# 1 History of Hepatology

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## Hepatology from ancient to modern times

Over the millennia, the conception of the liver has been subject to more remarkable change than that of almost any other organ. • In antiquity, mantic, religious and speculative thinking combined with anatomical and physiological observations resulted in a most imposing body of knowledge concerning the liver. • The features and disease processes of the liver were described more accurately than in the case of any other organ, and modern medicine has repeatedly afforded resounding confirmation of those ancient observations.

It may therefore be both interesting and instructive to trace the roots of our present knowledge of hepatology back to antiquity and to commemorate with admiration and respect the tireless spirit of medical and scientific research in this area.

## 1 Liver research in antiquity

Even in primeval times, the liver must have been well-known as the most powerful and most blood-rich organ of the animal body. Varied and important processes were attributed to this impressive part of the entrails – it was even regarded as the "seat of life". • The Indo-Germanic word "lîp" meant both liver and life, and there are obvious similarities between the English "liver-live/life" (Old English: "lifer-līf") and the German "Leber-Leben". In Old High German, the liver was termed "leb(a)ra". The Hebrew "kábe(r), kábe(d)" (or "cheber") is the probable root of the Greek word "hepar".

### 1.1 Hepatoscopy

Evidently, priests and fortune-tellers at that time became interested primarily in the liver and thus great mantic-religious significance was attributed to this organ. *For the Babylonians and Assyrians, the* **inspection of entrails,** *in reality* **inspection of the liver,** *was the most important method of foretelling events.* This "hepatoscopy" was based on the premise that the god to whom the sacrifice was offered would show his pleasure by revealing the future through variations in the appearance of the sacrificial animal's liver.

The sacrificial priests of Mesopotamia had acquired a precise knowledge of the size, colour and external structure of the animal liver, especially that of the sheep – the most commonly used sacrificial animal. They assigned specific names to the individual parts of the liver and gall bladder and to their different variations in form and appearance, reflecting similarities to everyday objects such as mountains, rivers, roads, nose, ear, tooth, hand, finger, etc. Hepatoscopy was carried out in accordance with stipulated ceremonial rites and in the face of an image of a god. It was limited to assessing the outer appearance of the liver; the organ itself was not dissected.

The Babylonian sacrificial priests taught the art of hepatoscopy systematically, using specially devised **models of the liver.** These models also served as topographical aids for the mantic interpretation of variations in the appearance of the animal liver. The no doubt oldest clay model of a sheep's liver is from a Babylonian temple and dates from ca. 2000 BC. (s. fig. 1.1) Clearly recognizable on the concave surface are 2 lobes: the coniform gall bladder with the cystic duct and the caudate lobe with the pyramidal process and the smaller papillary process (→). Carved lines divide the lower surface into approximately 40 small, rectangular fields, which contain cuneiform inscriptions of sacral symbols and mantic readings, one of the recurrent themes being ***"May your liver be smooth"***. • Many of the rectangles show small holes, presumably used to insert tiny wooden pins according to the variations in form observed in the animal liver. Such a topographical fixation of findings facilitated a more accurate prophecy.

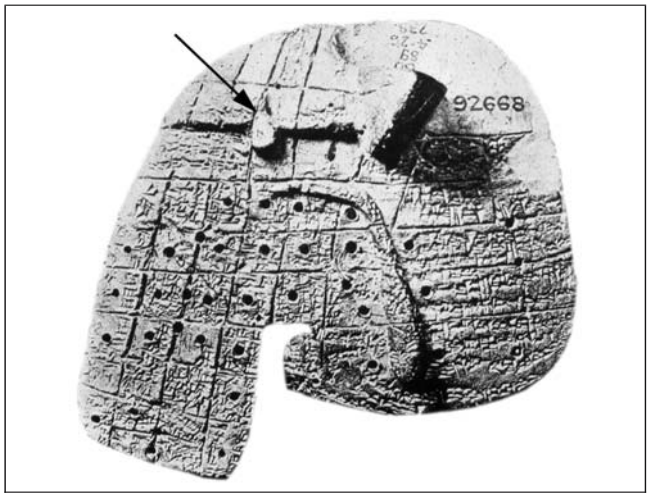


***Fig. 1.1:*** Babylonian terracotta model of a sheep's liver with papillary process ( ↓ ), ca. 2000 BC (British Museum, London) (11)

Sumerian culture has also yielded artefacts concerned with hepatoscopy. More than 30 such clay models of the liver with cuneiform inscriptions dating from the 17th