

How to Write a Hymn: Material Features in Manuscripts of Akkadian Poetry

Geraldina Rozzi
Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Deutschland

Abstract This paper investigates the materiality of cuneiform tablets, with a focus on paratexts in manuscripts of Akkadian literary texts, especially hymns and prayers. It explores how paratextual features, such as horizontal rulings, reflect and enhance poetic structures. Particular attention is paid to the corpus of the Great Hymns and Prayers, where couplet divisions could offer insights into their poetic form and textual evolution. By combining material and literary analysis, the study highlights the interplay between paratexts and poetry in Akkadian literature.

Keywords Materiality. Paratexts. Assyriology. Akkadian. Literature. Poetry. Hymns. Prayers.

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1 Introduction

The field of Assyriology combines epigraphy and philology. Its very name goes back to the beginning of the discipline, which emerged with the discovery of royal inscriptions in ancient Assyrian cities. Today, Assyriology encompasses the study of a wide range of languages and dialects beyond Assyrian, and involves examining sources that primarily consist of cuneiform tablets.¹ Unlike other disciplines in the Humanities, such as classics, in which the study of language is distinct from the study of material objects (e.g. epigraphy), the field of Assyriology demands that its practitioners be at once philologists, epigraphers and paleographers, deciphering cuneiform inscribed in clay or carved in stone.² Cuneiform tablets, the main object of Assyriologists study, can be considered manuscripts in every sense and, just as with manuscripts made from papyrus or parchment, each cuneiform tablet is a unique artefact.³ The study of cuneiform texts cannot be divorced from the study of the medium that preserves them because, as we will explore in this article, the physical nature of the manuscript provides essential information about the text.

Following a brief overview of the current state of research on materiality in Assyriology, the present paper will outline the types of paratexts found in cuneiform tablets and their functions. Manuscripts of literary texts, particularly hymns and prayers, exhibit specific paratextual features that of

1 Michel 2021, 90-1.

2 Michel 2021, 108-9. See also Friedrich 2024, 14 on the necessity of updating some definitions, such as the concept of ‘inscription’ in epigraphy, which usually includes both the material object and the text written on it.

3 On cuneiform tablets as manuscripts, see Michel 2021; cf. Matthews 2013, 71 and Friedrich 2024, 12-13, who mentions other kinds of written artefacts in ancient civilisations.



Peer review

Submitted 2024-09-02
Accepted 2024-11-22
Published 2024-12-19

Open access

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Citation Rozzi, G. (2024). “How to Write a Hymn: Material Features in Manuscripts of Akkadian Poetry”. *KASKAL. Rivista di storia, ambienti e culture del Vicino Oriente Antico*, n.s., 1, 323-340.

ten relate to poetic aspects. The relationship between paratexts and poetry is especially noticeable in some tablets that preserve a group of compositions referred to as the Great Hymns and Prayers. Manuscripts of these texts are often marked by horizontal rulings that divide the text into couplets. These rulings provide clues about the poetic structure of the compositions and occasionally about changes in the text over the centuries.

2 Materiality and Assyriology

The relevance of materiality and its role in the analysis of written artefacts has long been underestimated in many disciplines devoted to the study of literatures and languages. As emphasised by Michael Friedrich, the development of textual criticism in the nineteenth century has led to a disinterest in the material aspect of textual sources, resulting in a notion of manuscripts as purely textual and independent of their physical nature and transmission.⁴

This misconception began to decline in the 1960s as it became increasingly clear that the individual reproductions of texts were essential to understanding the texts themselves. New approaches and methods investigating the materiality of texts, such as ‘genetic criticism’, and later in the nineties the so-called ‘material philology’, began to emerge.⁵

Scholars from different fields have come to realise that texts and their material form should not be treated as separate entities. Instead, there has been a growing recognition that both aspects should be considered together as integral components, with a holistic approach. In essence, the physical characteristics of manuscripts, such as their material, layout and handwriting, have been understood to provide valuable insights into various aspects, including the historical context, production process and transmission of the texts.⁶

