

The Shape of Stories: Narrative Structures in Cuneiform Literature

Workshop at the 65th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale

Organizers:

Gina Konstantopoulos (University of Helsinki; gina.konstantopoulos@helsinki.fi)

Sophus Helle (Aarhus University; sophushelle@cc.au.dk)

Abstract

Writing literature in the cuneiform world was an act of moulding: Wet clay was shaped into tablets, and then re-shaped by the wedges that were impressed upon it. This workshop intends to extend that metaphor and its analysis to the narratives that are told on these clay tablets. How was the stuff of stories – traditional material, religious myths and cultural memories – moulded into the form in which we now find it? How could narratives be structured in the cuneiform world? What patterns and principles, constraints and considerations guided the organization of literary material?

The study of narrative structures, or narratology, is emerging as a promising methodological approach to the literary heritage of the cuneiform world. It supplements the traditional focus on individual literary passages with analyses of large-scale narrative forms, as well as comparisons across texts and genres. In particular, this approach highlights the interaction between medium and message, paying close attention to the way that narrative forms can modify, accentuate or even subvert narrative content. Finally, a focus on narrative invites an engagement with theoretical and methodological frameworks, such as narratology, that can expand our understanding of the structures of cuneiform literature.

This workshop invites discussions of narrative in cuneiform texts. It will focus on the structure of individual texts, recurrent narrative patterns, and comparisons within or between literary genres. Further, comparisons with other media, such as non-literary texts or visual representations, are warmly encouraged. We hope that papers will consider the variety of forms that narratives may take in the cuneiform world, which may open the way for further investigation into the shape of stories themselves.

Papers and Participants:

Johannes Bach (University of Helsinki)

Beatrice Baragli (Munich - Cambridge)

Bénédicte Cuperly (Göttingen)

Gösta Gabriel (University of Göttingen)

~~Athena Gadotti~~ (Towson University)

Sophus Helle (Aarhus University)

Gina Konstantopoulos (University of Helsinki)

Robert Marineau (University of Chicago)

Louise Pryke (Macquarie University)

~~Dahlia Shehata~~ (Universität Würzburg)

Selena Wisnom (Cambridge University)

Sessions and Titles:

Narrative, Myth, and Epic

The Shape of Stories: Introduction to the Workshop

Gina Konstantopoulos; University of Helsinki

Sophus Helle; Aarhus University

~~Narrative Structures in the Sumerian Gilgamesh Stories: A Preliminary Investigation~~

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Stitching a Story Together: Language Use for Transition and Cohesion in the Hittite Tale of

Zalpa

Robert Marineau, University of Chicago

Time and Recurrence

Familiarity Breeds Content: The Dynamics of Repetition in Akkadian Literature

Selena Wisnom; University of Cambridge

20/20 Foresight? The Presence of Foreshadowing in Divine Predictions

Louise Pryke; Macquarie University

~~Narrative Time in Combat Myths: a Comparative Case Study~~

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Genre and Structure

Gérard Genette's "Narrative Form" and Assyrian Royal Narrative Texts

Johannes Bach; University of Helsinki

Once Upon a Time, There Was an Exorcist: Narrative Structures in Old Babylonian Sumerian Incantations

Beatrice Baragli; Munich and California

The Layers of the Past: How the so-called "Sumerian King List" Arranges Narrative Material

Gösta Gabriel; Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

The Stuff of Stories

Which Way is Up? On Emotional Structure in Cuneiform Literature

Gina Konstantopoulos; University of Helsinki

Tablets as Narrative Units

Sophus Helle; Aarhus University

A Tale of Two Stories? Mythical Content and Narrative Devices in *Angalta*.

Bénédicte Cuperly; Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Abstracts:

Gérard Genette's "Narrative Form" and Assyrian Royal Narrative Texts

Johannes Bach; University of Helsinki

In his seminal study on narratology, the French literature theorist Gérard Genette has developed a thorough structural model for analyzing the formative principles underlying narrative texts. Genette's works have the advantage of giving analysis preference over interpretation, while not discarding the latter entirely. His approach can be put to good use for advancing our understanding of the historical development of Middle and Neo-Assyrian royal narrative text genres like royal inscriptions, royal epics and king's reports. This paper will focus on a short outline of Genette's model, and then demonstrate its applicability by subjecting various test cases from the Middle and early Neo-Assyrian period to it. Detailed discussion about the narrative categories of perspective, focalization, voice, distance and time will be offered, aiming at highlighting the historical developments of poetic aspects that are often misperceived as uniform and unchanging.

