

Divination Among the Hittites

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The Hittites were one of the earliest Indo-European peoples to migrate from the Indo-European homelands in the Ukraine to the lands of the Mediterranean, settling in Anatolia (what is now Turkey) in ca. 1800 BCE. The empire they established rivaled the other Bronze Age powers—the Mycenaean Greeks, the Assyrians, and New Kingdom Egypt—for power and control of trade and resources.

The chief gods of the Hittites were storm gods (note the priest of the storm god mentioned in the fourth letter), but their pantheon included many gods drawn from the indigenous Anatolian population (the Hurrians) and their neighbors, the Assyrians, along with their own. Hittite religion downplayed scheduled rituals and festivals and was more concerned with responding to difficulties or marking auspicious events. The state routinely sought the advice of the gods in determining certain courses of action, such as invading a particular land, and in response to bad omens, dreams, or strange illnesses.

According to the official correspondence that has come down to us, such as the excerpts reproduced below, the main method of divination (consulting the gods) was to observe the movements and actions of birds in a set place over a set time. This was done by the priests first posing a question, then watching for certain signs that indicated a positive answer; if those signs were observed, the answer was positive (“it is confirmed”); if they were not observed, the answer was negative.

Two other methods are indicated in the excerpts: the casting of stones, and a ritual called “the path” that involved opening a space up to spirits or friendly divinities.

- Source for text and commentary: Hoffner, Harry A., and Gary M. Beckman. *Letters From the Hittite Kingdom*. Society of Biblical Literature, 2009.

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[15.28] Augurs to the Queen

Say to the Queen, our lady: 1

Thus speak [the gods] Awawa, NugišKiri, dU-Sig, and the augurs, your servants: 2-3

[In three badly broken paragraphs the writer gives to the queen a detailed description of the behavior of observed oracle birds, mentioning details of the locale where they were observed: specifically, the city of Ḫaitta and the Zuliya and Imralla Rivers.]

[HKM 47] To the King from Šarla-Lamma [an augur]

[Although addressed by Šarla-Lamma to the king, this letter represents a report of the activities of several augurs, as can be seen by the “we” verb forms. Šarla-Lamma reports that his group was repeatedly frustrated by the observed birds, which did not give an unambiguous answer to the queries that they posed. When the first inquiries in Šipišaši, Pišatenitišša, and the land of Malazziya failed, the augurs tried other locations, hoping to find one that was propitious and would yield a result. But in Panāta and Kašaša they met only with failure. The king had intended to march from Kašaša to Takkašta, but tarried in Kašaša, until the augurs could give him the information he sought which was essential for his expedition. Finally, the augurs returned to Tapikka, where they had success, and from where they send this report both of the upshot of the oracle’s decision—namely that the king will be successful against Takkašta, and (almost like an appendix) a detailed description of the course of the oracular investigation, so that the king’s own specialists can see how the final decision was

reached. The oracle's decision, which is relayed here, is phrased in the third person: "[The king] will ...," in contrast to the augurs' own words to the king in the body of the letter, which are "you" forms. This shows that the intention is to reflect the actual wording of the questions that the augurs had posed to the oracle for a "yes/no" reply: "Will His Majesty (successfully) attack Takkašta?" and "Will he reap [its] crops?" The king in this case is thought to be Arnuwanda I, dating the letter to ca. 1380 BCE.]

Say to His Majesty, my lord: Thus speaks your servant Šarla- Lamma: 1-2

Regarding the fact that we were making oracular observations [of birds] in the towns Šipišaši, Pišatenitišša, and the land of Malazziya: no bird was actually defeating us, but the birds were refusing to give us an answer. 3-6

Since you, Your Majesty, my lord, were in Kašaša, we situated ourselves in Panāta. But when you, Your Majesty, my lord, marched, since the bird refused to give us an answer, we drove back to Kašaša, and the birds began refusing to give us an answer [in] Kašaša as well. 7-11

Then we came back to Tapikka and from [the base of] Tapikka have now carried out the auguries! So let Your Majesty, my lord, be informed! 12-14

We thoroughly investigated by augury the matter of [Your Majesty's planned attack on] the town Takkašta, and we obtained an answer. Regarding the campaign we said [i.e., predicted] as follows: "His Majesty will [successfully] attack Takkašta and reap its crops as well." 15-19

[The remainder of the letter contains a detailed and highly technical description of the course of the oracular investigation.]

