancient people regarded the tortoise as inherently sacred. It was believed that through its use, one could discern future events, determine the auspicious or inauspicious outcomes of matters, and accomplish significant endeavors. In this capacity, no other object was considered to surpass the tortoise in efficacy.

Fundamentally, the religious beliefs of the Yin people were closely associated with the turtle’s distinctive skeletal structure, scute patterns, and exceptionally long lifespan. As some scholars have argued: “The turtle is regarded as a unique creature due to its symbolic correspondence with the cosmos. Its carapace is convex like the heavens, while its plastron is flat like the earth. In contrast to the finite lifespans of ordinary beings, the turtle appears virtually ageless. These characteristics collectively constituted the foundational elements for the development of a distinct belief system, ultimately giving rise to the highly esteemed practice of turtle-shell divination. This ritual was employed to access divine power and to enhance the efficacy of prognosticatory practices.” [11]

Secondly, the rarity and intrinsic value of tortoise shells used in divination constituted another key factor contributing to their high esteem among the Yin people. As archaeologist Peiros has observed: “From a sociocultural perspective, objects that are inaccessible to the general populace and reserved for elite classes tend to hold greater symbolic value; similarly, from a geographical standpoint, items originating from distant regions are often perceived as more valuable.” The turtles employed in oracle bone divination were primarily freshwater species sourced from rivers, lakes, and ponds. Archaeological evidence indicates that prehistoric water turtles were predominantly distributed across the Yangtze River Basin, extending southward to the coastal areas of the South China Sea and northward into the Hai-Dai region. This spatial distribution aligns closely with Peiros’ theoretical framework, further reinforcing the notion that the scarcity and exclusivity of tortoise shells rendered them potent symbols of social status and aristocratic identity within Yin-Shang society.

Beyond oracle bone divination, ritualistic shamanic dances performed during sacrificial ceremonies also played a significant role in the broader Yin-Shang divinatory system. According to the *Shuowen Jiezi*, the term “wu” (shaman) refers to a female practitioner who communicates with deities through dance: “The shaman is one who performs rituals and invokes spirits through movement, depicted as a figure with fluttering sleeves.” This description underscores the function of shamanic dance as a medium for establishing divine-human

communication and seeking celestial favor and protection.

Among various forms of ritual dance, the Feather Dance held particular prominence. Given that the Shang Dynasty revered the 玄鸟 (Black Bird) as its ancestral totem, the Feather Dance—modeled after avian imagery—occupied a central place in religious practice. Oracle bone inscriptions even record instances of the Shang king personally performing the Feather Dance, signifying the highest*** appreciation but also expressed deep reverence for the divine. Similarly, the Yi Sacrificial Dance combined liturgical functions with elements of daily life. Performed with or adorned by bird feathers, dancers imitated avian motions to invoke blessings of health and prosperity. These ceremonies often lasted multiple days, serving dual purposes: honoring the gods and providing communal entertainment, thereby acting as a vital conduit between the sacred and the secular.

In summary, the Yin-Shang divinatory system was not limited to oracle bone interpretation but also encompassed ritualistic practices such as shamanic dancing and sacrificial offerings, forming a comprehensive and structured belief system. This integrated framework reflected the Yin people's profound veneration of the divine, their pursuit of aesthetic expression, and their efforts to uphold societal order.

In contrast, the Mesopotamian divinatory tradition exhibited greater diversity and complexity, primarily comprising hepatoscopy (liver divination), oneiromancy (dream interpretation), and astrological observation.

Hepatic divination, also referred to as liver divination, was a prominent method of forecasting the future in ancient Mesopotamian religious practices. This form of divination was carried out by specialized practitioners known as "baru," who analyzed the internal organs—particularly the liver—of sacrificed animals to discern divine messages. Each section of the liver was assigned a specific name and associated with symbolic meanings. Various patterns were inscribed on the surface of the organ, and in some cases, clay replicas of livers were created with corresponding divinatory markings [16]. It was widely believed that the liver served as the center of mental and spiritual activity. Upon the sacrifice of an animal to the gods, it was thought that the divine presence would inhabit the offering, transferring its essence into the liver. As a result, diviners could interpret the concealed intentions and actions of the deities by closely examining features such as the organ's patterns, fissures, and structural characteristics.

Babylonian hepatoscopic texts offer comprehensive documentation of the terminology and interpretations associated with divinatory symbols, such as "pitru," which denotes cracks, and "fibra," signifying fine linear markings. These features—patterns and fissures—are typically found in abundance on both the left and right lobes of the liver, often measuring at least half the length of a human finger. Diviners analyzed these anatomical indicators to foresee significant future occurrences, including the political fortunes of states and the outcomes of military conflicts.

An irregularly shaped clay model of a sheep's liver unearthed in Mari bears an inscription that reads: "It is foretold that Ishbi-Ilal, a vassal of Elam, shall conquer Elam. Such notable prophecies were compiled by royal decree." Dream divination constituted another significant form of prognostication. In this practice, priests would often invite diviners to reside within the temple precincts and sleep there, in the hope that divine revelations might be imparted through dreams. It was commonly held that dreaming of dogs, sheep, or deer signified ominous portents, whereas visions of lions, foxes, or fish were interpreted as auspicious signs. This method expanded the scope of divinatory practice beyond empirical observation into the realm of mystical dream experiences, thereby offering an additional interpretive framework for anticipating future occurrences.