Once Upon a Time, There Was an Exorcist: Narrative Structures in Old Babylonian Sumerian Incantations

Beatrice Baragli; Munich - California

Narratological approaches in cuneiform studies have mostly been applied to historical and mythological narratives, such as epics. Few attempts have been made to apply this method to incantations, which, being literary works as well, are also composed according to narrative structures that are specific to this genre. The present paper aims to use the literary theory of Genette (1983) to analyse a group of Sumerian incantation-prayers to the sun god Utu, which tell the mythological tale about a deity or a personal story about the petitioner's suffering: *Incantation to Utu A* and a *Kintu* of the *Bit rimki* ritual (Baragli forthcoming, Alster 1991, Borger 1967).

Within this framework, it is time to reconsider the concept of narrative structures in incantations in an attempt to answer the following question: to what extent is narratology a diagnostic tool for shedding light on the shaping of ritual texts? The Sumerian incantation prayers to the sun god Utu provide a case study to test the potential of this approach.

References:

Alster, Bendt (1991): "Incantation to Utu", *Acta Sumerologica* 13: 27-96.

Baragli, Beatrice (forthcoming): *Sonnengrüße. Die sumerischen Kintu-Gebetsbeschwörungen*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München.

Borger, Rykle (1967): "Das dritte "Haus" der Serie *bīt rimki* (VR 50-51, Schollmeyer HGŠ Nr. 1)", *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21: 1-17.

Genette, Gérard (1983): *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca.

A Tale of Two Stories? Mythical Content and Narrative Devices in *Angalta*

Bénédicte Cuperly; Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

The Sumerian composition known as "Innana's Descent to the Netherworld" (*Angalta*) is a patchwork text. As several researchers including Dina Katz and Annette Zgoll have already noted, it is a product of the (re)use of materials from various traditions that were combined to create a new pattern. The heuristic method developed at the University of Göttingen by Christian Zgoll and the DFG-research group STRATA provides researchers with tools to

reconstruct the narrative materials (*Erzählstoffe*) that take shape in texts, images, or other types of representations. Each new actualisation of a myth uses pre-existing materials, renewing their meaning, particularly through novel combinations. The analysis of mythical *Erzählstoffe* opens up new avenues for narratology in our field, by allowing rigorous comparisons between the material and the way it is presented and ordered in a text, making it easier to characterize the poetic form of mythical content.

We intend to apply this method to *Angalta*. After presenting the diversity of the *Erzählstoffe* combined in this text, we will show which literary devices have been used to give a unity to this disparate material. In concrete terms, we will compare the different stories featured in *Angalta* – as we reconstruct them – to the way they are artfully told and combined. We will focus in particular on the narrative structures deployed at the scale of the text: anticipations, embeddings, iterations, and so on. We will study in greater detail the interface binding together the two main stories, that of Innana and that of Dumuzi, to better understand how the combination was dealt with. Finally, we will argue that the use of some literary devices in turn has semantical implications.

The Layers of the Past: How the so-called “Sumerian King List” Arranges Narrative Material Gösta Gabriel; Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

In Babylonia, the past was not “what actually happened” (von Ranke 1824) but rather what people remembered. Piotr Steinkeller (2017) coined the term *mythical history* to describe a form of cultural memory that embraces both narratives that we would nowadays call “historical” and stories that seem “mythical” to us. From an emic perspective, however, it is all past, it is all history.

An important source for this Babylonian world-view is the so-called “Sumerian King List”, whose *editio princeps* by Thorkild Jacobsen (1939) celebrates its 80th anniversary this year. As the composition survives in a multiplicity of versions, it is what John Bryant (2002) would call a *fluid text*. Moreover, despite its conventional name, the composition is much more than a mere list, as it includes also a terse narrative of the “entire” political history of Sumer and Akkad since the time “when kingship was brought down from heaven.” Almost all variants briefly outline the deeds of a few outstanding rulers such as Etana, Gilgamesh, and Sargon. However, the composition does not only connect a global perspective with various *res gestae* but also systematizes the past as a whole.

Accordingly, I will first investigate which techniques are employed in order to tell the collected stories. Then, I explore how these means organize the past by creating a multilayered hierarchy among these narratives. Finally, I consider the composition’s textual history, thus connecting the idea of a stratified past with its stratified literary history.

