ANGUEM ENIXA MULIER

Near Eastern Snake Omens and Roman Literature

By

Nicholas Michael Gill

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Abstract

Comparative work in the divinatory traditions of the Near East and the classical world, aside from the sub-discipline of astrology, has not been forthcoming. John Jacobs’s 2011 article, “Traces of the Omen Series Šumma Izbu in Cicero’s De divinatione,” is a notable exception. In this work, Jacobs compared Mesopotamian birth omens with those found in Graeco-Roman literature, and discovered a concordance in the category of lion births. This concordance, however, is not exclusive to omens concerning the birth of lions. Snake omens drawn from the Šumma Izbu, the Mesopotamian omen corpus of birth omens, focus on two portents: the rise of a powerful leader and a negative change in social status. When snake omens in Roman literature are examined alongside these Mesopotamian omens, it is evident that the apodoses of the Roman omens likewise portend either or both of these events. The secondary focus of this work is to provide a history of snake omens in Roman sources, and to that end, this work draws on virtually all snake omens in classical Roman literature, although some late sources may have escaped notice. Ultimately, this analysis of the Roman snake omens provides evidence that several ideas about snake omens—that they predict eminent people and social discord—migrated from Near Eastern omen literature and surfaced in Roman literature. While this investigation does not theorize the means of this transmission, it reaffirms the complex relationship Mesopotamian omen lore has with the classical world.
Acknowledgements

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In recent years, studies have begun to examine the relationship between classical and Near Eastern divinatory practices. Scientific information, including divinatory lore, circulated around the Mediterranean in antiquity. Hittite diplomatic letters detail kings sending priests and physicians to one another as gifts; likewise Hittite extispicy seems to originate in Mesopotamian practice. Duane E. Smith recently argued for a Mesopotamian origin of Greek bird divination, against Peter Högemann and Norbert Oettinger, who maintain a Hittite origin. It is, however, quite clear that Greek astrology, which the Romans later adopted, descends from Babylonian astrology. Another possible instance of the circulation of divinatory knowledge is the Etruscan practice of haruspicy, the interpretation of the liver and other entrails. This Etruscan method of divination seems to include many of the procedures and beliefs as Babylonian extispicy; both cultures used liver models as instructional tools, which archaeologists have studied alongside textual sources to order to reconstruct their methods of divination. The liver models of both the Etruscans and the Babylonians depict similar versions of a fictionalized sheep liver; the same aspects and physical parts on the models are emphasized and exaggerated, which raises the question of whether haruspicy originated from or was influenced by Babylonian extispicy.

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1. This is due to the pioneering work of Burkert and West, who broadened the discipline of Classics and demonstrated the profound influence of the Near East on Graeco-Roman literature and culture. Burkert 1979, 78-83; 1984 = 1995. West 1971, 1997. For Hittite influence on Greek epic, see Bachvarova 2016.
2. That omen literatures should be considered “scientific” has recently been argued in Rochberg 2016.
8. Here I give thanks to Dr. Fabio Colivicchi, Dr. Daryn Lehoux, and Dr. Cristiana Zaccagnino for allowing me to undertake a practical examination of sheep livers, in order to reconstruct and compare the practices of Etruscan haruspicy and Babylonian extispicy. That session revealed both the intricacy and inherent messiness of the disciplines, and highlighted the differences between the model livers and the actual bloody organs.
As early as 1914, Morris Jastrow, Jr. hypothesized that the Etruscan and Roman practice of teratology, divination of unusual births, originated in ancient Babylonia, much like astrology and hepatoscopy. Erle Leichty also noted the similarities between Babylonian and Etruscan / Roman teratological practice in his 1970 critical edition of the Šumma Izbu, stating “there appears to be a strong cultural continuity from Mesopotamia to Rome via the Etruscans in the manner of birth divination. This same continuity is evident in extispicy and could probably be investigated with regard to other forms of literature with great rewards.” Comparative work on the birth omens of Near Eastern and classical civilizations, however, has not been forthcoming among either Classicists or Assyriologists, with the exception of John Jacobs. His article analyzes the lion birth omens from classical sources, and then compares them with the lion omens in the Šumma Izbu. Jacobs ultimately concludes that both the knowledge of the lion birth omen and its text originated in Babylonia because of the similar apodoses and syntax of the omens in each text. Although this study uncovered tantalizing clues regarding the relationship of Etruscan and Roman teratological omens to the Near Eastern tradition, as Nicla de Zorzi remarked in her recent critical edition of the Šumma Izbu, thus far there has been no in-depth analysis and comparison of the two divinatory traditions.

The present study—like Jacobs’ before it—analyzes and compares a subset of omens from the Šumma Izbu and Šumma Alu with Graeco-Roman texts in the hope of encouraging more comparative research in the divinatory texts of the ancient Near Eastern and classical antiquity. It

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10 Jastrow 1914, 50.
11 Leichty 1970, 14-16.
12 Ibid., 16.
13 Jacobs 2010.
14 Specifically, Hdt. 6.131.2; Plut. Per. 3.1-4; Cic. De div. 1.121.
15 Especially 1:5, 2:1, 2:44, 3:1, 4:56; omen 11 of YOS 10 56 i 26–27; omen 40 of YOS 10 56 iii 8-9.
16 Jacobs 2010, 324-333.
focusses on snake omens, which are prevalent in both Babylonian omen texts and in classical literature. Moreover, when the snake omens of the Šumma Izbu are compared with snake omens in Roman literature, it is clear that the omens in both traditions share the same internal logic, and portend one of two events: the birth / emergence of an eminent person, almost entirely distinguished by their martial prowess, or a change in social status. While there do not seem to be syntactical similarities in the Near Eastern and Roman omens,\(^\text{18}\) interchange clearly existed among the classical texts. Still, the similarity of the apodoses in Near Eastern and classical literature suggests that the Babylonian analysis of snake omens, especially as evident in the Šumma Izbu, was incorporated into Etruscan and thereby Roman divinatory lore.

Birth omens are a focus of this study because of the complimentary nature of snakes and birth in both Near Eastern and classical literature. Many Roman snake omens appear in the context of a birth or are birth omens themselves. Indeed, snakes are strongly associated with the process of birth in both Near Eastern and classical literature. Akkadian incantations for difficult childbirth implore the newborn to come forth from the womb like a slithering snake.\(^\text{19}\) While there does not seem to be a direct parallel to these incantations in Greek or Roman literature, both snakes and remedies derived from them have strong effects on pregnant women in the Graeco-Roman tradition. Pliny collects several Roman beliefs about snakes and pregnancy:

\[
\text{viperam mulier praegnans si transcenderit, abortum faciet, item amphisbaenam, mortuam}
\]
\[
dumtaxat, nam vivam habentes in pyxide inpune transeunt; etiam si mortua sit atque
\]
\[
adservata, partus faciles praestat; vel mortuam mirum innoxiam fieri si protinus adservatam
\]
\[
transcendat gravida.* anguis inveterati suffitu menstrua adiuvant. anguium senectus
\]
\[
adalligata lumbis facilius partus facit, protinus a puerperio removenda: dant et in vino
\]
\[
ribbonam cum ture, aliter sumpta abortum facit. baculum quo angui rana excusserit parturientes
\]
\[
adiuvat . . . \(^\text{20}\)
\]

\(^{18}\) Cf. Jacobs 2010, 324-333.
\(^{19}\) BAM 248 i 37-50 in Scurlock 2014; 11N-T3 in Civil 1974.
\(^*\) This seems to be a corrupt line. Restored from Jones 1963, 374.
\(^{20}\) HN 30.128-129. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
If a pregnant woman steps across a viper, it will cause a miscarriage; the same will happen if it is an amphisbaena (a snake with a head at each end), a dead one at least, but the ones who hold a living one in a box step over without harm—even if it is dead—have easy births. For example, it is astonishing that if a pregnant woman steps across a dead one, she will come to no harm if it is immediately preserved. Menstruations are assisted by the fumigation of a preserved snake. The slough of snakes, bound to the loins causes births to be easier, but must be immediately taken off after childbirth. They also give it in wine to be drunk with frankincense; consumed in other ways it causes miscarriage. A stick with which a frog was shaken out of a snake helps women in labor . . .

Conspicuously among these beliefs is that if pregnant women carry a serpent on them, or even a dead one in a box, their childbirth will be easier. Might this be a distorted idea originating from Near Eastern medical knowledge? Pliny also remarks that serpent amulets help with childbirth, and Suetonius later mentions Nero had a similar amulet which contained the slough of a serpent that protected him as an infant.21 In the Near East, women in childbirth wore amulets adorned with the image of Pazuzu—an apotropaic figure—chasing the child-stealing serpent-holding Lamaštu demon away.22

The extent to which serpents are associated with birth is unsurprising because of their iconographic connection with life and fertility due to their shedding of skin. This process of self-renewal caused ancient people to associate serpents with life, fertility, and rebirth. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, which focusses on Gilgamesh’s struggle with his own mortality and his later attempt to gain immortality, it is a serpent that steals the plant of immortality:

\[
\begin{aligned}
\textit{sēru(muš) i-te-ši-in ni-piš šam-mu} \\
\textit{[šá-qum-m]eš i-lam-ma šam-mu iš-ši} \\
\textit{ina ta-ri-šú it-ta-di qu-lip-tum}^{23}
\end{aligned}
\]

A snake smelled the fragrance of the plant, [silently] it came up and bore the plant off; as it turned away it sloughed a skin.

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21 Ner. 6.4; cf. Dio Cass. 61.2.3.
22 See Musée du Louvre, AO 22205; commentary in Wiggermann 2000, 243-249; Graff 2014, 264-265.
Immediately after stealing the plant of immortality, the snake sheds its skin, symbolizing its rejuvenation and rebirth. This minor episode from the epic provides an origin for the serpent’s practice of shedding skin, as well as its association with life.

Life, fertility, and birth only compose one branch of associations snakes had in the ancient world. Their movement upon the ground caused them to become associated with the earth, as demonstrated by Cecrops, the autochthonous and half serpent founder of Athens. Their deadly venom caused their association with death: both the demon Lamaštu and the Greek Furies were envisioned with serpents. Their dens within the earth furthered this association in cultures that imagined the underworld existed underground. Cerberus, the Greek three headed guardian of the underworld, is described as having snakes coiled around him. While Babylonian omens seem to have arisen from a highly developed oral tradition, and Roman omens were reported to the priests and recorded, some classical omens crept into literature for dramatic effect or political justification. In each instance, the thematic associations of serpents certainly played a role in the formation of the omen. Conversely, if these omens were written down as reported, then the similarity of the Near Eastern snake omens and those in classical texts could indicate a shared origin of omen traditions.

While the snake omens of the Šumma Izbu demonstrate the strongest concordance with classical serpent omens, it is important to note that it is not the only source for Near Eastern snake omens. Indeed, the Babylonians practiced ophiomancy, divination by the interpretation of

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28 MacBain 1982.
29 See pg. 21 below.
snake behavior. Recent research has linked the fateful serpent in Genesis 3 to this older Babylonian practice, which suggests a diffusion of Near Eastern ophiomantic divinatory lore into Israel. The primary corpus of Babylonian snake omens is the Šumma Alu, a miscellaneous collection of terrestrial omens. The Šumma Alu has at least five tablets (22-26) dedicated to the interpretation of snake behavior, and there are many other snake omens in the other tablets. The vast abundance of snake omens in the Šumma Alu, however, do not seem to correlate to later classical omens as strongly as the omens in the Šumma Izbu. Roman snake omens in particular usually portend the emergence of an eminent person, clearly drawing on the association of snakes and rebirth. The same internal logic is found in the Šumma Izbu.

Roman divination seems to have arisen from Etruscan practices, but the origin of Etruscan divination, and the Etruscans themselves, is a question that has been pondered since ancient times. The prevailing theory among ancient authors was that the Etruscans migrated from Lydia, modern Turkey, due to a famine, but Dionysus of Halicarnassus believed that they were autochthonous. Modern scholars primarily fall into this second category. Even if the Etruscans do not have eastern origins, there is no doubt that they had a deep appreciation for oriental art and culture, which reached its height in the Orientalizing Period (730 – 580 BC). Ideas were also transferred during this period; the speculation about the origin of haruspicy has already been presented. The Etruscans themselves need not to have originated in the east and taken their craft with them; seers and physicians commonly roamed in antiquity spreading knowledge:

30 D. E. Smith 2015.  
32 2:2; 5:27; 15:1; 17:19; 32:50-53; 32:62 in the Sultantepe texts; 34:7-12; 45:60; 61:24; 63:78  
33 Hdt. 1.94. Dionysus of Halicarnassus mentions that, among many others, Xanthus of Lydia and Hellanicus of Lesbos hold this opinion. Ant. Rom. 1.28.2-3.  
34 Ant. Rom. 1.27-30.  
36 Sannibale 2008.
For who calls in a guest from somewhere else when he himself visits another place, if they are not public workmen, a seer, a healer of maladies, a worker of woods, or even a divine bard, who can delight them when he sings?