The general tendency to overlook materiality also affected the field of Assyriology until quite recently, despite early Assyriologists’ recognition of the importance of studying cuneiform texts alongside their physical features. In this respect, two separate contributions published in the same year (1896) can be cited as examples: one by George Reisner and the other by Heinrich Zimmern. Reisner demonstrated an interest in the format of manuscripts in his volume on some Sumerian-Akkadian hymns preserved in the collection of the Berlin Museum and likely originating from Babylon.⁷ The author included a drawing of the profile of a cuneiform tablet and described the two most prevalent shapes of tablets observed in the corpus under examination. Differences between the obverse and reverse were also highlighted.⁸ Zimmern, in a review of two studies on Akkadian meter, emphasised the importance of analysing the layout and material features of literary texts to understand certain poetic aspects. The author focused in particular on the use of rulings in some Akkadian hymns to mark poetic stanzas.⁹ A few years later, in 1906, Leopold Messerschmidt published three studies on the nature of the stylus and the techniques used for impressing it on clay. He also looked at the production and shaping of tablets, reconstructing the processes involved in making smaller and larger tablets.¹⁰

In the following decades, the focus on these material aspects waned: the text and its content became the main object of study, a source of historical, cultural, philological and grammatical analysis, while the physical features of the tablets were treated only occasionally and for a long time as secondary elements.¹¹

⁴ Friedrich 2024, 2-3.

⁵ See the summary of these new approaches to written artefacts in Friedrich 2024, 3-7 with further references; on the genetic criticism, cf. also the recent contributions Hay 2017 and Rohrbach 2019.

⁶ Compare on this Bremer 2020, 350, who cites a significant passage from Chartier 1990, 12: “im Gegensatz zu der Darstellung, die von der Literaturwissenschaft selbst entworfen und von einer rein quantitativ orientierten Buchgeschichte wieder aufgegriffen wurde – nach ihr existiert der Text unabhängig von seiner Materialität – muß daran erinnert werden, daß ein Text nicht ohne den Träger, der ihn zu lesen (oder zu hören) gibt, existiert und daß kein Schriftstück unabhängig von den Formen, in denen es seine Leser erreicht, verstanden werden kann”.

⁷ For more detailed information about this corpus of Late Babylonian bilingual compositions, see Maul 2005, 11-16; Gabbay 2014, 244-55; Schwemer 2022, 62.

⁸ Reisner 1896; cf. Schnitzlein 2023, 51.

⁹ Zimmern 1896, 87-9; see also Zimmern 1893, 122. Cf. Hess 2015, 252.

¹⁰ Messerschmidt 1906, see also Messerschmidt 1907. Cf. Schnitzlein 2022, 29.

¹¹ Schnitzlein 2023, 9.

In recent decades, however, there has been a revival of interest regarding material features in Assyriology, as may be seen by numerous research projects on the topic.¹² Recent scholarship highlights the importance of studying materiality as an aid to understanding textual as well as cultural and social contexts. This approach departs from the ‘fetishistic’ view of written text, which considers the text as the only element worthy of attention,¹³ and instead also focuses on the physical characteristics of written sources. It places materiality and the interplay between materiality, text, and agent at the core (“Text-Anthropologie”).¹⁴

Indeed, the material features of cuneiform tablets can provide valuable information. The tablet’s shape, for example, can offer insights into the type of text it preserves and sometimes even provide a clue to its dating.¹⁵ This is particularly true for administrative texts, legal documents, and letters.¹⁶ Variations can also be found in the type of clay used, depending on the location and genre of the texts. For instance, Neo-Assyrian prisms may be identified by the traces of chaff in their clay.¹⁷ School tablets often have specific shapes as well, such as the classic lenticular school tablets from the Old Babylonian periods. Administrative texts and letters are often enclosed in thin layers of clay, which serve as envelopes to seal them.¹⁸ These are just a few examples of physical features that can provide insight into the type of cuneiform text.

