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xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā

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Special Issue: Discussions in Assyriology

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Quotation as a Basis for Intertextuality in Sumerian Cult Lyric and City Laments

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Abstract

This short communication investigates the concept of intertextuality in Sumerian literary texts, by studying the use of quotations in cult lyric and so-called City Laments. These text genres exhibit a series of intertextual borrowings, and the aim of this study is to discuss some examples of the use of quotations in these texts, as one of the most basic and important features of intertextuality in Sumerian literature.

Introduction

Based on the ancient literary catalogues, the Sumerian cult lyric under consideration here can be divided into four different genres: *balaĝ*, *eršemma*, *eršahuga* and *šu'ila*.¹ In addition to these ancient text classifications, a fifth (modern) category of texts referred to as City Laments, has been included in this study. The different text types can be briefly described as follows:²

1- This article formed a part of my MA dissertation written in the Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations (IHAC) at Northeast Normal University. I am most grateful to my supervisors, Drs Parsa Daneshmand and Wang Guangsheng, for their support and kind help during my studies in IHAC. I am also indebted to Dr Magnus Widell, who provided many useful insights to improve my paper.

2- See Löhnert 2011.

TYPES	LENGTH	CONTENT
balaĝ	Hundreds of lines	Stories and rituals
eršemma	≤100 lines	Short myths, visions of destruction, praise poetry of deities
eršahuga	About 50 lines	Individual prayers
šu'ila	About 50 lines	Litanies and petitions to calm deities
City Laments	Hundreds of lines	Destruction and revival of Sumer cities

Due to their lengths, City Laments and balaĝ compositions are typically divided up into several distinct sections. These sections were referred to in Sumerian as *giš-gi₄-gal₂* (composition division) and *ki-ru-gu₂* (a technical term that indicates a specific song or a clearly defined section of a song).³

Since the 1980s, a handful of Assyriologists have identified the existence of quotations in Ancient Mesopotamian literature.⁴ Erica Reiner proposed that Babylonian poetry used verbatim quotes which plays the same role as the quotes and allusions that punctuate modern poetry.⁵ In her monograph entitled *Weapon of Words*, Selena Wisnom offers a literary study of three Babylonian poems, and demonstrates how each uses complex intertextual allusions to compete and contrast with their predecessors.⁶ However, scholars are mainly focused on Babylonian literature, and our understanding of intertextuality in Sumerian literature remains inadequate.

The essential feature of intertextuality is “quotation.” In the two passages below, Julia Kristeva describes the concept:⁷

Le texte est donc une productivité, il est une permutation de textes, une intertextualité: dans l'espace d'un texte plusieurs énoncés, pris à d'autres textes, se croisent et se neutralisent.

Tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte.

Thus, a text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations. Although all intertextuality theories are based on the quotation of texts, Kristeva argues that the concept of intertextuality is based on pan-textualism.⁸ The words *texte*, *autre texte* or citation have very broad meanings in Kristeva's study. The *texte*, she states, can refer to literature, but initially it refers to a process of meaning production. The *autre texte*, she believes, can refer to another literary text, but it may also refer to all social and historical practices. So any symbolic system or cultural phenomenon (social practice) can be regarded as *texte*.⁹ For social historicity, Roland Barthes argues that the intertextuality brings a social volume to literature theory.¹⁰ In other words, the flat text gains volume through intertextuality, centered on the generalized quotation.

3- See Green 1975: 284-286.

4- Seri 2014: 89.

5- Reiner 1985: 33.

6- Wisnom 2019: 1.

7- Kristeva 1970: 12 and 16.

8- Walther Mitchell (1982: 617) described pan-textualism as a strategy that “reads the entire fabric of nature and culture as a network of signs.”

9- Qin 2006: 17.

10- Barthes 1994: 1683.

Example of Citations

Potsherd (šika)

The following two sentences are attested in the Lament of Ur (henceforth LU),¹¹ and the text Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana (henceforth EaE):¹²

uĝ₃-bi šika ku₅-da nu-me-a bar-ba ba-e-si

It's people, (though) not potsherds, (but) littered outside.

iri-ĝu₁₀ dul he₂-a ĝe₂₆-e šika-bi ħe₂-me-en

If my city becomes a ruin mound, then I will be a potsherd of it.