The Homeric epics generally date to the 8th century BC, and document a similar practice in Greece, where it is common sense for the host—or even guests—to invite travelling seers into their household. Burkert has noted the importance of these travelling specialty workers in spreading eastern religious and cultural practice into Greece during the 8th century BC. Moreover, the Neo-Assyrian empire—as well as their scholarship—was very strong at this time; the foundation of Ashurbanipal’s library at Nineveh, one of the most important sources for omen tablets, is dated to the 612 BC. The lituus is another proponent for the interconnection of Mediterranean societies; this augurial wand, among many others, was imported into Etruria from the Near East. According to tradition, Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome, remodeled Roman religion during his reign (715 – 673 BC), which falls well within the timeframe of the Orientalizing Period.

Both Etruscan divination and religion held great esteem for the Romans from the formation of the Roman state well into the Christian era. Plutarch reports that Romulus asked the men of Etruria how to found the city of Rome, and three legendary kings of Rome—Tarquinius

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37 *Od.* 17.381-385.  
38 Burkert 2014, 255.  
40 Kuhrt 1995, 540-541.  
41 Ambos and Krauskopf 2010.  
42 Hooker 1963.  
Priscus, Servius Tullius, and Tarquinius Superbus—were Etruscan. The haruspices were famous in antiquity for their prowess in divination, and Rome had a college of sixty haruspices at the end of the republic. Individual haruspices, however, were consulted before this time, and continued to be consulted into the imperial period. While haruspices were most famous for their interpretation of entrails, they were also called upon to interpret thunderbolts, unusual happenings, and prodigies. In the later Roman empire, Christian authors attacked the office of the haruspex because they viewed it as a threat to their own religious authority. Etruscan divination was viewed as an important branch of the ancient indigenous religion of Italy, and had intricate ties to the Roman emperor. During the Christian persecution of the pagans, Constantine twice forbade haruspices to consult for private citizens on pain of death, but he himself consulted them whenever the imperial buildings were struck by lightning. Thus, the Christians were jealous of the prestige of the haruspices and felt they threatened the growth of Christianity, resulting in their marked criticisms of the haruspices’ pagan beliefs. The beginning of the end of the haruspices occurred under Theodosius I, with the criminalization of victim sacrifice in 392 AD. A later tale claims that the Etruscans offered to use their rites to protect Rome from the Visigoths, but the Christians turned them away when they insisted they needed to perform the rites in public to have any effect. The city fell to Alaric soon afterwards in 410 AD.

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44 Tarquinius Priscus (also called Lucumo—his Etruscan name): Livy 1.34.1; Servius Tullius: 1.39.1-6; Tarquinius Superbus: 1.46.4.
45 Strabo 17.43.
48 Tac. Ann. 11.15.
49 de Grummond 2013, 542-544.
50 August. De doct. Christ. 2.20. See also Briquel 2007.
51 Cod. Theod. 9.16.1, 2.
52 Cod. Theod. 16.10.1.
53 Arn. Adv. Nat. 7.26; Oros. 5.4.19.
54 Cod. Theod. 16.10.12.
55 Zos. 5.41.
Etruscan haruspices compiled books of omens, which may have been comparable with Near Eastern omen texts.\textsuperscript{56} Unfortunately, in contrast to the Near East, the Etruscan material does not survive. Therefore, the divinatory practices of the Etruscans are reconstructed primarily through Roman authors alongside the archaeological record. The literary record indicates that the Romans referred the interpretation of snake omens to the Etruscans.\textsuperscript{57} These omens were considered prodigies, and ranged from the strange behavior of snakes, their location by altars or in temples, or even—as in the Šumma Izbu—their uncanny birth by women. A comparative approach is utilized in this study: when the serpent omens in Roman literature are compared with those in the Šumma Izbu and the Šumma Alu, there are several intersections where either the omen, the apodosis, or both, are the same. These final cases are candidates for transmission.

There are thirteen serpent omens in the Šumma Izbu, five of which (2:6, 4:55, 7:27, 12:38, 17:56’) correspond with an increase in the power of the king.\textsuperscript{58}

\begin{quote}
\textit{šumma sinništu úlidma quqqad šerra šakin amūt Ningišzida ša māta ikkalu amūt Gilgameš ša māta ibēlu šar kīšati ina māti ibbašši}
\end{quote}

If a woman gives birth (and the child) has the head of a serpent, it is the omen of Ningišzida, which signifies pestilence. (lit. will waste the land); it is the omen of Gilgamesh who ruled the land; there will be a king of the world in the land.

\begin{quote}
\textit{šumma sinništu šarri šerra úlid šar māti idannin}
\end{quote}

If a woman of the palace gives birth to a serpent, the king of the land will become strong.

\begin{quote}
\textit{šumma izbu qaqqad śēri šakin rubū kakkūšu eli kakki nakrišu imarrirū}
\end{quote}

If an izbu has the head of a serpent, the weapons of the prince will prevail over those of his enemy.

\begin{quote}
[\textit{šumma izbu} appi śēri [šakin] rubū māḥira ul [irašši]}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56} Lucr. 6.381; Cic. \textit{De div.} 1.20; \textit{Har. resp.} 25, 37; Plin. \textit{HN}. 2.138, 199; Juv. 13.62; Censor. \textit{DN} 17; Amm. Marc. 17.10.2; Macrob. \textit{Sat}. 3.7.2; Serv. 3.537; 6.72; 8.398.  
\textsuperscript{57} Guittard 2009, 99.  
\textsuperscript{58} Text and translation from de Zorzi 2014. I have rendered her Italian translations into English.
If an *izbu* has the nose of a serpent, the prince will have no rivals.

*šumma izbu kīma īrāt [šērri] šarru qarrādī irtašši*

If an *izbu* is like the scales [of a serpent], the king will have some warriors.

A further three omens (*5:11 = 5:67, 7:28, 22:77*) with the apodoses “years of Sargon” and “omen of Sargon” should perhaps be added to this total, but it is unclear what the apodoses signify.\(^5^9\)

Sargon of Agade certainly was a great king; thus, his omens may well portend the rise of a great king, or a return to the prosperous time of his reign, but nevertheless this reading is uncertain.\(^6^0\)

Likewise, it is unclear as to why the country gathers into the fortress in omen 22:77. The omen could signify the king is becoming stronger and more aggressive, and thus prepares for war, but it could equally well signify that the king has become weak and is consequently being attacked.

*šumma laḫru nēš]*a ūlidma qaqqad šerri šakin šanāt Šarru-kīn ša māta ibēlu*

If a sheep gives birth to a lion and (the newborn) has the head of a serpent, (it means) years of Sargon who ruled the land.

*šumma izbu qaqqad šērī zibbat šēlibi amūt Šarru-kīn ša māta ibēlu*

If an *izbu* has the head of a serpent (and) the tail of a fox, (it is) the omen of Sargon who ruled the land.

*šumma šaḫītu šērri ūlid mātu ana dannati ippāḫur*

If a sow gives birth to a serpent, the country will gather into the fortress.

Three of the remaining omens (*1:16, 17:55’, 18:76’*) portend social change.

*šumma sinništu šerra ūlid būt amēli issappaḫ / var. ittarrek*

If a woman gives birth to a serpent, the house of the man will scatter/ var. be punished.

*šumma izbu kīma šēri kaš[ir] māta ūtassar*

If an *izbu* is coiled up like a serpent, the land will lay in chains.

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If a fish gives birth to a serpent, the king will take away the home of those who are under his direct power.

Regarding the final two omens, 17:54’ seems to be an outlier because its apodosis does not correspond with either an increase in power or social change, while 19:37’ is incomplete.

If an izbu is covered with [scales] like a fish or [a serpent], (there will be) anger of the god Sin: the man has many epqa injuries.

If a cow gives birth and (the newborn) has the likeness of a snake, the city [. . .]

De Zorzi’s analysis of the snake omens in the Šumma Izbu links them all through aggression:

The birth of a serpent from the woman (1:16), from a goat (18:76’), and from a sow (22:77) indicate aggressiveness on the part of an external agent: the king in 18:76’ and the implied enemy in 22:77. In the 5:11= 67, 7:27, and 12:38, the aggressiveness is that of a ruler in battle because the characteristic concerns the head or the face of the izbu. The 2:6 connects a baby born with the head of a serpent and Ningišzida, a god of the underworld associated with the mušḫuššu dragon and the bašmu serpent (a mythological association). The citation of Gilgamesh in the second part of the apodosis is explained in light of his connection with Ningišzida as judge of the underworld.

The link between serpents and aggression in these omens is unsurprising given the hostile and dangerous nature of many snakes. The aggression of snakes is also noted in the Greek and Roman traditions: Herakles famously defeats the seven-headed hydra as the first of his twelve

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61 de Zorzi 2014, 164.
labors, and in Roman times, Pliny remarks that the snake is the most hostile of animals. The Greek hero Philoctetes was slain by a snakebite, and the medical traditions of Babylonia, Egypt, and Rome all include extensive sections on the treatment of snakebites.

Studies on Roman omens focus primarily on public omens, that is, those which concern the Roman state and were therefore recorded for posterity on the *Annales maximi*. It seems, however, that the omens and prodigies in Roman literature do not derive directly from this list; instead, the prodigies contained in the primary sources originate from earlier historians. The bulk of the public omens during the republic are found in Livy and Julius Obsequens, whose *Liber prodigiorum* seems to use Livy as its main source. As Susanne William Rasmussen notes, this somewhat compensates for the lost books of Livy. Together Obsequens and Livy provide a representative number of public omens during the republic. Public omens continued to hold importance in the empire, especially as a means for the gods to communicate to the masses who would become the next emperor, or when his demise would occur.

The snake omens in Roman literature, however, occur in both public and private contexts, and for that reason both must be considered. Many private omens—those which concern private citizens or individuals—circulated as popular anecdotes throughout Roman history and thus continuously reappear in the literary record. While these omens are not considered as “historical” as public omens, essentially because they were not officially recorded by the state, they provide essential descriptions of serpent omens and their interpretations. A small subset of private omens

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62 Seven-headed serpents are also present in Babylonian literature. *Šumma Alu* 23:91.
63 *HN* 10.207.
64 *Il.* 2.716-725; Soph. *Phil.* 266-267, 632.
66 MacBain 1982, 7-24
68 Rasmussen 2003, 18.
69 Potter 1994, 146-182.
should be classified as “literary” or “mythological.” There are several instances in which an omen is clearly inserted into the text for a specific literary effect—such as foreshadowing—or because of an established mythological tradition. Although these omens are certainly not historical, like other private omens, their descriptions are valuable because they may provide insight into a traditional belief in omens.

Omens appear in the earliest texts of Latin literature, and it is notable that snake omens are included among these, which perhaps attests to their antiquity and importance to the Romans. The first appears in Plautus, the first author of Latin literature with extant works. His comedies, like much of early Latin literature, incorporate Greek elements.\(^7\) It is not surprising, therefore, that the first snake omen recorded in Latin is borrowed from Greek mythology. Plautus recounts perhaps the most famous snake omen of classical antiquity, the birth of Herakles:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{BROM.} & \quad \text{magis iam faxo mira dices. postquam in cunas conditust, devolant angues iubati deorsum in impluvium duo maximii: continuo extollunt ambo capita.} \\
\text{AMPH.} & \quad \text{ei mihi.} \\
\text{BROM.} & \quad \text{ne pave. sed angues oculis omnis circumvisere. postquam pueros conspicati, pergunt ad cunas citi. ego cunas recessim rursum vorsum trahere et ducere, metuens pueris, mihi formidans; tantoque angues acrius persequi. postquam conspexit angues ille alter puer, citus e cunis exilit, facit recta in anguis impetum: alterum altera prehendit eos manu perniciter.} \\
\text{AMPH.} & \quad \text{mira memoras, nimis formidolosum facinus praedicas; nam mihi horror membra misero percipit dictis tuis. quid fit deinde? porro loquere.} \\
\text{BROM.} & \quad \text{puer ambo angues enicat. dum haec aguntur, voce clara exclamat uxor tuam—} \\
\text{AMPH.} & \quad \text{quis homo?} \\
\text{BROM.} & \quad \text{summus imperator divom atque hominum Iuppiter. is se dixit cum Alcumena clam consuetum cubitis, emoque filium suum esse qui illos angues vicerit; alterum tuum esse dixit puerum.}\(^7\)
\end{align*}
\]

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\(^7\) Kenney and Clausen 1982, 53-59.