3 Material Features in Cuneiform Sources: Visual and Textual Paratexts

However, it is important to consider other elements related to the physical aspect of manuscripts, beyond their shape and fabric. These elements can be referred to as ‘paratexts’, drawing on Genette’s famous concept: “a threshold, or – a word Borges used [...] – a ‘vestibule’ that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary”.¹⁹ We can therefore think of paratexts with respect to cuneiform artefacts as a set of material elements that provide us with information about the written object, but also about the text preserved on the object itself. They can in fact be considered as “the intersection between texts and materiality”.²⁰

Paratexts can further be divided into visual and textual. Visual paratexts are graphic elements that do not convey information through written text, such as layout, rulings, firing holes,²¹ line dividers,

¹² Such as, for example, *LIBER: The King’s Librarians at Work*. This was led by Prof. Paola Corò at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice and was recently followed by the connected project *The Structural and Visual Organization of Knowledge in Mesopotamian Archives and Libraries*. Another project, with a broader and interdisciplinary focus, is the one funded at Heidelberg University within the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 933 called *Material Text Cultures: Materiality and Presence of Writing in Nontypographic Societies*. The cluster of excellence “Understanding Written Artefacts” is currently hosted at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) at the University of Hamburg, and includes more than 40 disciplines, including Assyriology, and approximately 60 research projects. In addition, *Reading the Library of Ashurbanipal: A Multi-sectional Analysis of Assyriology’s Foundational Corpus* is a collaborative project based at the British Museum and Ludwig Maximilian University Munich. New publications have reinforced this focus: for example, the edited collection by Thomas E. Balke, Christina Tsouparopoulou (eds), *Materiality of Writing in Early Mesopotamia* (2016), or the comprehensive work on material features in cuneiform texts published recently by Babette Schnitzlein, *Untersuchungen zur Schreibkultur Mesopotamiens im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (2023). The mentioned projects and publications represent only a small part of the extensive research conducted on materiality in the field of Assyriology in recent years. See the detailed history of Schnitzlein 2023, 11-38 for further studies. Publications dealing with these issues are both digital and paper-based, and often rely on innovative techniques by which the material aspects of cuneiform sources are investigated, including for instance 3D scans and prints of tablets. Cf. also Matthews 2013, 65-6.

¹³ Tsouparopoulou 2016, 257.

¹⁴ The term “Text-Anthropologie” was coined by Markus Hilgert (2010). ‘Text-anthropology’ considers written texts and their meanings as products shaped by specific cultural knowledge systems and human actions. Hilgert’s use of the term emphasises an interdisciplinary understanding of the written word that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

¹⁵ Taylor 2011, 8-11; Matthews 2013, 65-6.

¹⁶ See Radner 1995. There are noticeable differences between, for example, Middle Assyrian contract tablets and later ones from the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods. The later tablets tend to be smaller and pillow-shaped, while the Middle Assyrian ones are more rectangular. Cf. Postgate 1986, 11; cf. Radner 1995 and Schnitzlein 2023, 50.

¹⁷ Taylor 2011, 7.

¹⁸ This practice dates to the Ur III period and continued through the Neo-Assyrian period, with various changes. For a detailed description of the physical characteristics of Assyrian letters, and their different types, see Schnitzlein 2023, 337-40. Cf. Radner 1995.

¹⁹ Genette 1997, 2; cf. also Genette, Maclean 1991.

²⁰ Ciotti, Lin 2016, viii.

²¹ For a recent investigation on firing holes, see Corò, Ermidoro 2020.

drawings (e.g. field plans or maps), seals, fingernail impressions, etc.²² Textual paratexts, on the contrary, include information expressed, in our case, through cuneiform signs (e.g. notations, dates, rubrics, colophons, etc.).²³

In addition, paratexts can be categorised based on their functions. Scholars working on materiality have recently identified three possible functions of paratexts: structuring, commenting, and documenting. The structuring function helps the reader navigate a manuscript, while the commenting function provides supplementary information such as glosses or commentaries. The documenting function serves to record aspects beyond the text itself, such as dates and places.²⁴

As with the tablet's physical shape, paratextual elements can also provide indications of certain textual categories. For instance, the layout – which we might consider a visual type of paratext with a structuring function –²⁵ provides valuable insights into the type of text. This is evident, for example, in lexical lists, which are typically organised in a tabular format with entries arranged into two or more parallel columns. Assyrian and Babylonian commentaries also exhibit distinct layouts, including the commonly used tabular format, the indented format, and other layout variations.²⁶