References:

- Bryant, John (2002): *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen*. Ann Arbor.
Jacobsen, Thorkild (1939): *The Sumerian King List*. Assyriological Studies 11. Chicago.
Ranke, Leopold von (1824): *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*. Leipzig, Berlin.
Steinkeller, Piotr (2017): *History, Texts and Art in Early Babylonia. Three Essays*. Boston, Berlin.

Narrative Structures in the Sumerian Gilgamesh Stories: A Preliminary Investigation

Alhena Gadotti, Towson University

In the past few decades, the field of Assyriology has experienced a new interest in the study of Sumerian poetry. After focusing on literary compositions mostly as a source of historical and religious information, an effort has been made to approach the texts from a strictly literary point of view. The study of narrative structures has been especially productive, in part thanks to the pioneering works of Bendt Alster, Adele Berlin and Jeremy Black, to name a few.

The present paper aims at offering an introduction to the narrative structures in the Sumerian Stories about the epic hero Gilgamesh. Using my 2014 study of the narrative structure of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* as a point of departure, this paper will consider narratology in *Gilgamesh and Huwawa A*, *Gilgamesh and Huwawa B*, *The Death of Gilgamesh* and, to a lesser extent, *Gilgamesh and Akka*. *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* will not be considered due to its poor state of preservation. Such an investigation will shed new light on the interconnections among the extant stories about Gilgamesh in the Sumerian language and further our understanding of the relationship among these compositions.

Tablets as Narrative Units

Sophus Helle; Aarhus University

Most major works of Akkadian literature consist of a number of tablets (*tuppu*) that were linked together in a series (*iškāru*). When reading these compositions in translation or transliteration on paper, it is easy to gloss over the distinction between tablets and treat them as inconsequential subdivisions of the narrative. Erle Leichty (1964, 148), for example, refers to tablets as being 'like chapters in a book'. However, the material circumstance of the tablets invites a rather different perspective. Each tablet was a separate object, and ancient libraries often did not hold entire series but only select tablets from each composition. While ancient readers were generally familiar with the broader plot of these works and could therefore place each episode in its narrative context, they had before them only a single tablet at a time.

In this paper, I ask what the material condition of cuneiform literature meant for the structure of its narratives. I propose that we treat tablets as self-standing narrative units, more akin to entries in a serial or episodes in a TV-series than to chapters in a book. Through a case study of *Gilgamesh*, *Enuma Elish*, and *Atra-basis*, I investigate what might be gained by this approach. Does it lead to new readings of the ancient compositions? What new aspects of the story come to the foreground? What narrative structures are revealed within each tablet? In short, I argue that taking tablets seriously as physical objects reveals new aspects of the stories written on them.

References:

Leichty, Erle (1964): "The Colophon", in R.D. Biggs and J.A. Brinkman, eds., *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim*. Chicago. P. 147-54.

Which Way is Up? On Emotional Structure in Cuneiform Literature

Gina Konstantopoulos; University of Helsinki

In his 1981 autobiographical work, *Palm Sunday*, Kurt Vonnegut summarized his long-rejected master's thesis in anthropology, in which he proposed that stories and their narratives had emotional shapes. Such shapes could be graphed along a x-axis of the progression of narrative time and a y-axis of good or ill fortune, representing positive or negative values respectively. The

shapes of stories, Vonnegut argued, was as important an aspect of a society as any other, and “at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads” (285). Following this general theme, Vonnegut identified a set of basic emotional patterns which governed story arcs and the progression of a text’s protagonist through its narrative.

This paper applies Vonnegut’s basic premise – that stories have both emotional and narrational shapes and structures – to examine the narratives of several Sumerian and Akkadian literary texts, particularly those centered on the figures of Gilgamesh and Lugalbanda. In particular, I question how we might interpret such texts through this framework of the emotional narrative, or the emotional texture even, that can be found in them and the associated actions of their respective protagonists. Furthermore, the emotions of the text’s protagonist are best examined through the lens of native Akkadian and Sumerian terminology and understanding, in order to understand the expression of positive and negative emotions, be they joy or grief. Finally, this understanding and charting of emotional structure can be set in comparison to the narrative structure of the larger text, revealing points where the two frameworks may alternatively align or diverge, thus providing another avenue of exploration and analysis into the text’s overall narrative.