\(^7\) *Amph.* 1107-1124.
Now I think you will find this more miraculous. After they were placed in their cradles, two extremely large crested snakes fell into the impluvium. Immediately both of their heads rise up!

Don’t be afraid. But the snakes looked around at all of us with their eyes. After they saw the boys, they began to hasten to the cradles. I backed away, dragging and hauling the cradles back, fearing for the boys, and was afraid for myself. Then the snakes pursued all the more eagerly. After that other boy saw the snakes, he then leapt from his cradle, and promptly made an attack on the snakes. Then he swiftly grabbed them, one in one hand, another in the other hand.

You have told a wondrous thing; you have declared a very terrible thing. For terror seizes the limbs on miserable me from your words. What happened next? Speak on!

The boy strangles both snakes. While these things were being done, he calls your wife in a clear voice—

Which man?

Jupiter, the greatest ruler of both gods and men. He says he himself secretly lay in bed with Alcmena, and that it was his own son who conquered those snakes. He says that the other son is yours.

After Herakles is born, Hera (Juno in the Roman tradition) sends two great snakes to kill him out of jealousy. This omen consists of three parts: the initial appearance of the snakes, their behavior inside the house, and finally their demise at the hands of Herakles. These snakes fall through the conpluvium, the hole in the roof of the Roman household and into the impluvium, the large basin for collecting rainwater, which suggests that they fell from the sky. This is not the only occurrence of this kind of omen in Roman literature. Terence describes a similar omen, which is apparently negative enough to justify cancelling a wedding:

ant quam ob rem? aut quid dicet? rogas?
quot res postilla monstra evenerunt mihi: intro it in aedis ater alienus canis; anguis per impluvium decidit e tegulis; gallina cecinit; interdixit hariolus; haruspex vetuit; ante brumam autem novo negoti incipere?

72 Phorm. 704-710.
Antipho: But for what purpose? And what will he say?  

“Many portentous things happened to me afterwards:  
a strange black dog came inside, into the house;  
a snake fell through the impluvium from the roof;  
a hen crowed; a fortuneteller forbade it;  
a haruspex banned it; moreover, imagine starting some new business before the winter solstice!”

These omens are listed as normal excuses to cancel a wedding. The offhand manner in which they are stated might reflect the commonality of their use as excuses, but clearly reflects some reservations Romans had on their truthfulness. This makes it all the more interesting that similar omens in fact appear elsewhere in Latin literature. That the Romans believed chickens to be portentous is known from the story of Publius Claudius Pulcher, whose disregard for them in 249 BC resulted in disaster. A similar tale involves Gaius Flaminius. Another omen, when a hen changed into a rooster and a rooster changed into a hen, likewise brought misfortune. Dog omens also feature in Roman literature, but the most similar omen features a wolf: *lupus urbem ingressus in domo privata occisus*, “a wolf that entered the city was killed in a private house.”

One or more wolves coming into a city, or seen within it, was interpreted to be a bad omen. The strange dog coming into a house appears to be a scaled down private omen of this type. Both animals are ominous in Mesopotamian omen lore, and frequently the omens occur in succession, which suggests that Near Eastern seers considered dog omens to be similar to wolf omens.

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74 Cic. *De div*. 1.77. Other chicken omens: Livy *Per*. 55; Val. Max. 1.6.7; Obseq. 24.  
75 Livy 22.1.14-20.  
76 Livy 3.29.9; App. *B. Civ*. 4.4; Dio Cass. 40.17.1; 45.17.7; 47.40.3; Oros. 5.18.9; Obseq. 28, 31, 43, 50, 51, 52, 54, 63, 68.  
77 Obseq. 49.  
78 Livy 3.29.9; 27.37.3; 32.29.2; 33.26.9; 41.9.6; Dio Cass. 39.20.2; 40.17.1; Obseq. 13, 43, 52, 63. Other wolf omens: Cic. *De div*. 2.45; *Cat*. 3.19; Livy 21.46.2, 62.6; 22.1.12; Plut. *Vit. C. Gracch*. 11; App. *B Civ*. 1.24; 4.4; Dio Cass. 13 in Zon. 8.22.5; Dio Cass. 37.9.1-2; Oros. 5.18.9; Obseq. 27a, 28, 33, 61, 69.  
Terence’s description of the snake omen in his play is also curious. Technically, the snake should fall through the *conpluvium* and into the *impluvium*, not the other way around. Yet, *per impluvium* appears several times elsewhere in both Plautus and Terence, where it is certain to refer to the *conpluvium*, which suggests that the *impluvium* can refer to both features, perhaps because Romans considered the *conpluvium* to be a component of the *impluvium*.

Falling snakes also appear as prodigies in the Šumma Alu. In fact, there are upwards of forty-five omens based on falling snakes in this omen series alone. Consequently, the apodoses of these prodigies are quite wide-ranging. In the Roman tradition, falling snakes appear to be either good or bad portents: Hera / Juno sent the snakes to harm both Herakles and Amphitryon’s son in Plautus, but the snakes end up being part of an omen that portends Herakles’ greatness, while the falling snake in Terence is inserted as one of several negative omens often used as excuses to cancel engagements.

The gaze of the snakes is the second component of the omen in Plautus. A snake’s stare is portentous in Mesopotamia as well; Humbaba and Lamaštu have sight-based magic, and many snake omens in the Šumma Alu derive from the interpretation of a snake’s stare, just as Bromia states *sed angues oculis omnis circumvisere* to forshadow the snakes’ ill intention towards the infants in *Amphitruo*. The Medusa myth and a line in the Hippocratic corpus hint at a similar Greek tradition: ὅφις ἐξαίφνης ὀφθεῖς χλωρότητα ἐποίησεν, “a snake that was suddenly seen caused paleness.” Paleness is often equated with fear in Greek literature, which could reflect

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82 Graff 2014, 266.
84 *Hum.* 9.
85 *Il.* 7.479; *Od.* 11.43.
that the appearance or sight of snakes was a bad omen in Greece, but perhaps the author simply uses a snake as an example of a common fear that affected the humoral balance of the body. Wordplay—here between ὄφις, “fear” and ὄφθείς, the aorist passive participle of ὀράω, a verb of sight—is another common characteristic of Near Eastern omen lore. Also notable is that several omens in the Šumma Alu interpret the appearance of a snake inside a baby’s cradle. Similar omens appearing in the Roman tradition portend eminent people, and usually future emperors.

Herakles’ strangling of the snakes is evocative of the Near Eastern “master of animals” motif in which a hero or god holds a snake in each hand; in this motif, grasping snakes signifies dominance over nature. Herakles is exemplary because he has mastered the snakes in his infancy. It is important to note that in Plautus this occurrence is both a motif and an omen. In this version of the myth, Jupiter dissuades Amphitryon from calling upon the seer Tiresias to interpret the omen. This stands in marked contrast to the Greek version, first appearing in Pindar, which includes Tiresias’ interpretation of the portentous event:

| ὁ δὲ οἱ φράξε καὶ παντὶ στρατῷ, ποίαις ὀμιλήσει τύχαις, |
| ὃςσος μὲν ἐν χέρσῳ κτανὼν, |
| ὃςσος δὲ πόντῳ θῆρας ἰώροδίκας, |
| καὶ τινα σὺν πλαγίῳ |
| ἀνδρῶν κόρῳ στείχοντα τὸν ἐχθρότατον |
| φᾶσέ νυν δόσειν μόρον. |

Then [Tiresias] declares to him and to all the people, he will come into certain fortunes, after killing so many beasts on land, and as many savage beasts in the sea, then he said that one approaches with the treacherous insolence of men, a most hated one, and that he would cause his doom.

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87 Cic. De div. 1.79; cf. 2.66; Suet. Ner. 6.4; Tac. Ann. 11.11; Dio Cass. 61.2.1-4; cf. Hist. Aug. Aurel. 4.4.  
88 Burkert 1992, 87; West 1997, 460.  
89 Eur. HF. 1266-1268; Theoc. Id. 24.  
90 Plaut. Amph., 1131-1143.  
91 Nem. 1.33-72.  
92 Nem. 1.61-66.
Tiresias understands the actions of the infant Herakles to be indicative of his future heroic exploits; Herakles’ conquest over the snakes at a young age portends his future fame through martial feats. An interesting, albeit coincidental, correlation in the snake omens from Plautus and Pindar: the three serpent omens in the *Ampitruo* correspond to the three predictions in the *Nemean Odes*. The three snake omens—their entrance into the house, frightful stare, and ultimate demise—each indicate a future conquest of Herakles over beasts of the land, beasts of the sea, and a crucial victory in the Gigantomachy. Still, the snake omens in both Pindar and Plautus foretell the future eminence of Herakles and his violent deeds to come, as do the majority of snake omens in the *Šumma Izbu* (2:6, 4:55, 7:27, 12:38, 17:56’; possibly 5:11 = 5:67, 7:28, 22:77). De Zorzi’s observation also holds true: there is no doubt that the snakes are a manifestation of Hera / Juno’s aggression towards Herakles.

A later Roman tradition ascribes the conception of great people to serpents.93 The earliest instance of this tradition in the Roman literary record occurs in Livy, who states both Alexander the Great and Scipio Africanus were conceived by serpents.94 Gellius echoes Livy,95 while Quintilian and Dio Cassius reaffirm the tradition of Scipio’s birth.96 Pliny adds to this theme by stating that a snake watches over Scipio’s ghost.97 Apart from Livy and Gellius, only Plutarch gives an account of Alexander’s serpent-siring,98 although earlier literature hints at the tradition.99 Alexander believed himself to be the offspring of Zeus,100 who appeared as a serpent to make

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93 Ogden 2009.
94 Livy 26.19.4-8.
95 Gell. *NA* 6.1.1-5.
96 Quint. *Inst.* 2.4.18-19; Dio Cass. 16.57.39.
97 *HN* 16.235; cf. a tradition about Scipio’s descendant at Dio Cass. 17.57.63-64.
100 Strabo 17.43; Arr. *Anab.* 3.3.1-2; Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 27.5-11.
love with Persephone,\textsuperscript{101} and identified with Herakles, who likewise sired a serpent after he made love with Pyrene.\textsuperscript{102} Moreover, there was a tradition that the Argead house descended from Herakles.\textsuperscript{103} Suetonius and Dio Cassius both recount that Augustus was likewise sired by a serpent.\textsuperscript{104} The fables about the birth of Scipio and Augustus do not appear in the literary record prior to Livy. It seems, therefore, that Augustus created this serpent-siring story about himself in order to draw a comparison between himself and Alexander; he probably also invented the serpent-siring tale of Scipio in order to give his origin story a Roman precedent, and thus distance himself from Greek monarchic associations. In fact, Cicero wonders why the haruspices foretold the glory of Quintus Roscius Gallus, a mere actor, and not that of Scipio, indicating that this belief did not exist in his time.\textsuperscript{105} Although the omens of Augustus and Scipio appear to be political, there is still a correlation between snakes, birth, and eminence, as in the \textit{\textsuperscript{Ś}umma Izbu}.

A strong argument could be made that the tradition of prestigious Romans being born from serpents ultimately has its roots in mythology through the association of Zeus / Jupiter and serpents, as well as the myths in which he takes the form of a serpent to seduce Persephone. In all likelihood, the myth of Olympias’ conception from a serpent, and Alexander’s subsequent birth originated from these myths, since Alexander proclaimed he was the son of Zeus. An alternative is the myth of Herakles’ seduction of Pyrene, who gave birth to a serpent as a result of their union. That Herakles engendered a serpent and Alexander was sired by a serpent certainly substantiated both Alexander’s and the Argead dynasty’s claim as descendants of Herakles. Therefore, it seems that the Romans assimilated the story of Alexander’s birth.