3.1 Paratexts in Literary Tablets

While administrative texts typically offer contextual information such as names or dates, making it easier to identify their *Sitz im Leben*, literary compositions present consistent challenges in this regard. This is because often the only clear context for most literary texts is the educational setting.²⁷ Identifying a *Sitz im Leben* is not the only difficulty when it comes to cuneiform literary works. Determining aspects such as genre and authorship is also problematic in most cases.²⁸ With this respect, the study of materiality and of paratexts can prove useful, shedding light on the type of text, its use (e.g. providing insights into performative aspects) and occasionally its composition and transmission processes.

The paratexts found in manuscripts of literary compositions largely overlap with those found in non-literary sources. However, some paratexts are specifically associated with the nature of literary texts. Examples of 'visual' paratexts in literary tablets include, besides the layout: spacing, rulings, decimal markers, line dividers, musical notations. Textual paratexts are, for instance, rubrics, subscripts, colophons, catchlines.²⁹

As in the case of administrative documents, the form of the tablets and the arrangement of text on manuscripts, i.e. the layout, can serve as an initial criterion when examining literary tablets. Despite variations and changes between textual traditions, even in literary compositions there is an occasional correspondence between the textual genre and the manuscript shape. This is exemplified, for example, by many Old Babylonian and first millennium Sumerian and Sumero-Akkadian compositions, such as bilingual lamentations and incantations (e.g. Balags, Eršahungas, Šuilas and Eršemmas), which are usually written in a single-column format, giving the manuscripts an elongated appearance.³⁰ Furthermore, Christian Hess has shown that this format, i.e. a long single-column tablet, is also common in ep-

²² These are only a few types of visual paratexts that can be found in cuneiform tablets. See Taylor 2011 for more about similar material features in cuneiform sources.

²³ For the distinction between visual and textual paratexts see Ruokkeinen, Liira 2019, 112. These examples of paratexts applied to cuneiform texts do not always correspond perfectly with Genette's theory, which refers to the printed book and thus necessarily includes aspects that deviate from our area of interest. Genette himself was aware of the limitations of his theory when applied to 'pre-Gutenberg' ancient manuscripts (Genette 1997, 16). For further information on this aspect, see Andrist 2018, 132. However, we have decided to adopt Genette's theories and apply them to material features in a broader sense, adapting them to the cuneiform context.

²⁴ Ciotti, Lin 2016, vii; cf. Friedrich 2023, 5.

²⁵ The question of whether the layout qualifies as a true paratext is a subject of debate among scholars interested in the materiality of ancient manuscripts (Andrist 2018, 135). On the paratextual value of layout and other physical elements, see Andrist 2018, 135, 137 and 138.

²⁶ Schnitzlein 2023, 251; Frahm 2012, 33-7.

²⁷ When referring to literary compositions, I adopt the 'minimalist' definition offered by Röllig ("Literatur". *RIA*, 7, 48-66), who distinguishes between *belles-lettres* and texts of everyday life. Identifying the *Sitz im Leben* of literary texts is a well-known challenge: in most cases we have no clue about the author of a text, its use and purpose, on this see Hess 2015, 254; George 2007, 41.

²⁸ See Lenzi 2019, 37-8 for a survey on the problem of genre in Akkadian literature, with previous bibliography.

²⁹ This is a partial list and does not include all possible paratexts found in literary manuscripts. For a comprehensive analysis of materiality in epic texts, refer to Hess 2015. Additionally, Schnitzlein 2023, 71-81, discusses other characteristics of materiality in literary texts of various types.