[KuT 50] To the King from Ḫalpa-ziti

[The queen has written to Ḫalpa-ziti, from wherever he wrote this, reporting a disturbing dream that she had experienced, in which her daughters had suffered a beating. The queen asked Ḫalpa-ziti to use oracles to determine from the gods whether this dream actually portended harm for the princesses. Ḫalpa-ziti did as he was told, then reports to the king the oracularly significant movements that he and his colleagues observed in "birds of agitation," a special type of birds used by the augurs. This was Ḫalpa-ziti's "first" method of oracular checking. As a countercheck, he observed something called "the road/path"; "paths" were created by rituals to draw away impurities or attract positively inclined deities.]

Say to the lord, my lord: Thus speaks Ḫalpa-ziti, your servant: May it be well with the princesses and with my lord. All is well with us too. 1-4

The palace official Ḫandapi brought me word, as follows: "The Queen wrote me. In a dream beatings were being administered to the princess[es]. Since you are there, you yourself should investigate [the matter] through oracles." 5-9

So the palace official Ḫattušili and I investigated [the matter] through oracles. These "birds of agitation" appeared. ... 10-16

[What follows in this and the next two paragraphs is a description by the writer of what birds were seen, and their movements, together with comments as to the oracular significance of each.] 17-22

And these [were] the "birds of agitation." 23

And concerning what they [the augurs] said regarding 'the road': "Observe 'the road' beforehand by means of the deity [i.e., the oracle]!" Tomorrow, after we have dispatched this messenger, we will observe 'the road' by means of the deity, and we will write to the palace ... as soon as that happens. 24-30

Furthermore, concerning what you wrote me by the hand of Upnalli: “Observe [pl.] beforehand ‘the road’ by means of the deity!” After Upnalli drove here from the presence of the king, on the following day Allawanni indeed observed ‘the road.’ 31-37

First, a ḥalliya-bird was gun-iš. For one day we are leaving off [observing], but tomorrow we will observe. We observed birds of laḥra- on behalf of the princesses. The birds of laḥra- ‘discarded’ [defecated]. 38-43

Furthermore, concerning the gold cup you wrote me about: I weighed it—it weighs thirty shekels—and I gave it to Walwalli. 44-47

Send back whatever gold presentation ašuša-vessels are with my lord! He will refine it to the same quality. Then write to me the job that you, my lord, have assigned to him, and I will certainly assign it to Walwalli. 48-55

[HHCTO 1] From [...] to [...]

[Of the three paragraphs in this letter, the first touches on oracles and the spirits of the dead, but is not well preserved; the second concerns work crews and is unrelated to the others; the third concerns an act of sacrilege and the corresponding purification rituals. The “roads” mentioned in the fragmentarily preserved opening paragraph could be “paths” created as part of a ritual to draw away impurity or to attract positively-inclined deities (perhaps the spirits of benevolent deceased mentioned in line 4). The third paragraph concerns the reported act of sacrilege. Because the two apprehended persons are of opposite sex, some scholars guess that their sacrilege involved a sexual offence. (As a cult title in Hittite, the term “Old Woman” for a kind of priestess/augur only requires that the person be post-adolescent, i.e., mature.) Although evidence for sexual activity by the “Old Woman” does not exist in Hittite texts, the Code of Hammurabi §145 indicates that a man whose first wife was a naditum (whose status required that she not bear children) was allowed to take a šugitum (“old woman”) as a second wife for the purpose of having children. But we should be cautious in assuming that the only action qualifying as sacrilege committed by two persons of opposite sex must be sexual. They may have contrived to steal one or more valuable sacred objects. Furthermore, bathing is not uncommon as an accompaniment of purification rituals and need not refer to the normal requirement that cult personnel, when returning from their homes where they have had sex, bathe before resuming their duties in the temple. So while it is possible (perhaps even likely) that their act involved sexual intercourse, it is by no means certain. What is truly intriguing here is the instruction that the purifying bath not take place in Ḥanziwa, but in another locale. Ḥanziwa was probably fairly close to Šapinuwa, where the king’s temporary residential center was located. If the river passing by Ḥanziwa continued downstream to Šapinuwa, it is possible that secondary pollution from the materials used to purify in the river was feared. In the Hittite law codes, severe penalties are imposed on anyone who discards remnants from a purification ritual on another person’s property, where they may affect him adversely. Such a case becomes one of sorcery, must be judged in the king’s court, and could result in the death penalty.]