\textsuperscript{101} Ov. \textit{Met.} 6.114; Nonnus, \textit{Dion.} 31.49-56.
\textsuperscript{102} Sil. \textit{Pun.} 3.415-441.
\textsuperscript{103} Arr. \textit{Anab.} 3.3.1-2.
\textsuperscript{104} Suet. \textit{Aug.} 94.4; Dio Cass. 45.1.1-5.
\textsuperscript{105} Cic. \textit{De div.} 2.66.
This correlation between Roman and Near Eastern omens appears in a series of omens centered on benevolent snake behavior. When a serpent behaves in a friendly or protective manner towards an individual, whether they are a child or an adult, the universal interpretation is positive for that individual. Moreover, all these benevolent snake omens are associated with eminence and glory. Almost all of these omens portend the future power or glory of the subject; only one reflects past glory. This subsection of omens first appears in Cicero:

quid? amores ac deliciae tuae, Roscius, num aut ipse aut pro eo Lanuvium totum mentiebatur? qui cum esset in cunabulis educeturque in Solonio, qui est campus agri Lanuvini, noctu lumine apposito experrecta nutrix animadvertit puerum dormientem circumacticum serpentis amplexu. quo aspectu exterrita clamorem sustulit. pater autem Rosci ad haruspices rettulit, qui responderunt nihil illo puero clarius, nihil nobilius fore.

What about your beloved and dear friend Roscius? Does he himself lie, or does all of Lanuvium lie for him? While he was in his earliest days and being raised in Solonium, which is a field of the Lanuvian district, his nurse woke up in the night and with a nearby light noticed the boy sleeping surrounded by the embrace of a serpent. She was terrified by such a sight and raised a loud cry. The father of Roscius then reported it to the haruspices, who responded that no one would be more renowned than that boy, and no one would be more celebrated.

This omen portends the future eminence of the aforementioned Quintus Roscius Gallus, who became a famous actor. Haruspices provide the interpretation of the omen, once again linking them to the reading of serpent omens. The omen of Roscius is especially interesting because it includes several different aspects that reappear in later omens: the subject of the omen is young and asleep at the time of the omen, someone sees the omen take place, and expert diviners interpret the omen and find that the appearance of the snake portends the future eminence of the subject, in this instance, as an actor. For example, an omen in Plutarch’s Life of Crassus incorporates several of these aspects to foretell the great fate of Spartacus:

107 De div. 1.79; cf. 2.66.
And they say that when he was first led to Rome to be sold, a serpent was seen coiled around his face while he was sleeping. His wife, who was from the same tribe as Spartacus and was both a seer and inspired by frenzies from Dionysus, declared it to be an omen of the great and formidable power that would follow him to a fortunate end.

There are several differences between this omen and the one about Roscius, such as the age of the subject and other details, but there are also many similarities. Spartacus, like Roscius, is asleep at the time of the omen. In each case the omen was observed, and experts provide an interpretation for the omen: the Etruscan haruspices for Roscius, and Spartacus’ wife, a μαντική, interprets his omen. In Pindar too, Tiresias declares the meaning of the prodigy. Both the Spartacus omen and the Roscius omen are explicit about the positive meaning of the omen as well, although Spartacus’ omen is more militaristic. The omen of Roscius, however, is the only omen of this type that does not portend the rise of a military leader. All of the others portend the rise of an emperor, or a prominent military leader like Spartacus. The Spartacus omen also includes a difference of description; Cicero states that *puerum dormientem circumplicatum serpentis amplexu*, “the boy was sleeping surrounded by the embrace of a serpent,” but Plutarch includes a further detail, that the serpent on Spartacus was coiled *τὸ πρόσωπον*, “around his face.” The *Historia Augusta* includes two omens in which a serpent wrapped itself around the head of future emperors while they were sleeping; these omens signified the future rule of both Septimius Severus, and Maximus, the son of Maximinus Thrax.

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108 Vit. Crass. 8.3.
109 Nem. 1.61-66.
110 Sev. 1.10.
111 Max. 30.1.
The similarity of these omens to Plutarch’s account of Spartacus suggests that the later composers of the *Historia Augusta* had read Plutarch and incorporated the omen into their text. This seems especially likely when the Spartacus omen is compared with the omen portending the rule of Maximus. Plut. *Vit. Crass.* 8.3: δράκοντα κοιμωμένω περιπελεγμένων φανήναι περὶ τὸ πρόσωπον; Hist. Aug. Max. 30.1: *serpens dormienti caput circumdedit.* Each of these passages begin with the same pattern. A serpent subject is the first word: δράκοντα is an accusative subject in indirect discourse, while *serpens* is nominative singular. In each case this is followed by a dative / ablative singular present participle for “sleeping.” Although the word order diverges from this point, notably both “wrapping” verbs appear in the perfect tense: περιπελεγμένων as an accusative singular perfect participle agreeing with δράκοντα, and *circumdedit* a perfect indicative active, agrees with *serpens*.

Another clearly related portent also appears in Plutarch’s *Life of Cleomenes*. This portent, however, does not occur on a living body; instead, after Cleomenes dies on a cross, a serpent coils around his head to protect him. This is a fundamental difference between this omen and the previous ones because all the previous omens portend the future eminence of the subject, while the omen of Cleomenes portends his past glory and importance to the gods.

A few days later, the people watching over the crucified body of Cleomenes saw that a well-grown serpent wound itself around his head and hid his face so that no flesh-eating bird could fly upon him. And from this, superstition and fear fell upon the king, and he allowed the beginning of other expiations for the women, since the nature of the man was accepted to be beloved of the gods and superior. Then the Alexandrians also began to turn to him in prayer and constantly go upon the spot. They addressed Cleomenes as a hero and a child of the gods, until the time that wiser men stopped them, and gave the reason that as when cows rot away and produce bees, and horses likewise produce wasps, and as beetles are produced in donkeys in the same condition, so too human bodies, when the juices around the marrow have some conflux and conflict in themselves, produce snakes. And when the ancients observed this, they associated the serpent with heroes, more than any other animal.

This portent contains many similarities to the earlier omens of snakes wrapping themselves around important people. Again, the subject of the omen is not conscious; although he is not sleeping, but dead. Furthermore, Plutarch ascribes a motive to the serpent. He states that it wraps itself around Cleomenes head ὡστε μηδὲν ὄρνεον ἐφίπτασθαι σαρκοφάγον, “so that no flesh-eating bird could fly upon him” and disfigure his corpse. A similar story from Demetrius of Magnesia, but surviving only in Diogenes Laertius, reports that Heraclides Ponticus attempted to fool people into believing that he was a hero and had changed into a serpent after his death by ordering an attendant to hide a snake on his funerary bier, which was seen slithering away during the funerary procession.¹¹³ Plutarch himself is skeptical of prodigies, and reports a scientific reason for the snakes appearing around Cleomenes head, that snakes arose from bone marrow. This was a common belief among the Romans. Ovid reports that sunt qui, cum clauso putrefacta est spina sepulcro, / mutari credant humanas angue medullas, “there are those who believe when the spine has putrefied in a closed tomb, the human marrow changes into a snake.”¹¹⁴ Pliny later echoes this belief.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Diog. Laert. 5.6.89-90.
¹¹⁴ Met. 389-390.
¹¹⁵ HN 10.188; cf. 11.197.
In this passage, Plutarch asserts that serpent omens are associated with heroes because ancient people witnessed them originating in human bodies, but he is the only author to voice this opinion. Serpents and serpent omens have a foreign nuance for other Roman authors;\textsuperscript{116} Tacitus describes the serpent omens in Nero’s life as \textit{fabulousa et externis miraculis adsimilata}, “a fabled thing also to be likened to foreign wonders.”\textsuperscript{117} He seems to be referring to the fact that the recipients of these omens are not Roman: Alexander was Macedonian, Spartacus was Thracian, and Cleomenes was Greek. It is also notable that the serpent omens in the \textit{Historia Augusta}—which were recorded after Tacitus’ time—occur with emperors from the edges of the Roman empire: Septimius Severus was a member of the Septimii, a Punic family, while both Maximus and Aurelian were from the Danube region.

At present there only seem to be a few parallel omens in Near Eastern omen literature.\textsuperscript{118} Unfortunately, all of these are damaged. The only surviving apodosis among these omens relates that the consequence for killing a snake that has coiled around a man’s foot is divine wrath.\textsuperscript{119} The following omen is clearly its counterpart, and describes the consequence of allowing a snake performing the same action to leave alive, but the apodosis is broken.\textsuperscript{120} If killing that snake granted divine wrath, letting it live could grant divine favor, exactly what is signaled in the Roman omens of the same type. This is, however, an interpolation that can only be accepted if more copies of \textit{Šumma Alu} 22 or fragments containing the omen are recovered. A more comparable omen is \textit{Šumma Alu} 22:49, which describes the consequences of a snake coiling around a man’s neck, but as before, the apodosis is missing.

\textsuperscript{116} Luc. 9.
\textsuperscript{117} Tac. \textit{Ann.} 11.11.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Šumma Alu} 22:46-49.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Šumma Alu} 22:47.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Šumma Alu} 22:48.
Regardless of their relationship with the east, it is nevertheless clear that serpents were strongly associated with guarding the household, as the serpent guards the corpse of Cleomenes against defilement. Similarly, serpents watched over Nero as a child.\textsuperscript{121} According to Suetonius, they saved him from assassination,\textsuperscript{122} while Dio Cassius states that the snake slough found in his cradle foretold that he would receive power from an old man.\textsuperscript{123} Another omen that appears in the Historia Augusta and portends the future rule of Aurelian also falls into this category: \textit{primum pueri eius pelvem serpentem plerumque cinxisse neque umquam occidi potuisse, postremo ipsam matrem, quae hoc viderat, serpentem quasi familiarem occidere noluisse}, “first, in his childhood, a serpent encircled his basin many times, and it was not able to be killed. At last, his mother, who had seen this, was not willing to kill the serpent as if it belonged to the household.”\textsuperscript{124} While it is unclear if the serpent was actively guarding Aurelian, his mother nevertheless seems to accept the serpent as part of the household. Both the Greeks and the Romans—notably the emperor Tiberius—kept snakes as pets, and Pliny mentions that the Egyptians did as well.\textsuperscript{125} The cult of Asclepius may have contained domestic snakes, and the incorporation of this cult into Rome is documented in the literary tradition.\textsuperscript{126}

The other manner in which serpents are guardians is through their association with the family \textit{genius}, a protective spirit of the Roman household. This aspect of serpent iconography is best characterized in the frescos of Pompeii, where the snakes frequently appear as the \textit{genius} of the Roman household, alongside the \textit{lares}.\textsuperscript{127} The serpent’s identification as \textit{genius} of the Roman

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\textsuperscript{121} Tac. \textit{Ann.} 11.11.  \\
\textsuperscript{122} Suet. \textit{Ner.} 6.4.  \\
\textsuperscript{123} Dio Cass. 61.2.1-4.  \\
\textsuperscript{124} Aurel. 4.4.  \\
\textsuperscript{125} Suet. \textit{Tib.} 72.2; Plin. \textit{HN} 10.208. See also Lazenby 1949, 248-249;  \\
\textsuperscript{126} Livy \textit{Per.} 11; Val. Max. 1.8.2; Oros. 3.22.4-5.  \\
\textsuperscript{127} Small 2007, 189-193.
\end{flushleft}
household is also evident in the literary tradition. Virgil records a prominent example in an episode about the death of Aeneas’ father, Anchises. During the funeral, the Trojans perform many funerary sacrifices and libations. The spirit of Anchises then appears as a large snake:

He said these things, then a slippery snake from the lowest part of the shrine with seven giant coils, dragged seven rolls, peacefully circled the burial mound and slithered through the altars. Blue marks were on its backs, it was spotted, and lightning was illuminating its scales in gold, as a rainbow in the clouds shoots a thousand various colors to meet the sun.

Aeneas was astounded by the sight. With a long movement, that serpent was finally among the libation dishes and polished cups and tasted the sacrificial feast; then the harmless serpent went back underneath the deepest burial mound, and left the food on the altars. Then he renews the begun honors for his father to a greater degree, he is uncertain and wonders whether it is the genius of the place or an attendant of his father . . .

Aeneas is uncertain about the identification of the snake, but he deduces that it is either the genius or an attendant spirit of his father, which explains its benevolent behavior. The snake itself is characterized as innoxius and the manner it moves as placide; furthermore, it originates from the burial mound of Anchises. This passage in Virgil appears to be an earlier instance of the

\[128\] Aen. 5.84-96.
tradition attested in the Pompeian frescos. According to Snakes are also common in the
iconography of Etruscan tombs. Whatever the snake embodies in this passage, it is clearly
associated with Aeneas’ deceased father, and thus eats the funerary sacrifices offered.

The *Summa Alu* also has omens connecting serpents with food offerings. K.743 (CT 40
21) 1-2 and 5-6, as well as SU 51/49+ (STT 321-322) iii 27' indicate that snakes seen inside a
temple signify the presence of food offerings, while iv 10 from the same tablet states that if a
snake dies in a temple, the food offering will be increased, perhaps because the snake is not
eating or taking any part of the offering. This correlation is also present in Greek iconographical
evidence. There is a clear link between the Greek motif of a serpent drinking from cups and hero
worship, which Gina Salapata argues spread throughout the Hellenistic period and into Rome.