³⁰ Schnitzlein 2023, 355.

ic texts and myths, as evidenced by several Old Babylonian manuscripts of the Epic of Gilgameš, some manuscripts of *Atraḫasis*, and all the manuscripts of the Descent of Ištar.³¹

In certain cases, the layout can offer immediate indications regarding the period and origin of a text, as seen in the earliest literary compositions written in cuneiform from Abu Salabikh, dating from the third millennium BCE. Their manuscripts come in two formats: either small and rectangular or much larger, but still identifiable due to their peculiar layout of being divided into multiple columns, which are further subdivided into smaller cases.³²

Another example of a visual paratext with a structuring function, often found in literary manuscripts, are rulings. Horizontal rulings are regularly drawn in bilingual interlinear texts to visually structure the text and serve as guides for scribes to maintain straight writing. The horizontal rulings are positioned where the Sumerian phrases appear. The line in Sumerian is usually written on top of a horizontal guiding ruling, whereas the Akkadian line has no such graphic aid. These guiding rulings, which may be either faint or more strongly marked, give the impression that the cuneiform signs ‘hang’ from them.³³

Horizontal rulings in bilingual texts can also be used as text dividers. They are traced every two lines, so that each Sumerian line is paired with its Akkadian equivalent.³⁴ This division can also be considered a graphic indication, rather than a poetic division as often found in Akkadian hymns (see below).

In addition, not only can certain physical characteristics be associated with particular textual genres, but also there seem to be standard, preferred forms for specific compositions, which may vary depending on place and time. For example, the manuscripts preserving the Old Babylonian version of the Epic of Gilgameš are often single-column tablets. In Nineveh, however, the preferred format for the standard Babylonian version was wider, typically spanning three columns. The Ipiq-Aja version of *Atraḫasis* also adheres to a standard form, being characterised by a four-column layout, whereas the Late Babylonian version from Sippar is typically preserved in single-column manuscripts. The Epic of *Enūma eliš* is mainly found on single-column tablets.³⁵

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the observed characteristics are not necessarily fixed features or rules. As Hess rightly points out,³⁶ the manuscript tradition of epic texts is very diverse, and only a few general tendencies can be discerned. The same applies to many other literary genres. Indeed, as will be shown further in this paper, texts that may seem dissimilar, such as wisdom compositions and hymns, might share numerous physical and paratextual features. This reinforces the idea that the concept of literary genre is largely a modern construct, and that the Mesopotamians likely had a more fluid understanding of the differences between texts.

Questions of genre notwithstanding, the observation of recurring correspondences and patterns, however flexible, can be relevant for understanding some literary aspects of cuneiform compositions and for identifying differences and similarities between texts.

Moreover, scholars have identified a further correlation between the format of manuscripts and the text they contain. This correlation suggests that when material and paratextual features are standardised, there tends to be a corresponding consistency in the transmitted text. For instance, if different manuscripts share similar physical characteristics, such as tablet shape and layout, they might often exhibit a high degree of uniformity in textual variants as well.³⁷ This phenomenon is particularly evi-

³¹ Cf. Hess 2015, 261.

³² See for example IM 070263 at Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI). December 4, 2001. <https://cdli.ucla.edu/P010263>. On the materiality of Sumerian third millennium literary texts, see Jáka-Sövegjártó 2020, 322. Note, however, that the division into rectangular cases is not specific to literary texts from Abu Salabikh, but is also attested in archival texts from the same site. Therefore, in this context and period, it cannot be considered specific to any particular genre. For an overview of the Abu Salabikh tablets, see Krebernik 2009.

³³ See for example K.1296. Lenzi 2019, 15; Schnitzlein 2023, 71-2 with previous bibliography. Bilingual texts are particularly well-suited for analysing physical and material elements. For instance, a common paratextual feature used in bilingual texts is indentation, which can help recognise such texts at first glance. The indentation involves only the line of text written in Akkadian, meaning the Akkadian translation is placed below the Sumerian text line and slightly indented to the right. This often results in the Akkadian signs being smaller. For an example of an indented tablet, see K.133. In another fragment of a bilingual literary text, BM 47805, a manuscript of the composition labelled by Lambert as “The seed of Kingship” (1974), it is evident that the Akkadian text is written in a slightly smaller size. On the physical features of bilingual texts, cf. Krecher 1976-80 and Heinrich 2024, 54-5.