... the roads ... the roads ... the men of ... summon [the spirits of] the dead ... oaths ... 1-5

Concerning the fact that the time for the work/task has now already come? ... why do you not send a work crew ...? Whether it comes quickly, or the ... it, you should not? ..., because he will perhaps proceed to postpone the work time? But [at] work [time] ... you must not do ... But send for work crews and oxen! And let him come quickly and put them to the task. 6-10

Concerning the fact that an act of sacrilege has now occurred, and they have apprehended [as guilty parties] a Man-of-the-Storm-god [a kind of priest] and an Old Woman [a kind of priestess or exorcist]. They will begin to perform [a purification ritual]. But let them not begin to perform [the ritual] in the town Ḥanziwa. Let them not bathe in the river of the town Ḥanziwa. Let them rather perform [the ritual] up in X-šamāša, and let them bathe only there. Let them not perform [the ritual] in Ḥanziwa. And let them not bathe in the river of Ḥanziwa. Get to it! 11-17

[KuT 49] To the Gal Dumu.Meš É.Gal [Palace Chief of Staff] from the Ḫazannu [Mayor]

[The sender of the letter, the mayor, speaking on behalf of a group of augurs, writes to his superior, the Chief of the Palace Officials. None of the individuals uses his name. A certain Old Woman, one of whose competences was the consulting and interpreting of the Kin-oracle, had requested that the augurs run a countercheck on the result she had obtained through the Kin-oracle to an important question: What were the prospects for recovery from grave illness by the “son of the priestess”? The Old Woman performed the Kin-oracle consultation four times, and all four turned out unfavorable. The fact that it was done four times indicates how important this issue was and how careful the Old Woman was to ensure a correct interpretation of the oracle. At this point, rather than performing a fifth consultation, she asked that her augur colleagues pose the same question(s) to a bird oracle, involving the observation of three specific birds. They do so, using as a safety check two opposite queries: the first in the positive (“do we have something to fear?”) and the second, to a different set of birds, in the negative (“do we have nothing to fear?”). The first is answered in the affirmative, and the second with silence, implying a reply “On the contrary: we do have something to fear.” The augurs are not content to simply give their interpretation; they also give a description of the movements of the birds on which they based their interpretation. This would make it possible for specialists at the other end to verify their interpretation.]

Say to the lord, the Chief of the Palace Officials, my lord: Thus speaks the mayor: 1-2

Iya, the Old Woman [*female augur*], spoke the following to me: “The (oracular) trace turned out bad for the person of the son of the priestess, and these traces occurred. 3-6

“The [token named] ‘bad’ was ‘taken’, and [moved] back to [the location] ‘Ḫalmaššuit’. I performed the oracular consultation four times, and all four times it turned out bad. So let them perform a consultation there as well.” 7-10

So we proceeded to seek an answer to the following question further by [observing] birds: 11

“Concerning this which Iya has said: ‘Should we fear for the person of the son of the priestess?’” — It is confirmed [i.e., yes, we should fear]. 12-14

[Here is the record of the movements of the birds, which lead to the interpretation given in line 14 “it is confirmed.”] 15-21

Then we proceeded to make a further observation [of the birds] with reference to the life [i.e., survival] of the son of the priestess: “Should we perhaps have nothing to fear for the person of the son of the priestess?” 22-24

[Here is the description of the movements of the birds.] 25-29

[Since there is no further answer of “It is confirmed” (i.e., we should have no fear), this counter-query is answered by an implied: “On the contrary”.] 30-32