The presence of this association in the material and literary records of all these civilizations
presents this religious idea as a possible import into Greece and later Rome from the Near East.

This motif reappears in a set of omens that focus on snakes eating either animals or
consulted entrails. Aside from a cryptic anecdote in Propertius, Livy reports the first Roman
omen of this type, which appeared to Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, a proconsul in 212 BC:

Graccho, priusquam ex Lucanis moveret, sacrificanti triste prodigium factum est: ad exta
sacrificio perpetrato angues duo ex occulto adlapsi adedere iocur conspectique repente ex
oculis abierunt. ideo cum haruspicum monitu sacrificium instauraretur atque intentius
exta reservarentur, iterum ac tertium tradunt adlapsos libatoque iocinere intactos angues
abisse. cum haruspices ad imperatorem id pertinere prodigium praemonuissent et ab
occultis cavendum hominis consultisque, nulla tamen providentia fatum imminens
moveri potuit.

130 Hostetler 2007.
131 The previous omen, iii 9', however, states that the food offering will be cut off if a snake dies in a temple.
132 Salapata 2006.
133 Prop. 4.8.1-14.
134 Livy 25.16.1-5.
Before he moved away from Lucania, an unfavorable portent occurred for Gracchus while he was sacrificing. After he completed the sacrifice for the entrails, two snakes came from a hidden place to eat the liver, and when they were seen, they suddenly went out of sight. Therefore, after the sacrifice was renewed on the admonition of the haruspices, and the entrails were kept more intently, they report that the snakes came again and for a third time they went away unhurt after the liver was tasted. Although the haruspices had warned that that portent applied to the commander and that he must be on guard from concealed men and from hidden plans, nevertheless, no foreknowledge was able to avert imminent fate.

Although Gracchus is not performing a funerary sacrifice, and neither Livy nor Valerius Maximus, who later recount this prodigy, mention an altar, it is comparable to the omen in the Aeneid. A perfect form of *libo*, “to sample or taste,” appended with –*que* accounts for the actions of the snakes in both passages. This type of omen likely arose from a Greek tradition: Apuleius later recounts that interpreting the food eaten by serpents was significant in Greek divination, such as in Homeric epic, where Calchas infers the number of years the Trojan war will rage by the number of eggs eaten by a serpent, which had slithered out from underneath an altar. That a comparable omen appears to Tarquinius Superbus, and is interpreted by the Pythian oracle at Delphi, adds credibility to the Greek origin of—or specialization in—this type of omen.

A more famous snake omen occurs to Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus’ famous great nephew of the same name, the tribune of the plebs who introduced divisive agrarian laws in 133 BC. As with other omens, the first account appears in Cicero’s discussion of divination:

> *quid? Ti. Gracchus P. F., qui bis consul et censor fuit, idemque et summus augur et vir sapiens civisque praestans, nonne, ut C. Gracchus, filius eius, scriptum reliquit, duobus anguibus domi comprehensis haruspices convocavit? qui cum respondissent, si marem emisisset, uxori brevi tempore esse moriendum, si feminam, ipsi; aequius esse censuit se maturam oppetere mortem quam P. Africani filiam adulescentem; feminam emisit, ipse paucis post diebus est mortuus.*

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135 Val. Max. 1.6.8.
137 *Il.* 2.299-329; *Cic. De div.* 2.63; *Ov. Met.* 12.4-23.
139 *De div.* 1.36.
What about Tiberius Gracchus, the son of Publius, who was consul twice and the same as censor, and was a most distinguished augur, a wise man, and an eminent citizen, did he not, as Gaius Gracchus, his son, left in writing, call together the haruspices when two snakes were caught at home? After they responded that if the male one was freed, it was destined that the wife would die in a short time, and if the female was freed, it was destined that he would die, he resolved that it was more just for an early death to meet him than the young daughter of Publius Africanus, and he set free the female one. He himself died after a few days.

Valerius Maximus and Pliny record what Cicero leaves unsaid in this passage: the snake that was not freed was killed;\textsuperscript{140} thus the status of the snakes, whether they are left alive and unharmed or are killed, is again portentous.\textsuperscript{141} Likewise, the haruspices interpret this snake omen, and, as in Plautus and several later omens, this portent has two snakes.\textsuperscript{142} Cicero later refutes the validity of this omen in the second book of this work, thus providing more details on the omen:

C. Gracchus ad M. Pomponium scripsit duobus anguibus domi comprehensis haruspices a patre convocatos. qui magis anguibus quam lacertis, quam muribus? quia sunt haec cotidiana, angues non item. quasi vero referat, quod fieri potest, quam id saepe fiat. ego tamen miror, si emissio feminae anguis mortem afferebat Ti. Graccho, emissio autem maris anguis erat mortifera Corneliae, cur alteram utram emiserit? nihil enim scribit respondisse haruspices, si neuter anguis emissus esset, quid esset futurum. at mors insecuta Gracchum est. causa quidem, credo, aliqua morbi gravioris, non emissione serpentis; neque enim tanta est infelicitas haruspicum, ut ne casu quidem umquam fiat, quod futurum illi esse dixerint.\textsuperscript{143}

“Gaius Gracchus wrote to Marcus Pomponius that when two snakes were caught at home, the haruspices were called together by his father.” Why about snakes rather than about lizards or about mice? “Since these things are daily, and snakes are not like that.” As if it truly matters that something is able to happen in comparison with something that happens often. Nevertheless, I wonder, if the release of the female snake brought death to Tiberius Gracchus, but the release of the male snake was deadly to Cornelia, why would he release either one of the two? He certainly did not write that the haruspices gave a response about what would happen if neither snake was released. “Moreover, death overtook Gracchus.” Indeed, I believe it was from a condition, from some kind of more severe illness, not from the release of a serpent, and the misfortune of the haruspices is certainly not so great that something never happens, not even by chance, which they said would happen to him.

\textsuperscript{140} Val. Max. 4.6.1; Plin. \textit{HN} 7.122.
\textsuperscript{141} Livy 25.16.1-5; Hist. Aug. Sev. 1.10; Hist. Aug. \textit{Aurel}. 4.4; Obseq. 58; cf. Plaut. \textit{Amph}. 1107-1124; Dio Cass. 50.8; Obseq. 42.
\textsuperscript{142} Plaut. \textit{Amph}. 1107-1124; Livy 28.11.1-7 (cf. Dio Cass. 17.57.59-60); Obseq. 28a, 58.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{De div.} 2.62.
Although Cicero has various arguments as to why the omen could be false, he ultimately has to concede that the haruspices do interpret prodigies correctly some of the time. That he closes out his discussion of this omen with that concession suggests that this omen was widespread and famous in antiquity. This omen likely served as a standard proof for the accuracy of Roman and Etruscan divination in antiquity, which also accounts for why it is included in Cicero. The traditional interpretation of the omen reveals its distinct Roman character, which perhaps accounts for its popularity among classical authors. In this interpretation, the male snake is taken to be the *genius* of the household, the protective spirit of Tiberius Gracchus himself as the *paterfamilias* of the household, while the female serpent corresponds with the *iuno*, the protective spirit of his wife, Cornelia.\(^{144}\) After Gracchus killed the snake representing his own protective spirit, he died, while Cornelia remained alive because the snake corresponding to her *iuno* was allowed to go free. In later times, the *genius* was depicted in the frescoes of Pompeii as a bearded serpent, while the *iuno* was a beardless one.\(^{145}\) Bearded serpents also appear in Etruscan tombs; they notably feature in the Tomb of the Blue Demons, as well as the Tomb of Orcus II, in which the demon Tuchulcha holds them in his hands.\(^{146}\) Similar imagery appears on the sarcophagus of Ramtha Viśnai, which features a female demon holding snakes. The bearded serpents in the Tomb of the Blue Demons and the Tomb of Orcus II are doubtless features of the Etruscan underworld, like the other iconography in these tombs. Perhaps their blue coloration suggests that they are the deceased *genii* of Etruscan households.

At the beginning of his rule, Augustus created the *genius Augusti*, which effectively linked the citizens to their emperor’s spirit and subsequently became an important aspect in

\(^{144}\) Wardle 2006, 200.
\(^{145}\) A clear example is in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, inv. 8905.
\(^{146}\) See also Pieraccini 2016.
ruler-cult. This cult may provide an explanation for the serpent omens of the empire: Nero and Aurelian seem to be protected by snakes, which could indicate that the spirit of Augustus—the very spirit of the empire itself—approves of their rule. If the serpents that wrapped themselves around Severus and Maximus while they were sleeping are identified as agents or embodiments of the genius Augusti, then perhaps the action of the snakes indicates the bequest of the genius Augusti, and therefore the empire, to them. Suetonius reports that when Tiberius considered returning to Rome from his retirement in Capri, he saw a portent that deterred him: erat ei in oblectamentis serpens draco, quem ex consuetudine manu sua cibaturus cum consumptum a formicis invenisset, monitus est ut vim multitudinis caveret, “there was a slithering serpent among his amusements, he was about to feed it from his own hand as was the custom, when he discovered that it was devoured by ants. He was warned to be wary of the power of the masses.” This omen seems to indicate Tiberius’ loss of the genius Augusti through the death of his pet serpent. The genius Augusti served to connect the ruler with the common people; thus its destruction would indicate this connection was lost, and result in suspicion and perhaps revolt.

Snake omens in the context of tombs appear to be a purely classical occurrence. Tablet 16 of the Šumma Alu contains at least ninety-six omens about the construction of tombs, none of which mention snakes. Likewise, there does not seem to be a Near Eastern counterpart for the genius or the iuno as a serpent. The nearest comparison appears to be the Egyptian uraeus, a raised cobra head that symbolized the power of the Pharaoh. A first millennium Egyptian bracelet from Sais depicts a child-deity flanked on both sides by protective uraeus serpents,

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147 Suet. Ner. 6.4; Tac. Ann. 11.11; Dio Cass. 61.2.1-4; Hist. Aug. Aurel. 4.4.
148 Hist. Aug. Sev. 1.10; Max. 30.1.
149 Tib. 72.2.
150 Johnson 1990.
which represent Upper and Lower Egypt.\textsuperscript{151} There is also evidence that the Romans adapted the uraeus into their own iconography in imperial times, alongside other Egyptian motifs.\textsuperscript{152}

In contrast to tombs, the appearance of snakes in temples is more ominous in the Near Eastern omen tradition than in Roman literature. There are fifty-nine omens of this type in Sally M. Freedman’s published work on the Šumma Alu alone.\textsuperscript{153} In sharp contrast, four snake omens in Roman literature occur in temples, and of these, only three are unique.\textsuperscript{154} The earliest omen of this type occurs in Livy; according to him, it occurred in the 206 BC: Satricanos haud minus terrebant in aedem Iovis foribus ipsis duo perlapsi angues, “two snakes that glided into the temple of Jove through the very doors were not less terrifying to the Satricans.”\textsuperscript{155} Dio Cassius later repeats this omen; although he does not include any details about the people of Satricum, the similarity of the passage suggests that Livy was his source: κατά τε τῶν θυρῶν τοῦ ναοῦ τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Καπιτολίου ὀφεῖς δύο κατώλισθον, “two snakes slipped under the doors of the temple of Capitoline Jupiter.”\textsuperscript{156} The syntax is not comparable in these two passages, but if Satricanos haud minus terrebant is taken out of consideration, the passage in Dio Cassius nevertheless reads as a simple translation of Livy. Just as the two snakes inside the temple of Jove are a bad omen for the people of Satricum, the two snakes that enter a temple, as recorded in Obsequens, are also considered a negative omen: angues duo nigri in cella Minervae allapsi civilem caedem portenderunt, “two black snakes that glided into the cella of Minerva portended civilian

\textsuperscript{151} The British Museum, EA 14595; commentary in Mazar 2014, 177-178.
\textsuperscript{152} Hardwick 2009; See also Roullet 1972.
\textsuperscript{153} K5642 (CT 40 25): r. 5', r. 6'-7', r. 8'-9', r. 10', r. 11', r. 12', r. 13', r. 14'; K.10668 (CT 4025): 6, 7, 8, 9, 10; K.6294 (CT 40 24): 6; BM 78960: r. 15'-16'; K.1908 (CT 4023): r. 7; CBS 4799 (JCS 31 pl.220-221): r. 22'; K.743 (CT 40 21): 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, r. 1-2; SU 51/49+ (STT 321-322): iii 27', iii 28', iii 29', iii 30', iv 9, iv 10, iv 11; VAT 10116 and 10145 (KAR 384-385): 8', 10', 13', 14', r. 1, r. 2, r. 3, r. 11; W22310 (Hunger SBTU 1 75): 6', 7', 8', 9', 10', 11', 12', 13', 14', 15', 16', 17', 18', 19'; Sm.909 (CT 41 5): 2', 3', 4', 5', 6', 7', 8', 9', 10'.
\textsuperscript{154} Livy 28.11.2-3 = Dio Cass. 17.57.60; Obseq. 28a. See 21 above for Dio Cass. 45.1.1-5.
\textsuperscript{155} Livy 28.11.2-3.
\textsuperscript{156} Dio Cass. 17.57.60.
None of the Near Eastern omens correspond exactly to these apodoses; K.10668 (CT 4025) 7 and 8 report what snakes at the entry of a temple signify, but the apodoses of these omens are lost. K5642 (CT 40 25) r. 10’ is also similar, but portends an impurity entering into the temple as opposed to the civilian slaughter in Obsequens and seemingly implied in Livy and Dio Cassius.