³⁴ This can be clearly seen in the Eršahunga-prayer to Enlil KAR 9+ VAT 10607 + Vat 11573, Maul 1988, Pl. 65. Cf. also for example the Lugale manuscript K.2871, ruled every two lines, available at <https://www.ebl.lmu.de/fragmentarium/K.2871>.

³⁵ Hess 2015, 261-2.

³⁶ Hess 2015, 273.

³⁷ On standardisation of Akkadian texts, see Lenzi 2019, 29-33. It should be noted that the process of canonisation in the first millennium, while undoubtedly involving a systematisation and a certain homogenisation of many texts, does not completely exclude changes and different versions, cf. Lenzi 2019, 31 with fn. 75.

dent in epic texts.³⁸ Additionally, there are instances where paratextual features associated with poetic elements are consistent across different manuscripts of the same composition, for example, indications of meter or poetic structure.

3.1.1 ‘Poetic’ Paratexts

In certain cases, paratexts may serve to mark both palaeographic and poetic conventions. They can indicate the standardised format for transmitting certain texts, as previously demonstrated with epic literature and myths, but they can also embody specific poetic characteristics. However, like other paratexts, even those of a ‘poetic’ nature, i.e. clearly associated with aspects of poetic texts, such features are not exclusive to a single literary genre; rather, they are often found across multiple genres. Nevertheless, certain genres exhibit a higher concentration of these ‘poetic’ paratexts. The most prominent ‘poetic’ paratexts include those related to meter and those that indicate the structure of the poetic text, such as horizontal rulings marking its stanzas.

3.1.1.1 Vertical Dividers (metrum)

Poetic paratexts mark meter through the representation of metrical units (feet) and the caesura on the tablet.

The Akkadian metrical system is still debated, and many different models of meter have been proposed in recent years. However, the tablets themselves provide valuable clues on this topic. The standard Akkadian meter consists of four feet, with the last being trochaic, and is divided by a caesura in the middle. Feet and caesura can be depicted through vertical rulings or blank spaces.³⁹

Both material features can be considered visual paratexts serving a structuring purpose. This metrical pattern is confirmed by some manuscripts of the Babylonian Theodicy (BM 35405, BM 47745, BM 34773, BM 40124+).⁴⁰ Three of these manuscripts display vertical lines drawn across the whole tablet, marking the standard four-foot metrical structure of each line. In the case of BM 40124+, the meter is expressed through spacing, with spaces left between the metrical units in each line. Another manuscript of Theodicy (K.9290) shows spacing that sometimes coincides with the metrical caesura.

Another wisdom poem whose manuscripts show metrical breaks is *Ludlul*. In fact, in the manuscripts HuzNA1, SipLB1 (*Ludlul* I); HuzNA1 (*Ludlul* II); BabNB1a (*Ludlul* III), BabLB3 (*Ludlul* V), an anepigraphic space is visible in the middle of the tablet, marking the caesura between the two hemistichs.⁴¹

Manuscripts of epic texts and myths occasionally exhibit spacing that appears to correspond to the metrical caesura as well. For example, a metrical pattern can be identified in some manuscripts of *Enūma eliš*⁴² and *Etana*.⁴³

3.1.1.2 Horizontal Dividers (Larger Text Units, Strophes, Couplets)

The second type of paratext mentioned above, namely horizontal rulings drawn on the tablets, were used to indicate the structural elements of poetic texts. This practice can be observed in manuscripts of literary texts dating back to the Old Babylonian period.⁴⁴ It is worth noting that horizontal lines can

³⁸ In this respect, Hess (2015, 273) has analysed a group of manuscripts of *Atraḫasis* that not only share identical layouts but also appear to contain the same poetic variants.

³⁹ It has been hypothesised that the red dots in the literary texts from Amarna might also be markers of meter, although the manuscripts preserving this physical feature are very few, and this theory remains uncertain (Izre’el 1991). For an overview of Akkadian meter, see Jiménez 2017, 72-5, with previous studies, and Lenzi 2019, 47-57.

⁴⁰ For an updated edition of the Babylonian Theodicy, see the online version at Heinrich 2022.

⁴¹ For the latest edition of *Ludlul*, see Häntinen 2022 where photos of all manuscripts preserving the text can be found. I am thankful to A. Häntinen who kindly brought the manuscripts of *Ludlul* here mentioned to my attention.