Stitching a Story Together: Language Use for Transition and Cohesion in the Hittite Tale of Zalpa

Robert Marineau, University of Chicago

The dynamics of story telling include not only poignant pericopes, but interconnections between them. Thematic foundations, narrative transitions, and allusions from one pericope to another work together to form these interconnections. Hittite narratives are rich with a diversity of transition markers and techniques for creating connections that enhance the poetic quality of a story. This paper will discuss the ways that one Hittite story, the Tale of Zalpa (CTH 3), used various narrative techniques to create a poignant and unexpectedly ironic situation. This story has incited much debate among Hittitologists about both the meaning and the purpose of the text. Scholars are still working through complicated and interrelated issues in an attempt to answer the question, “What is the text doing?” While an answer to this question may yet prove elusive, this paper will endeavor to bring greater clarity to the narrative techniques employed in the text and discuss how such techniques draw attention to a possible narrative goal.

20/20 Foresight? The Presence of Foreshadowing in Divine Predictions

Louise Pryke; Macquarie University

This paper explores the presence of the literary technique of foreshadowing in Mesopotamian narratives. In well-known stories such as *Gilgamesh*, *Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld*, and *Adapa and the South Wind*, major future narrative events are preceded by the prophetic counsel of a divine figure. Deities in myth can be presented as having the ability to foresee future events, with omniscience considered to be one of the traits associated with divinity in Mesopotamian religion (Vanstiphout 2009). Despite this, not all divine counsel appears to align well with later events in the narrative—at times, conflicts unfold in unpredicted ways, and divine directions can omit seemingly key points. If divine signalling of future events does not always provide a reliable preview of things to come, what functions might it serve in the narrative? This paper considers how elements of foreshadowing may be found in divine predictions, and explores how the incomplete knowledge of future events is used in myth to give shape to stories, create an atmosphere of suspense, and to test the boundaries of wisdom and divinity.

References:

Vanstiphout, Herman (2009): "Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus, Or How and Why Did the Sumerians Create Their Gods?", in B.N. Porter, ed., *What Is a God? Anthropomorphic and Non-Anthropomorphic Aspects of Deity in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Winona Lake. P. 15-40

Narrative Time in Combat Myths: A Comparative Case Study

Dahlia Shehata; Universität Würzburg

Most surviving Mesopotamian combat myths, including *Enuma Elish*, *Anzû*, *Erra* as well as Sumerian *Lugale* and *Angin*, share similar plots and are therefore prime examples for schematic literature belonging in a wider sense to the well known group of 'heroic poetry'. In most of these texts the events are narrated in their chronological order. Flashforwards or extended flashbacks are hardly to be found, also parallel actions are rather uncommon narrative techniques in Mesopotamian literature. On the basis of Genette's (2010) differentiation of 'narration time', this paper aims at comparing parallel scenes or moments in selected examples of combat myths, at the same time taking into account parameters such as tense, order, duration and frequency.

References:

Genette, Gérard (2010): *Die Erzählung*, 3rd edition. Paderborn.

Familiarity Breeds Content: The Dynamics of Repetition in Akkadian Literature

Selena Wisnom; University of Cambridge

Repetition as a literary device has fallen out of favour with contemporary readers. Consequently, the details of its workings in Akkadian poetry have yet to be fully explored, despite the fact that it is a key feature of cuneiform literary texts. This paper takes a cognitive approach to the topic by examining repetition from the point of view of performance, from the perspective of an audience who listens rather than reads. In music, both in ancient times and today, repetition serves as a means of instilling familiarity with the composition, which in turn increases the audience's enjoyment of it. Repetitions are not always exact, but often introduce small variations in order to build on this familiarity and prevent it from becoming stale. Thus, rather than boring an audience repetition in fact has the opposite effect, engaging us with the text by better acquainting us with it.

I will examine repeated passages in *Anzû*, *Enuma Elish*, and *Gilgamesh*, analysing their placement in the overall structure of the poems, as well as the similarities and differences between them. These texts may have originally been sung ('Here now is the song of Marduk', *Enuma Elish* VII 161), but the aim of this approach is to shed light on them as texts, since it is their underlying patterns that are being considered. Both cognitive and intratextual methods will be applied in order to discover whether analysing the texts from a musical perspective can account for the effectiveness of their repetitions and help us understand their purpose and effects.