Periods of great strife and violence in Roman history produce the most omens. The largest collection of omens attributed to a single year—of those included in the Liber prodigiorum of Obsequens—is for 44 BC, which marks the assassination of Julius Caesar. This entry also reports that an overflow of the Po revealed a mass of snakes, which foretold the end of the republic. Likewise, several authors recount that a snake omen marked the fall of the Roman monarchy and the foundation of the republic under Brutus. Livy’s account is the earliest of these:

haec agenti portentum terribile visum: anguis ex columna lignea elapsus cum terrem fugamque in regia fecisset, ipsius regis non tam subito pavore percult pectus, quam anxiis implevit curis. itaque cum ad publica prodigia Etrusci tantum vates adhiberentur, hoc velut domestico exterritus visu Delphos ad maxime inclitum in terris oraculum mittere statuit; neque responsa sortium uti alii committere ausus duos filios per ignotas ea tempestate terras, ignotiora maria in Graeciam misit. Titus et Arruns profecti. comes iis additus L. Iunius Brutus Tarquinia sorore regis natus, iuvenis longe alius ingenii, quam cuius simulationem induerat. is cum primores civitatis, in quibus fratrem suum, ab avunculo interfectum audisset, neque in animo suo quicquam regi timendo neque in fortuna concupiscendum relinquire statuit, contemptuque tutus esse ubi in iure parum praesidiis esse. ergo ex industria factus ad imitationem stultitiae, cum se suaque praedae esse regi sineret, Bruti quoque hauit abnuit cognomen; ut sub eius obtentu cognominis liberator ille populi Romani animus latens opperiretur tempora sua. is tum ab Tarquiniiis ducibus Delphos, ludibrium verius quam comes, aureum baculum includum corneo cavato ad id baculo tulisse donum Apollini dicitur, per ambages efficiem ingenii sui. quo postquam ventum est, perfectis patris mandatis cupidis incessit animos iuvenum sciscitandi, ad quem eorum regnum Romanum esset venturum. ex infimo specu vocem redditam ferunt, “imperium summum Romae habebit, qui vestrum primus, o iuvenes, osculum matris tulerit.” Tarquinii, ut Sextus, qui Romae relictus fuerat, ignorans responsi expersque imperii esset, rem summam ope taceri iubet; ipsi inter se eter prior, cum Romam redisset, matri osculum dare, sorti permittunt. Brutus aliis ratus spectare Pythicam vocem velut si prolapsus cecidisset terram osculo contigit, scilicet quod ea communis mater omnium mortalium esset.

157 Obseq. 28a.
158 Obseq. 68; Dio Cass. 45.17.7.
159 Livy 1.56.4-13; cf. Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 4.63.1-3, 68.1-69.4, which is earlier, but does not mention the snake.
For the one doing these things, a terrible portent appeared: a snake glided out from a wooden column and then caused terror and flight in the palace, but the heart of the king himself was not unnerved as much by sudden trembling than filled with anxious concerns. Therefore, since the Etruscan seers were employed only for public portents, and because he was frightened by this domestic appearance, he decided to send word to the most famous oracle in the lands, to Delphi; he did not dare to entrust the responses of prophecies to any others, he sent his two sons through unknown lands, through strange seas, to Greece at this time. Titus and Arruns departed. Lucius Junius Brutus, born from Tarquinia, the sister of the king, joined as a companion for them. He assumed a pretense of far more youthful character than the others. After he heard that the most distinguished men of the state, among whom his brother, had been put to death by his uncle, he decided to abandon not only anything in his spirit that caused fear for the king, but also anything he desired in fortune, and he was safe in contempt when there was not enough protection in law. Thus, he intentionally performed in an imitation of foolishness, since he allowed himself and his things of gain to be the king’s; he also did not refuse the cognomen Brutus, so under the excuse of his cognomen, this liberator of the Roman people awaited his times as a hidden spirit. He was then led to Delphi by the Tarquinii, more truthfully as a laughing-stock than as a companion; he is said to have carried a golden staff enclosed by a hollow cornel-wood staff on it as a gift for Apollo, it was an image of his character in an obscure way. After he came to that place, when they completed the orders of their father, a desire to ask about which of them would come into the kingship of the Romans came over the spirits of the young men. They say that a voice from the lowest cavern recited “he will hold the greatest power of Rome, O young men, who first will have brought your kiss to their mother.” The Tarquinii, since Sextus, who had been left at Rome, was ignorant of the response and deprived of power, ordered the affair to be kept secret on the greatest authority; they themselves first decided by lot who among them would be first, when they returned to Rome, to give a kiss to their mother. Brutus believed that the Pythian utterance was observed in another way, as if he slipped and fell, he touched the earth with a kiss, of course because she is the common mother of all mortals.

The sudden appearance of the snake creeping out of the pillar is interpreted as a bad omen, but Livy specifies that it is the members of the palace who are distraught. This is due to the fact that the snake is a private omen pertaining to Tarquinius Superbus and the royal family, not the entire Roman state. In contrast to previous omens, Livy indicates that another group of Etruscan seers are responsible for the interpretation of public omens, the vates. Nevertheless, a public omen of this type is stated to be the specialization of Etruscan seers. The most interesting aspect of this omen is that it links the appearance of the snake with the end of the monarchy and the beginning of the republic under the power of Brutus. Thus, as in the Šumma Izbu, a snake omen portends the rise of
a ruler, as well as social change. Each of these aspects is present in the shift from monarchy to republic. Other accounts, such as an epitome of the second book of Dio Cassius, preserved in Zonar. Also preserve this aspect, albeit with a different type of snake omen:

While [Tarquinius Superbus] was feasting with his friends in it, a great snake appeared and drove both him and his messmates out of the andron. Because of these things, he sent his sons Titus and Arruns to Delphi. But then Apollo proclaimed that he would fall from power when a dog proclaimed with a human voice, and he was raised by good hopes, since he did not believe that the portent would ever happen. Lucius Junius was a son of Tarquinius’ sister, but Tarquinius killed his father and his brother. This man consequently also feared for himself and feigned foolishness, putting forward this protection for himself. Therefore, he was called Brutus, because it was a custom for the Latins to call foolish men thus. He consequently fabricates his foolishness and was brought along as a plaything for the sons of Tarquinius when they departed to Delphi. He said he was bringing a votive offering to the god, but it was a staff, not serviceable at all from its appearance, and that account, he brought more laughter on himself. The representation also had the same sort of deception as him, because he had secretly hollowed it out and poured in gold, he demonstrated through it that his own dishonorable mind of foolishness also concealed a sound and honorable one. Then the sons of Tarquinius asked who would receive the kingship of their father, and the god proclaimed that the first to kiss their mother would take power. Brutus understood, so he accidentally fell down and kissed the earth, rightly estimating her to be the mother of all.

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161 Summa Izbu 1:16; 17:55'; 18:76'. See also S. C. Smith 2007 on the Brutus omen.
162 Zonar. 7.11.
Zonarus’ account reads as a summary of Livy, which in turn incorporated the bulk of its material from Dionysus of Halicarnassus. Notably, both Livy and Zonarus utilize indirect discourse in the same passage: *tulisse donum Apollini dicitur*, is the same construction as ἀνάθημα φέρειν ἔλεγε τῷ θεῷ, despite the difference in word order. Furthermore, the use of *scilicet* and ὡς mirror one another later in these passages. The most significant difference between the passages is the snake omen: Livy recounts that a snake slithered out of a wooden pillar, while Zonarus states that a giant snake chased Superbus and his guests out of the *andron* while they were feasting. This omen is clearly analogical: just as Superbus is driven out of his *andron*, so too will he be driven out of his kingship. Zonarus, however, provides another detail: Superbus will lose power when a dog speaks with a human voice. This seems to indicate yet another tradition about the fall of Superbus and the beginning of the republic, one referenced in Pliny: *canem locutum in prodigiis, quod equidem adnotaverim, accepimus et serpentem latrasse cum pulsus est regno Tarquinius*, “I have certainly noted that a dog spoke in prodigies; we also accept that a serpent barked when Tarquinius was driven away from kingship.”

Again, a serpent omen marks the transition of the monarchy to the republic. Pliny’s account, however, could be a misunderstanding of these traditions. He was aware that a snake omen and a dog omen occurred during the transition to the republic, and combined the omens so that the omens of a snake appearing and a dog speaking became a new omen, that of a serpent barking. The omen of a snake barking markedly does not exist in literature outside of Pliny.

A final, abbreviated account of this omen occurs in Ovid. This account incorporates many of the same aspects as both Livy and Zonarus, and seems to draw on the antecedent narrative of Dionysus of Halicarnassus. Again, the most important alteration is the snake omen itself, which is significantly different from the aforementioned accounts:

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Behold, a dreadful sight, a snake goes out from the middle of the altars and snatches the entrails from the extinguishing flames. Phoebus is consulted: a prophecy was thus recited: “the first one who will have given a kiss to his mother will be the victor.” Everyone hastened to their mother to bring kisses to their mother, since the credulous crowd did not understand the god. Brutus was wise and an imitator of a fool, so that he was safe from your treachery, cruel Superbus; that man leaned forward falling, he gave a kiss to mother earth, he was believed to have fallen from a stumbling foot.

As before, the interpretation of the snake omen is negative, and foretells the end of Superbus’ rule. Both the summary of the event and Brutus’ behavior are clearly drawn from Dionysus of Halicarnassus, however, the details of the snake omen are significantly different than in the previously examined accounts. This snake snatches the entrails in a manner reminiscent of the tippling serpent motif, the funeral of Anchises, and the omen of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus (the proconsul, not the famous tribune of the plebs). This omen is also comparable to the omen in Zonarus, where the serpent attacks Superbus and his companions while they are dining: in each instance, the snake is associated with food. Other differences are that the snake appears between

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164 Fast. 2.711-720.
165 Salapata 2006.
166 Aen. 5.84-96.
167 Livy 25.16.1-5; Val. Max. 1.6.8.
altars in Ovid, instead of from a wooden pillar in Livy, and that the successor of Superbus is called a victor, a conqueror.

While there is a strong Roman tradition of snake omens appearing near altars, there does not seem to be an equivalent Near Eastern tradition. The Šumma Alu does not feature any omens of snakes associated with altars, but the apodoses of the Šumma Izbu snake omens correlate well with the apodoses of these Roman omens, in that they portend the rise of a powerful ruler and a social change. In Roman literature, when snakes appear near altars, they portend violence, with a single exception: the aforementioned serpent in the Aeneid, which had funerary implications.  

The omen in the Fasti foretold the fall of the monarchy and the transition to the republic under Brutus’ leadership.  

Obsequens reports that Trebulae Mutuscae ante quam ludi committerentur, canente tibicine angues nigri aram circumdederunt, desinente cantare dilapsi. postero die exorti a populo lapidibus enecati, “before the games were initiated at Trebula Mutusca, while a flute-player was playing, black snakes surrounded the altar, they vanished when the playing ceased. When they appeared on the following day, they were killed off by the people with stones.”  

This omen, among others, is followed by a statement about the slaughter of a Roman army, which suggests some causality between the omen and the event. Since Obsequens does not specify which omen is linked to the slaughter, the meaning of the omen remains speculative. Granius Licinianus reports that these snakes attacked the bystanders in his fragmented text. While their aggression resonates with de Zorzi’s observation on the Šumma Izbu snake omens, the omen is again not interpreted.