⁴² E.g. CT 13, pls 14-15, 1882,0918.3737 (= Ee IV), Hess 2015, 267; on layout in Ee see Lambert 2013, 17-34.

⁴³ For example, the Nineveh manuscripts K.8563 (Etana SB I, SB III) and K.2606 (Etana SB I, SB II, SB III). For an updated edition of the epic, see Földi 2024.

⁴⁴ Hess 2015, 263.

serve a dual purpose: they may indicate not only the divisions between poetic sections within a composition, such as stanzas, but also mark the tenth line of a column, functioning as decimal markers. Alternatively, decimal markers can be represented by wedges impressed in the margin.⁴⁵ Placing a marker on the tablet every tenth line likely aided scribes in manuscript consultation and copying, thus functioning as a library mark.

Horizontal rulings indicating both stanzas and decimal markers can be found in many Akkadian epic texts, although not consistently, as, for example, in some manuscripts of *Atrahasis* and OB *Gilgames*.⁴⁶ In the manuscript from Sultantepe of the Myth of Nergal and Ereskigal, horizontal lines are used to mark the beginning of new sections, especially in the introduction of direct speech.⁴⁷ The Theodicy also exhibits a clear poetic structure, with horizontal rulings appearing every 11 lines. In this case, rulings denote the end of stanzas, each comprising five couplets and an odd line.⁴⁸ Rulings are also present in manuscripts of other wisdom texts. For example, RB 59 (AO 4462, The Dialogue between a Man and his God) also features the ‘guiding’ rulings every 10 lines.⁴⁹ Various manuscripts of *Ludlul* also appear divided by horizontal rulings every 10 lines (VAT 9954, VAT 10569), or after each individual line (BM 55481).⁵⁰

3.2 Paratexts in Akkadian Hymns and Prayers

Within the Akkadian literary corpus, two genres stand out for their frequent use of paratextual features such as metrical break and line dividers: hymns and prayers.⁵¹

Akkadian hymns and prayers display distinctive elements of materiality, despite their heterogeneous nature and development over the centuries. For example, like epic texts, hymns from the Old Babylonian period are often preserved on single-column tablets. In the first millennium, however, hymns were usually written on two-column tablets, especially in Nineveh.⁵² A few Old Babylonian Akkadian hymnic compositions, furthermore, are preserved on a *Sammeltafel* (i.e. the series of Old Babylonian hymns to Papulegara).⁵³

In addition, Akkadian hymns and prayers frequently include textual paratexts, such as rubrics, subscripts, and catchlines. These textual paratexts serve a ‘commenting’ function and are invaluable to modern scholars in providing more contextual information, i.e. understanding how these texts were perceived, used and labelled by the ancients. For example, subscripts and rubrics provide information about the performance of these texts, such as whether they were sung and sometimes on which occasion. Old Babylonian hymns often have subscripts indicating their types, or defining the different sections, e.g. the annotations *kirugu* and *ĝešgiĝal* found in the manuscript of the hymn *Agušaya A*, already used in Sumerian hymns and lamentations.⁵⁴ Akkadian incantation prayers, on the other hand, carry the typical superscript *ÉN*, which identifies them as part of a ritual.⁵⁵

⁴⁵ E.g. *Gilg.* OB UM 29-13-570, see George 2003, 217.

⁴⁶ Hess 2015, 264-5.

⁴⁷ SU-1951.108, see STT I, 28 (Gurney, Finkelstein 1957).

⁴⁸ See Lambert 1960, 66.

⁴⁹ For the edition of the text see Lambert 1987 and more recently Oshima, Anthonioz 2023.

⁵⁰ Häntinen 2022.

⁵¹ Providing a precise differentiation between hymns and prayers in Akkadian literature is challenging since the two types overlap in many aspects. Hymns generally focus on praising the invoked god, while prayers emphasise petition and supplication. For an overview of Akkadian hymns and prayers, refer to von Soden 1957-71 and 1972-75; for Akkadian hymns, cf. also Streck 2020, who also discusses the differences between hymns and prayers.