LU 120 describes a scene of a “storm” that destroys the city. EaE 133 is an emphatic reply of En-suhgir-ana to the messenger of Enmerkar, telling him that he shall never surrender, even if the city falls into potsherds. It is obvious that there is a tradition in using the image of potsherds as a euphemism for dying people, similar to how the metaphors for storm and flood stands for enemy.¹³ It is possible that EaE was composed, though probably not written down, during the Ur III period, slightly earlier than LU.¹⁴ Thus, it is possible that the šika metaphor used by the former text may have influenced the latter one. Of course, another possibility, although impossible to prove, would be that the metaphor was created in a time predating both these texts, and that the first occurrence of the metaphor has never been recovered. Nevertheless, it may also be worthwhile to try to identify texts which is later than both our texts, and to see if the metaphor survived into later periods. In some later Akkadian praise poetry, potsherds were used to reference the characteristic features of abandoned city-mounds or the netherworld:¹⁵

ša ašar ḥašbata la iqabbû anâku

I am the one whom one does not mention at the place of potsherds.

To offer another example, Nili Samet compared the texts of LU and the Book of Lamentation, and found a handful of similar texts, in which there were some thematic and phraseological parallels.¹⁶ For instance, the Book of Lamentations uses the image of potsherds as a metaphor for dying people:¹⁷

The precious children of Zion: Once valued as gold—Alas, they are accounted for as earthen pots, Work of a potter's hands!

11- See *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (= *ETCSL*) 2.2.2

(LU, line 210; <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.2.2>).

12- *ETCSL* 1.8.2.4 (EaE, line 133; <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=c.1.8.2.4>).

13- See Zhang 2020: 225.

14- Some scholar assume that these two texts were contemporary (e.g. Vanstiphout 2003: 1).

15- Meier 1941: 244.

16- Samet 2015.

17- See *Biblica, the International Bible Society* Lamentations 4:2; <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/lamentations/4/>.

Moreover, the Book of Lamentations was composed one thousand years later, when the Sumerian City Laments had been erased from the memory of people. However, these two texts tend to use the same method of expression. Roland Barthes argues that text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.¹⁸ With this in mind, I suggest that this would allude to a literary tradition in the ancient Near East, and that the metaphor of the potsherd should be understood as a manifestation of this tradition.

Musical Instruments (šem-ala-tigi)

Another example is reference of musical instrument, which comes from LU¹⁹ and the Gudea cylinders:²⁰

šem₃^{kuš} a₂-la₂ ni₃ ša₃ hul₂-le-da tigi₂-a nu-mu-ra-an-du₁₂-uš

They are no longer playing for you the šem and ala drums that gladden the heart, nor the tigi.

ušumgal-kalam-ma ti-gi₄-a mu-gub a₂-la₂ u₄-dam šeg₁₂ mu-na-ab-gi₄

ušumgalkalama was accompanied by tigi drums, and ala drums roared for him like a storm.

Line 355 of the LU is part of the eighth verse/section (ki-ru-gu₂) of the composition. This verse mainly focuses on convincing the goddess Ningal to return to Ur, and the writer describes the various losses suffered by the city to make the severity and sadness of the events more vivid. The passage in the Gudea cylinders offers the reverse scenario. According to this text, the purpose of the instrument performance is to express strong positive emotions, to enhance and emphasize the rites of Gudea.

The word šem usually refers to a drum accompanying the gala singer in laments.²¹ Francis Galpin recognized ala as a “big drum.”²² Tigi is probably a general name for a group of instruments,²³ and the word is typically used in expressions conveying positive emotions, like joy and celebrations.²⁴ Moreover, Dahlia Shehata found that the tigi, šem, and ala always appear together in the themes related to praise and sacrifice.²⁵ As I mentioned before, the *autre texte* can refer to another text, but it also refers to all social and historical practices. Any symbolic system or cultural phenomenon can be regarded as “text,” and the process of intertextuality can be traced in the above examples.

18- Barthes 1977: 146.

19- *ETCSL* 2.2.2 (LU, line 355; <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.2.2>).

20- Edzard 1997: 98.

21- Gabbay 2007: 70.

22- Galpin 1937: 6-7.

23- See *ETCSL* 2.4.2.01 (Šulgi A, line 81; <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.4.2.01>): nar-ĝu₁₀ tigi 7-e šir₃-re-eš ħa-ma-an-ne-eš “My singers praised me with songs accompanied by seven tigi drums.”

24- See *ETCSL* 4.13.14 (Nanna N, lines 22-24; <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.4.13.14>): ki-sa₂-al ma-ĥe ninda ba-ĝa₂-ra-zu ti-gi ni₅ du-ge si ħa-pa₃-ne-sa₂ um-mi an-na ti-gi mu-ra-an-du “The sweet-sounding tigi instruments are arranged in the majestic forecourt where your food-offerings are presented. In the heavenly assembly, the tigi instruments resound for you.”

25- Shehata 2014: 104-105.