Astrology, undoubtedly the most esteemed and widely practiced form of Mesopotamian divination, emerged from the profound awe inspired by celestial phenomena among populations transitioning from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles. Through prolonged and meticulous observation of the heavens, the Mesopotamians discerned recurring correlations between astronomical events and terrestrial affairs, leading to the formulation of the principle "as above, so below." They believed that those who could decipher the meanings of celestial omens possessed the ability to comprehend the will of the gods and thus foresee the unfolding of worldly events. In their cosmological imagination, the sky was conceived as a vast manuscript, with stars serving as its script. The movements and appearances of the sun, moon, and major planets were regarded as indicators of the destinies of both rulers and common individuals alike.

For example, the Mesopotamians interpreted overcast skies on July 1st as a sign of impending warfare; cloud cover occurring on the 13th and 19th days was taken as an omen of the king's imminent death; while clouds appearing on

the 30th were viewed as a favorable sign predicting the monarch's longevity. Furthermore, the direction of shadow movement during solar and lunar eclipses was also employed to determine whether such events presaged fortune or misfortune [16].

Within the royal courts of Mesopotamia, specialized officials known as **baru** were tasked with systematically observing celestial phenomena, interpreting omens for the monarch, providing a sacred foundation for decision-making, and issuing warnings regarding impending disasters.

In contrast to the Shang Dynasty in China, where divination primarily involved oracle bone scapulimancy and ritualistic shamanic practices to establish communication with deities and discern omens, Mesopotamian divination relied on systematic examination of animal viscera—particularly the liver—as well as dream interpretation and astrological observation to foresee future events. These methods reflected a deep engagement with natural phenomena and celestial movements. While both traditions exemplified cultural efforts to interpret supernatural forces and anticipate the future, they exhibited notable distinctions in their procedural approaches and material selections.

4. CONCLUSION

A comparative analysis of the divination practices in the Shang Dynasty and Mesopotamian civilizations reveals not only shared approaches to interpreting omens and supernatural phenomena—such as the significance attributed to agriculture and female figures—but also notable differences in their conceptualizations of omens and the methodologies employed in divinatory rituals. These parallels and divergences reflect varying cultural interpretations and applications of mystical forces, while simultaneously highlighting the distinct value systems and religious frameworks that shaped each society.

REFERENCES

- [1] Li Shiping. Comparison of the concept of heaven and its material basis in Yin and Zhou dynasties [J]. *Journal of Chongqing Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 1989(4):56-62.
- [2] Jin Lijiang. Research on the history of Sumerian mythology [J]. Doctoral dissertation of Beijing Normal University, 2010.
- [3] Chen Mengjia. A review of Yinxu oracle inscriptions [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1988:501.580.346-251.
- [4] Xu Zhongshu. Dictionary of Oracle Bone Inscriptions [M]. Chengdu: Sichuan Dictionary Publishing House, 2014:7.
- [5] Wang Zhenzhong. The evolution of the pre-Shang social form [J]. *Chinese Historical Studies*, 2005(2):3-23.
- [6] Rowan K. Flad. Divination and Power: A Multiregional View of the Development of Oracle Bone Divination in Early China. *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 49, No. 3(June 2008).404.
- [7] Inner Mongolia Working Team of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Sciences. A Brief Report on the Excavation of the Fuhagoumen Site in Balin Left Banner, Inner Mongolia. *Archaeology*, 1964, (1); 3. Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. A Data Set of Carbon-14 Dating in Chinese Archaeology (1965-1981) [M]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1983.24.
- [8] Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Archaeological Discoveries and Research in New China [M]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1984.196.
- [9] [Tang] Kong Yingda. Jingyin Official Edition of Zhouyi Zhengyi in the Southern Song Dynasty [A]. An Pingqiu and Yang Zhong (eds.). *Re-returning Documents - Jingyin Confucian Classics Rare Books* [C]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2017.120.
- [10] [Qing] Chen Li. Baihutong Shuzheng [M]. Wu Zeyu (ed.). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1994:329.
- [11] [France] Wang Demai. Two Rationalities of Chinese Thought: Divination and Signification [M]. Translated by Jin Siyan. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2017.14-15.
- [12] Marcus Tullius Cicero, On Divination [M]. Translated by Dai Liankun. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2019.38-39.
- [13] Ito Michiharu. The Formation of Ancient Chinese Dynasties [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2002:12.
- [14] Wang Hui. A Comparative Study of Shang and Zhou Cultures [M], Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2000:43.

- [15] Zhang Anning. A Preliminary Arrangement of Female Materials Seen in Binzu Oracle Inscriptions [J]. Master's Degree Thesis of Zhengzhou University. 2021(05).
- [16] Yang Gongle, Chief Editor. Yu Dianli. "One Belt, One Road" Ancient Civilization Series. Ancient Mesopotamian Civilization [M]. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press. 2018(11).