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168 Aen. 5.84-96.  
169 Ov. Fast. 2.711-720.  
170 Obseq. 42.  
171 Gran. Lic. 33.21.  
172 de Zorzi 2014, 164.
Cicero also records that an omen of this type happened to Sulla before he became dictator of Rome: *cum ille in agro Nolano immolaret ante praetorium, ab infima ara subito anguis emergeret, cum quidem C. Postumius haruspex oraret illum ut in expeditionem exercitum educeret.*

_ id cum Sulla fecisset, tum ante oppidum Nolam fortissima Samnitium castra cepit_, “when [Sulla] was sacrificing before his headquarters in the land of Nola, a snake suddenly emerged from the bottom of the altar. Indeed, then Gaius Postumius the haruspex begged him to bring his army out to the offensive. When Sulla did this, he then captured a very eminent fortress of Samnites in front of the city of Nola.”\(^{173}\)

As before, when the snake came out from underneath the altar, a haruspex interprets the omen. Haruspices’ association with snake omens has been stressed earlier. Like the previous omens, this one foretells his martial exploits. Indeed, when Valerius Maximus repeats this story, he stresses that this omen signified the beginning of Sulla’s eminence:

> L. Sulla consul sociali bello, *cum in agro Nolano ante praetorium immolaret, subito ab ima parte arae prolapsam anguem prospexit.* qua visa Postumii haruspicis hortatu continuo exercitum in expeditionem eduxit ac fortissima Samnitium castra cepit. quae victoria futurae eius amplissimae potentiae gradus et fundamentum exstitit.\(^{174}\)

Lucius Sulla was consul in the Social War, when he was sacrificing before his headquarters in the field of Nola, suddenly he saw a snake sliding from the lowest part of the altar. After seeing this, he led his army to the offensive at the incitement of the haruspex Postumius, and captured a very eminent fortress of Samnites. This victory also became a step towards the foundation of his most distinguished future power.

It is abundantly clear that Cicero was Valerius Maximus’ source for this passage, as several portions are taken directly from the earlier work. Cic. *De div.* 1.72: _cum ille in agro Nolano immolaret ante praetorium_; Val. Max. 1.6.4: _cum in agro Nolano ante praetorium immolaret_.

Valerius Maximus neglects to include _ille_, but otherwise the syntax and construction of each _cum_ clause is identical aside from word order. Additionally, each of these statements is shortly followed

\(^{173}\) Cic. *De div.* 1.72.  
\(^{174}\) Val. Max. 1.6.4.
by a statement with a combination of subito, anguis, and ara. Moreover, Cicero states in expeditionem exercitum educeret, which Valerius Maximus mirrors: exercitum in expeditionem eduxit, the only difference being that Cicero uses the imperfect subjunctive of educo, while Valerius Maximus utilizes the perfect indicative. Valerius Maximus also borrowed fortissima Samnitium castra cepit from Cicero, where it appears in an utterly identical manner. Valerius Maximus, however, adds an interpretation to this omen, which is not present in Cicero. He explicitly states that this omen was the first step in Sulla’s rise to eminence as a dictator. As with Herakles, Roscius, Spartacus, Nero, Septimius Severus, Maximus, and Aurelian, Sulla’s rise to power, which included martial exploits as well as a drastic social change, was portended by a snake omen.\(^{175}\) According to Cicero, even the rise to power of Gaius Marius, Sulla’s contemporary and most bitter rival, was marked with a snake omen.\(^{176}\) An omen about the birth of Commodus, which appeared in a dream somewhat resonant to the one portending Paris’ birth, could also be added to this list.\(^{177}\) A snake that coiled around Lepidus’ sword foreshadowed his future glory and the civic strife to follow.\(^{178}\)

Sulla appears to have an affinity for snake omens, as he also seems to be the subject of three accounts of Roman birth omens. As in the Near East, Rome had a tradition of teratology, primarily through the Etruscans. The interpretation of these prodigies is identical to the previously examined omens of snake conception: according to legend, serpents sired Alexander, Scipio, and Augustus, which accounted for their later eminence as military leaders.\(^{179}\) Sulla’s prominence was


\(^{176}\) Cic. De div. 1.106.

\(^{177}\) Hist. Aug. Comm. 1.3-4; cf. the Paris omen in Hyg. Fab. 91. The earliest account is fragmentary: Pind. Pae. 8a.

\(^{178}\) Dio Cass. 47.1.1-3.

\(^{179}\) Alexander: Livy 26.19.4-8; Plut. Vit. Alex. 2.6; Gell. NÁ 6.1.1-5; cf. Cic. De div. 2.135. Scipio: Livy 26.19.4-8; Quint. Inst. 2.4.18-19; Gell. NÁ 6.1.1-5; Dio Cass. 16.57.39; cf. Plin. HN 16.235. Note especially Cic. De div. 2.66,
foretold not only by the snake at the altar in Nola, but also by the birth of snakes by women.

Pliny reports that *serpentem peperit inter initia Marsici belli ancilla*, “a female slave giving birth to a serpent was among the initial events of the Marsic war.” While Sulla is not explicitly mentioned in respect to this omen, comparable later omens indicate that this omen references his future rule over Rome. Sulla was a commander during the Marsic war, and was responsible for the destruction of the Samnites. Pliny’s account is abbreviated, but Appian provides more detail:

Then fate also seemed to foretell these things to them in this war. For it began to announce horrors and unspeakable things to many people throughout the whole of Italy, both in private and in public. They also began to remember very terrible ancient omens, and many monstrous things began to happen: a mule gave birth, and a woman conceived and brought forth a viper instead of a newborn baby, and the god greatly shook upon the land and brought down some temples in Rome—and the Romans are very strongly attuned to such things. The Capitol, built by the kings some four hundred years before, was set on fire, and no one knew the cause. Everything appeared to foretell the great number of deaths to come, the conquest of both Italy and the Romans themselves, as well as an assault of the city and a change of government.

Along with the other omens, the portent of a woman giving birth to a snake is a negative omen for the Roman republic, in marked contrast to *felicitas* of Sulla. Both the Greeks and the Romans believed mules to be completely sterile, so they regarded their pregnancy and birth as ominous.

which suggests that this tradition did not exist in the republic. Augustus: Suet. *Aug.* 94.4; Dio Cass. 45.1.1-5. See 20-21 above.

180 Cic. *De div.* 1.72; Val. Max. 1.6.4.
In fact, the omen of a mule giving birth is the most common birth omen in Roman literature.¹⁸⁵

Their pregnancy and birth signified a departure from nature, and was often interpreted as a bad omen. Obsequens explicitly reveals the meaning of one such omen: mula pariens discordiam civium, bonorum interitum, mutationem legum, turpes matronarum partus significavit, “a mule giving birth indicated the discord of the citizens, the ruin of good men, a change of the laws, and disgraceful births from matrons.”¹⁸⁶ In Herodotus, a mule giving birth was also a negative omen for Xerxes during his invasion of Greece.¹⁸⁷ Earthquakes, described with the verb σείω, usually portend war in Roman literature.¹⁸⁸ The fire on the Capitoline may portend war, the destruction of the citizens, the ruin of the state, or perhaps all three, as both Appian and Obsequens report.¹⁸⁹

All of these omens, including the birth of the snake, portend the return of Sulla in 83 BC. This signaled his march on Rome and subsequent reign of terror as interrex, which included his infamous proscriptions. An omen found in Obsequens reaffirms that the uncanny birth of a snake from a woman portends civic discord, war, and the rise of a leader. Once again, that leader is Sulla:

per Syllana tempora inter Capuam et Vulturnum ingens signorum sonus armorumque horrendo clamore auditus, ita ut viderentur duae acies concurrere per plures dies. rei miraculo intentius considerantibus vestigia equorum hominumque et recens prostratae herbæae et virgulta visa molem ingentem belli portendere. in Etruria Clusii mater familiaris vivum serpentem peperit, qui iussu aruspicum in profluentem dejectus adversa aqua natavit. Lucius Sylla post quintum annum victor in Italianam reversus magnis terrori fuit inimicis. fraude aeditui Capitolium una nocte conflagravit. Sylla crudelitate foeda proscriptio principum fuit. centena milia hominum consumpta Italico civilique bello relata sunt.¹⁹⁰

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¹⁸⁵ Livy 26.23.5; 37.3.3; 40.2.4, 45.5; Dio Cass. 47.40.3; Obseq. 1, 5, 15, 28, 52, 57, 65, 70.
¹⁸⁶ Obseq. 65.
¹⁸⁷ Hdt. 7.57.
¹⁸⁸ Cic. Cat. 3.18; De div. 1.78, 97; Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 10.2.3; Livy 3.10.6; 4.21.5; 34.55.1-4; 41.28.2; Plin. HN 2.199, 200; Plut. Vit. Fab. Max. 3.2; Gell. NA 4.6.1; Dio Cass. 39.20.2; 42.26.3; 45.17.4; Oros. 2.13.8; Obseq. 45, 46, 48, 54, 57, 59, 61, 68.
¹⁸⁹ Obseq. 57.
¹⁹⁰ Obseq. 57.
During the time of Sulla, a massive sound of banners and arms was heard—with a terrible cry—between Capua and Vulturna, so that two armies seemed to engage for many days. After they more intently considered the event as a prodigy, the tracks of horses and humans, the newly trampled plants, and the appearance of the brushwood, portended the trouble of a massive war. In Etruria at Clusium the mother of a family gave birth to a living serpent, which was thrown into a flowing river on the orders of the haruspices, but it swam against the water. Lucius Sulla returned triumphant to Italy after five years and greatly terrified his enemies. The Capitol burned down in a single night from the error of a temple attendant. A horrible proscription of the leading citizens occurred through the cruelty of Sulla. They report that hundreds of thousands of men were consumed by the Italian and civil wars.

The birth omen in Obsequens shares vocabulary with Pliny—both utilize the phrase *serpentem peperit*—perhaps indicating that Obsequens made use of Pliny while composing the *Liber prodigiorum*. In any case, the interpretation of the omen is once again abundantly clear, and, in this case, intrinsically linked to Sulla’s return and subsequent reign of terror. Thus, all three of these accounts of snake births echo the apodoses of the majority of the snake birth omens in the *Šumma Izbu*, which portend a martial increase in the power of the king,¹⁹¹ as well as a change in social status.¹⁹² These omens seem to specifically correlate with *Šumma Izbu* 7:27: *šumma sinništu šarrī šerra ūlid šar māti idannin*, “if a woman of the palace gives birth to a serpent, the king of the land will become strong.”¹⁹³ While Sulla did not take the title of king and instead ruled under the title of *interrex*, he nevertheless ruled as a king in all but name until his voluntary abdication.

The actions of the haruspices, who attempted to dispel the omen of the snake birth and thus save Italy from Sulla’s conquest, is also evocative of divinatory practice in the Near East. As with other birth omens in Roman literature, and especially those of a sexual nature, such as hermaphroditic births,¹⁹⁴ the haruspices try to negate the evil of the portent by throwing the birth

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¹⁹² *Šumma Izbu* 1:16; 17:55’; 18:76’.
¹⁹³ See n. 58 above on text and translation.
¹⁹⁴ Diod. Sic. 32.12.2; Livy 27.11.4-5; 39.22.5; Obseq. 3; 53. See also MacBain 1982, 126-135; Ajootian 1995, 101-103.
into a body of water. Leichtly noticed that this action, among others, is also present in Near Eastern nambubi rituals, which also attempt to dispel unfavorable omens. Perhaps related is that Freedman has published a fragmentary tablet that lists water among the ingredients used to dispel the evil of a snake.

These monstrous births, however, are not Sulla’s only connection to the Near East. He also campaigned in the east as a successful general. An episode in Plutarch, perhaps drawn from Sulla’s own written memoirs, details that while he was campaigning in the east, he received a prophecy:

iyorīteTai de τις ἀνήρ τῶν μετὰ Ὀροβάζου καταβεβηκότων, Χαλδαῖος, εἰς τὸ τοῦ Σύλλα πρόσωπον ἀπιδὼν καὶ ταῖς κινήσει τῆς τα ἐν τοῖς καὶ τοῦ σώματος οὐ παρέργῳς ἐπιστήμης, ἐπὶ τός τῆς τέχνης ὑποθέσεις τῆς φυσιν ἐπισκεψάμενος, εἰπεῖν ὡς ἁναγκαῖον εἰ τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρα μέγιστον γενέσθαι, θαυμάζειν de καὶ νῦν πῶς ἀνέχεται μὴ πρῶτος ἄν ἀπάντων.

It was also recorded that some man from among the ones who came down with Orobazus, a Chaldaean, after he saw the face of Sulla and considered the movements of both his mind and his body, not trivially, but according to the principle nature of the art he commanded, said that because of necessity, this man would become the greatest, and even now he wondered how he did not hold himself to be foremost of everyone.