The Order of Cities

A balaĝ dated to the Old Babylonian period offers a short list of cities in central and southern Mesopotamia:²⁶

uru₂-zu nibru^{ki} / še-eb-e₂-kur-ra / ki-ur₃ ki-gal / eš₃ e₂-nam-ti-la
 še-eb-zimbi^{ki} / eš₃ e₂-babbar-ru₃
 še-eb-tin-tir^{ki} / še-eb-e₂-sag-il₂-la
 še-eb-barsip^{ki} / še-eb-e₂-zi-da

Your city **Nippur**! The brick work of the Ekur! The Kiur, the great place! The shrine Enamtila!
 The brickwork of **Sippar**! The shrine Ebabbar! The brickwork of **Babylon**! The brickwork of
 Esagila! The brickwork of **Borsippa**! The brickwork of Ezida!

Mark Cohen has interpreted the first line in the text as its title: u₄-dam ki am₃ us₂ “It touches the earth like a storm.” In similar texts, the order of cities follows two governing principles: religion and geography. Because of Nippur’s status as a religious center, it appears on the first line. The remaining cities are broadly arranged in geographical order, from north to south.²⁷

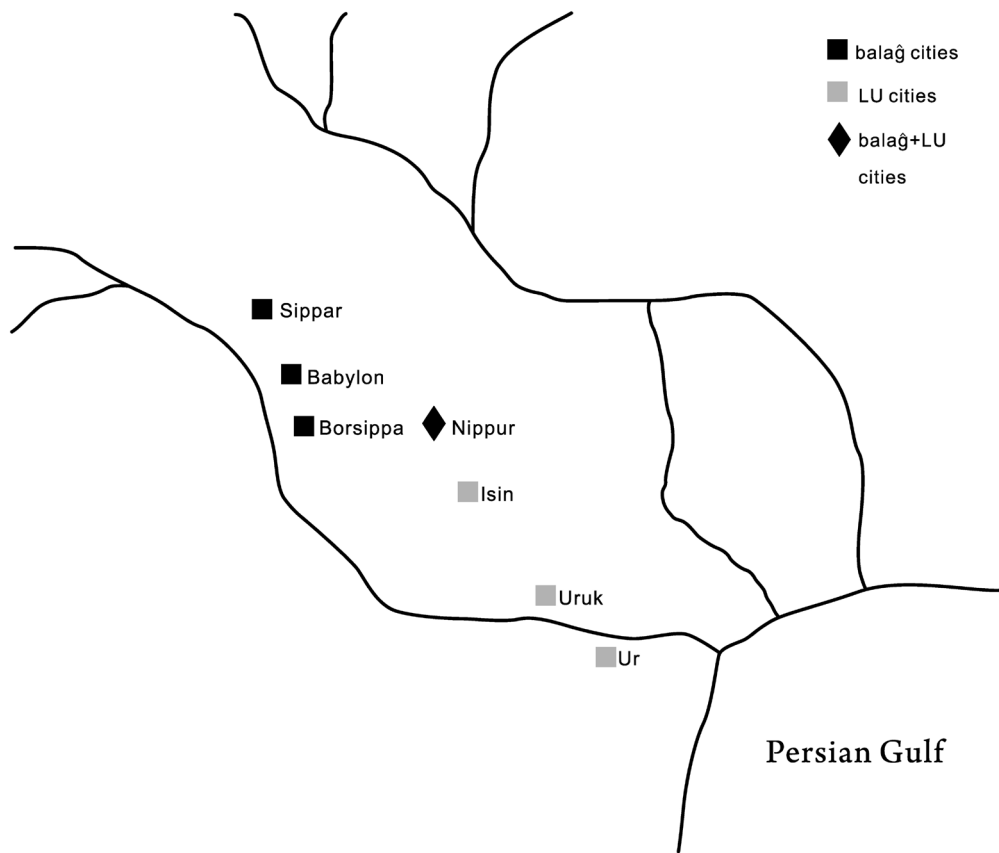
Listing cities in this way is not limited to balaĝ compositions, and in the first verse of LU, we encounter the following list of cities, organized according to the same principles (the order of cities is Nippur > Keš > Isin > Uruk > Ur):²⁸