While the name of this seer remains unknown, his form of divination in the passage is recognizable as physiognomy, divination by the interpretation of a person’s appearance. Physiognomy has a strong tradition in the Near East, and Plutarch earlier states that this event occurred while Sulla was on the banks of the Euphrates. Since the diviner is identified as a Chaldaean, it is clear that he is a seer from the Near East, and likely a Babylonian. Though the term is usually used to denote a Babylonian astrologer, later authors like Plutarch sometimes use it as a general term for diviner.

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195 Livy 27.37.5-7; 31.12.6-8; Oros. 5.4.8; Obseq 22; 27a; 32; 34; 36; 47; 48; 50.
197 Summa Alu 22:36; Freedman 2006, n. 17b-18b.
198 Plut. Vit. Sull. 5.5-6.
199 Böck 2010.
200 Vit. Sull. 5.4.
In any case, it is remarkable that the birth omens that relate to Sulla so closely correspond with the Šumma Izbu, and that—according to legend—a Babylonian seer also foretold his future eminence.

Aside from the snake omens that portend the rule of Sulla, there are two further omens recorded in Roman literature. Tacitus later reports that a woman gave birth to a snake during the reign of Nero. He states that anguem enixa mulier, et alia in concubitu mariti fulmine examinata: iam sol repente obscuratus et tactae de caelo quattuordecim urbis regiones. quae adeo sine cura deum eveniebant, ut multos post annos Nero imperium et scelera continuaverit, “a woman gave birth to a snake, and another woman was killed by lightning in the coupling of marriage. Indeed, the sun was suddenly hidden and fourteen regions of the city were struck by lightning. So far, these things were occurring without the concern of the gods, as after many years Nero would continue his power and crimes”\(^{201}\) Although this snake birth certainly does not mark Nero’s martial eminence, Tacitus connects the omen to Nero’s crimes. Like the aforementioned snake births of Sulla’s time, this birth seems to single out the negative manner of Nero’s rule, namely, his many crimes. These omens therefore paint an analogous picture; a woman giving birth to a snake warned the Romans of Sulla’s domination and proscriptions, and likewise a snake birth warned the populace of Nero and his crimes, even while he continued to rule.

Phlegon of Tralles, who was active during the reign of Hadrian, records another uncanny birth, once again by a woman. According to him: γυνὴ ἀπὸ πόλεως Τριδέντου τῆς Ἰταλίας ἀπεκόψεν ὄφεις ἐςφαρμένους, ὑπατευόντων ἐν Ρώμῃ Δομετιανοῦ Καίσαρος τὸ ἐνατον καὶ Πετιλίου Ῥούφου τὸ δεύτερον, ἐν Ἀθῆναις ἀναρχίας οὐσίας, “a woman from the city of Tridentum in Italy brought forth snakes that were curled into balls in the ninth consulship of Domitian Caesar and the second consulship of Petilius Rufus at Rome, when there was anarchy

in Athens.” Phlegon does not provide many details about the omen aside from the date it occurred, as is the nature of his work, which simply records wondrous occurrences. The ninth consulship of Domitian was held in 83 AD, which, among other events, marked his great victory over the Chatti, the most powerful German tribe. Because snake birth omens signify a rise in martial power, the omen could mark this victory. Yet this remains speculation because this omen does not appear elsewhere in literature, nor does any other evidence connect the two events.

In marked contrast to both the Babylonians and the Romans / Etruscans, it appears that the Greeks did not have a strong teratological tradition. Bouché-Leclercq, in his seminal study of classical divination, did not believe that teratology was a specific form of divination for the Greeks, who, he argued, considered birth omens under the category of miraculous portents. Leichty also notes that “while it is obvious that the Greeks were aware of birth portents, it is equally obvious from the paucity of references that this type of divination never played a major role in Greek society.” Still, a comparable omen is found in Aeschylus. After Clytemnestra dreams that she gave birth to a snake, her son Orestes interprets the meaning of this dream:

\[
\text{ἀλλ’ εὔχομαι γῇ τῇδε καὶ πατρὸς τάφῳ τοῦνειρόν εἶναι τούτ’ ἐμοὶ τελεσφόρον·}
\]
\[
κρινὼ δὲ τοί νῦν ὡστε συγκόλλος ἔχειν.}
\]
\[
eι γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν χῶρον ἔκλιπών ἐμοὶ οὐφὶς ἐμὸσὶ σπαργάνοις ὁπλίζετο,**
\]
\[
καὶ μαστὸν ἀμφέχασκ’ ἐμὸν θρεπτίριον,
\]
\[
θρόμβῳ δ’ ἐμείζεν ἀματος φίλον γάλα,
\]
\[
ἡ δ’ ἀμφὶ τάρβει τὸδ’ ἐπώμωξεν πάθει,
\]
\[
δεὶ τοί νῦν, ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἐκπαγλόν τέρας,
\]
\[
θανεῖν βιαῖως· ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς δ’ ἐγὼ
\]
\[
κτείνω νῦν, ὡς τοῦνειρον ἐννέπει τὸδε.”
\]

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203 Bouché-Leclercq 1879–1882, 1:120.
204 Leichty 1970, 14.
205 Aesch. Choe. 527, 928. See also O’Neill 1998.
** This is a corrupt line. Restored from Weir Smyth 1926, 214.
206 Choe. 540-550.
But I pray, towards the earth and to the tomb of my father, 
that this dream is fulfilled by me. 
And I will judge it for you so that it is held in accordance with [the dream]. 
For if the snake left the same place as me, 
and was dressed in my swaddling-clothes, and 
gaped for the breast that nurtured me, 
but dear milk mixed with a clot of blood, 
and she wails about this terror and this misfortune, 
It is necessary, you see—since she gave birth to a terrible omen—to 
kill her with force, because I became a serpent, 
let me kill her, as this dream bids.

In the following line, the chorus refers to Orestes as a τερασκόπος; once again, a seer is involved 
in the interpretation of a snake omen, although to a lesser extent in this instance, as Orestes is not 
a specialized and famous seer like Tiresias. This omen, like the similar snake births in Roman 
literature, portends the rise of an eminent individual. Instead of Sulla’s violence against the 
Samnites and the Roman state, the omen in Aeschylus foretells the rise of Orestes to the 
avenging slaughter of both his mother and her consort Aegisthus, who together conspired and 
slew Agamemnon.

In Roman literature, the omen of a woman giving birth to a snake seems to portend the rise 
of a military leader, with similar stature to the king, amidst social turmoil. While this leader is 
explicit in some omens,207 and the social turmoil is implied in all,208 it is striking how closely the 
apodoses correspond with the majority of snake omens in the Šumma Izbu, which stress an increase 
in the power of the king,209 and social change.210 Nevertheless, the nonconformity of the apodoses 
in both the classical and the Near Eastern sources hints that no distinct omen tradition about snakes 
migrated from the Near East and implanted itself in Roman literature. That is not to say, however,

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207 App. B. Civ. 1.9.83; Obseq. 57.
210 Šumma Izbu 1:16; 17:55'; 18:76'.
that a set of associations from the Šumma Izbu did not exert some sort of influence on classical divination and the interpretation of snake omens. Instead of an omen, or a series of omens being adapted into the Roman tradition, it seems that associations about snake birth omens—taken from the Šumma Izbu—were adopted by the Romans and the Etruscans, and then incorporated into their divinatory tradition.

The first set of omens in the Šumma Izbu stress the rise of a king or a prince, and their military activities; later these omens and associations appear to be reworked in classical texts to predict the rule of emperors Nero, Septimius Severus, Maximus, and Aurelian, whose upcoming reign were marked by snake omens.²¹¹ Other people who rose to military eminence, such as Lepidus, Spartacus, Gaius Marius, and Sulla, and perhaps Domitian were likewise recipients of snake omens.²¹² The myth of Herakles’ strangling the snakes sent by Hera as a child, which is preserved in Plautus, indicated his future power,²¹³ and stems from the Near Eastern “master of animals” motif. Similarly, the tradition that Alexander was conceived by a serpent,²¹⁴ which served to stress either that Zeus is his father or that the Argead house, and particularly Alexander himself, descended from Herakles—or perhaps both—was repurposed by Augustus to foretell his own glory;²¹⁵ he then created an identical tradition for Scipio Africanus, as a Roman precedent for the legend.²¹⁶ An assortment of snake omens also foretold how Superbus would vacate the Roman

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²¹⁴ Livy 26.19.4-8; Plut. Vit. Alex. 2.6; Gell. NA 6.1.1-5; cf. Cic. De div. 2.135.
²¹⁵ Suet. Aug. 94.4; Dio Cass. 45.1.1-5.
²¹⁶ Quint. Inst. 2.4.18-19; Dio Cass. 16.57.39; cf. Cic. De div. 2.66.
kingship, and how Brutus would lay the foundations of the republic.\footnote{Livy 1.56.4-13; Ov. Fast. 2.711-720; Zonar. 7.11.} Even the future eminence of the famous actor Roscius, according to Cicero, was marked by a snake omen.\footnote{Cic. De div. 1.79; cf. 2.66.}

The second set of \textit{Summa Izbu} omens portend a negative change in social status. Clearly the omens of Spartacus, Gaius Marius, and Sulla are once again relevant.\footnote{Plut. Vit. Crass. 8.3; Cic. De div. 1.106; Cic. De div. 1.72; Val. Max. 1.6.4; Obseq. 57; cf. Plin. \textit{HN} 7.34-35; App. B. Civ. 1.9.83.} Furthermore, the birth of a snake from a woman in the life of Nero portended his crimes against the Romans,\footnote{Tac. Ann. 14.12.} while the omen of the death of Tiberius’ pet snake warned him about the power of the common people.\footnote{Suet. Tib. 72.2.} Other omens, which have no subject, but are in general interpreted as negative, perhaps fit under this heading as well, such as the omens of snakes that appear in altars and in temples.\footnote{Altars: Aen. 5.84-96; Ov. Fast. 2.711-720; Gran. Lic. 33.21; Obseq. 42. Temples: Livy 28.11.2-3 = Dio Cass. 17.57.60; 45.1.1-5; Obseq. 28a.} Additional miscellaneous snake omens, which primarily comprise strange sightings of snakes and are included in prodigy lists may also be interpreted in this manner: when Gaius Hostilius Mancinus found a snake on his boat and failed to catch it, it was interpreted as a negative omen.\footnote{Obseq. 24; Val. Max. 1.6.7.} A popular legend recounts that Hannibal saw a snake monster as an embodiment of Italy’s desolation while he was on campaign.\footnote{Livy 27.4.13-14; 41.21.13; 43.13.4; Dio Cass. 17.57.63-64; 41.14.1-6; 50.8.4-5; 51.17.4-5; 58.7.1-2.} Livy and Dio Cassius record many sightings of strange and miraculous snakes as omens,\footnote{Livy 41.9.5; cf. Plin. \textit{HN} 11.257.} including snakes with feet.\footnote{Stat. Theb. 10.589-615.} Another example occurs in the \textit{Thebaid}; smoke from a divination rite forms into a snake, which Tiresias interprets as a negative omen.\footnote{Stat. Theb. 10.589-615.} Unfortunately these omens do not have apodoses, instead they are recorded among other omens in lists as notable portents, and are thus difficult to analyze. In general, however, they seem to be negative omens.
Clearly, there is some resonance in the interpretation of snake omens in Roman literature and those in the Šumma Izbu, enough so to posit that at some point, several ideas about snake omens—primarily that they predict eminent people and social discord, especially when associated with a birth—migrated from Mesopotamia and into Europe, before surfacing in Roman literature. It remains to be seen if the snake omens in Greek literature likewise demonstrate this concordance, as a comprehensive study of snake omens in Greek literature has yet to be completed. Comparable omens, such as the Orestes omen,\textsuperscript{228} as well as the omen of Alexander’s birth,\textsuperscript{229} suggest some similarity between the Greek and Roman omen traditions, and also hint at a shared tradition with the Near East. Ultimately, divination is the study of unusual events: portents, prodigies, and miracles. Since snakes are a particularly complex and strange creature, their unusual behavior was frequently reported as portents. While Cicero tells a story about a diviner that said a snake coiled around a roof beam is not a portent, but a roof beam coiled around a snake is,\textsuperscript{230} from the wide range of snake omens, it is clear the ancients would consider both to be ominous.

\textsuperscript{228} Aesch. Choe. 527, 540-550, 928.
\textsuperscript{229} Strabo 17.43; Arr. Anab. 3.3.1-2; Plut. Vit. Alex. 27.5-11.
\textsuperscript{230} Cic. De div. 2.62.
References