u₃-mu-un kur-kur-ra-ke₄ muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e \ \ ^dmu-ul-lil₂-le eš₃-e nibru^{ki}-a muš₃
 mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e \ \ dam-a-ni ^dnin-lil₂-le muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na-lil₂-e \ \ ^dnin-
 lil₂-le e₂-bi ki-ur₃-ra muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-le
 nin keš^{ki}-a-ke₄ muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e \ \ ga-ša-an-maḥ-e e₂-bi keš^{ki}-a muš₃ mi-ni-in-
 ga amaš-a-na lil₂-le
 mu-lu i₃-si-in^{ki}-na-ke₄ muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e \ \ ga-ša-an-i₃-si-in^{ki}-na-ke₄ eš₃ e₂-gal-
 maḥ-a-muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na-lil₂-e
 nin ki-unug^{ki}-ga-ke₄ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na-lil₂-e \ \ ga-ša-an-na e₂-bi unug^{ki}-ga muš₃ mi-ni-in-
 ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e
^dnanna uri^{ki}-ma muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e \ \ ^dsuen-e e₂-kiš-nu-ĝal₂-la muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga
 amaš-a-na-lil₂-e \ \ dam-a-ni ga-ša-an-gal-e muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na-lil₂-e \ \ ga-ša-an-
 gal-e agrun-ku₃-ga-na muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e
 am uru₂-ze₂-ba^{ki}-ke₄ muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e \ \ ^dam-an-ki-ke₄ e₂-bi uru₂-ze₂-ba^{ki}-ke₄
 muš₃ mi-ni-in-ga amaš-a-na lil₂-e

26- Cohen 1988: 129.

27- Wilcke 1972: 43.

28- For an English translation, see *ETCSL* 2.2.2 (LU, line 3-18; <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.2.2>); or Samet 2014: 55.



Map of southern Mesopotamia with the cities in two texts (the location of ancient Keš listed in LU remains uncertain)

In both texts, Nippur is listed in the first line, reflecting the city's importance as a religious and cultic center. Other cities are in both texts arranged according to their geographical location from north to south. The texts provide an example of a type of intertextuality that extends over multiple lines, and offer a hint at the implementation of more universal organizational and logical principles across different Sumerian text genres.

Idioms of chaos (out of order)

In Sumerian City Laments like “ u_2 ḫul mu_2 - mu_2 - de_3 ,” we encounter many idioms describing disaster, chaos, and destruction. Good examples are found in the Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur (henceforth LSU)²⁹ and the LU:³⁰

e^2 tur₃-ra i₃ gara₂ nu-ak-de₃ šurum ki nu-tag-e-de₃

That butter and cheese not be made in the cattle pen, that dung not be laid on the ground.

ku₃-ḡu₁₀ lu₂ ku₃ nu-zu-ne šu-bi ḡa-ba-da-ab-si

Men ignorant of silver have filled their hands with my silver.

29- Michalowski 1989: 39.

30- ETCSL 2.2.2 (LU, line 280; <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.2.2>).

Similar examples can also be attested from incantations and related texts:³¹

a-ba ^dnanše-kam / **ku** ^dinanna-kam / še ^{-zu edin-na-kam} / edin-na lu ^{gu}-di de ^{-a an-ne} sag
il₂-la / gir₃-pad-ra₂

The sea belongs to Nanše, silver belongs to Inanna, your excrement belongs to the steppe. In the steppe a man (was) shouting, raising his head to the sky. Bone!

The last example is presumably a charm incantation intended to heal a broken bone. The incantation offers an image of a man crying out and turning to heaven for help, and it is possible that the incantation was originally performed by the city lamentation singer, on behalf of the injured man. In all these texts, the singer would have prayed for the return of the deity, describing a scene of chaos and despair in the abandoned city. The texts demonstrate similar concepts of social historicity of intertextuality, with the silver belonging to the god, and the dung belonging to the steppe (as fertile soil).

The social and historical characteristics of intertextuality are called *idéologème* by Kristeva. She thinks that the *idéologème* can connect a specific structure with other structures in an intertextual relationship. The relationship develops along with the progress of the text, and provides the text with social and historical coordinates.³² In other words, the *idéologème* of the above text is the direct application of the intertextual function. It introduces the social and historical value of the external text into the laments.

Conclusion.

The forms of intertextuality as it is expressed in Sumerian literature is relatively clear, and it is easy to find the echoes of a particular plot in various works, across different genres. The core behind these echoes relate to the experiences of the scribe, and his knowledge of the society in which he lived, including its geography, religion and administration.

Establishing a multidirectional and multileveled text network will contribute to the understanding of literary texts. Analyzing the interrelationship between Sumerian lamentation texts and relationship with other texts can open a new way for understanding different models of intertextuality in the Mesopotamia written tradition. Quotation is only one layer of intertextuality, and there are many different intertextual approaches. By linking different texts and the social history of different periods, we can bring volume to these texts, and present them in a multi-dimensional fashion.

31- George 2016: 139.

32- Kristeva 1968: 312.

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