⁵² This is likely due to a paleographical convention resulting from the already established Sumerian tradition. Manuscripts of Sumerian hymns from third millennium typically use *Kurzzeile*, which are short lines broken into triads across multiple lines. This convention was also adopted to some extent in later hymns, including those from the Old Babylonian period (on *Kurzzeile* and their development, see Jáka-Sövegjártó 2020). For instance, in the tablet of the hymn to *Agušaya A*, each line contains only two metrical units out of four (see below in this paper). This structure differs from later poetry, particularly Akkadian hymnic poetry of the first millennium, where each line corresponds to an entire line (Foster 2005, 38-9).

⁵³ Streck, Wasserman 2008; for a definition and description of *Sammeltafeln*, see Worthington 2008.

⁵⁴ On the *kirugu* and *ĝešgiĝal* sections in Old Babylonian hymns, see Metcalf 2015, 56. Note, furthermore, the remarks by Metcalf regarding the partially damaged subscript preserved at the bottom edge of the Hymn to Amurru. According to Metcalf, this subscript might suggest the context in which the hymn was recited (Metcalf 2015, 54, with fn. 12). Furthermore, Old Babylonian hymns show occasionally the subscripts *pārum*, whose meaning is uncertain, *zamārum*, ‘song’, and *šer₅ tanittim*, ‘song of praise’. All these terms are adapted from the Sumerian terminology (Metcalf 2015, 54-7, cf. Shehata 2009, 262-83).

⁵⁵ Lenzi 2019, 165-7 with previous literature.

As for the other paratexts mentioned above, caesuras and rulings, they are particularly common in manuscripts of Akkadian hymns, but are occasionally also found in prayers. A clear example of a caesura achieved by spacing can be found in the Assurbanipal's hymn to Aššur K.3258.⁵⁶ The hymn is preserved on a single-column tablet and is entirely divided into two parts to indicate the two hemistichs.

In addition, a similar layout is found in the main manuscript of the Great Prayer to Nabû, K.2361, where the metrical caesura is represented by either a vertical line or spacing on the tablet. In the first column, spacing is used when the line is short enough to fit within the line. In longer lines, a vertical line is preferred. However, this division is not consistently applied throughout the manuscript, as the metrical marker is only visible in the first column. It appears that the scribe has overlooked it in the rest of the tablet, where no caesura is drawn.⁵⁷

The Hymn to Ištar Queen of Nippur⁵⁸ also features spaces at the presumed metrical caesura in some of its manuscripts, most of which come from Nineveh, at the presumed metrical caesura. Taking, for example, the manuscript K.8697 (ii, ll. 10-12), it is evident that the scribe has marked the four metrical units, leaving spaces and occasionally adding firing holes. The manuscript K.9955+ Rm 613 (e.g. obv. ii, 65-7) shows a similar division. In other manuscripts, however, spaces and firing holes are placed less consistently (see e.g. Si 9, rev., ll. 68-9 and l. 76), and the scribe apparently just tried to fill the available space on the tablet evenly.⁵⁹

Indeed, like the epic texts, hymns and prayers do not always have uniform physical characteristics, and variations are often found even between different manuscripts of the same text. However, one of the most common paratextual features in Akkadian hymns is the use of horizontal rulings to divide the texts into different sections. This practice is often consistent across different manuscripts of the same compositions (as can be observed in the corpus of the Great Hymns and Prayers, see below).

3.2.1 Horizontal Rulings

In numerous instances, Akkadian prayers employ horizontal rulings to separate sections. Rulings in prayers are typically found at the end of the composition and followed by a subscript indicating the type of prayer, or by ritual instructions. It is common for tablets to contain multiple prayers, each separated by horizontal lines and rubrics.⁶⁰

Manuscripts of Akkadian hymns can feature horizontal rulings to mark the composition at every tenth line. This is seen, for instance, in the Acrostic Hymn to Nabû (BM 55469), which is divided into four stanzas of ten lines each.

3.2.1.1 Strophes and Couplets

However, horizontal lines are often used to indicate the poetic structure as well, dividing the text into couplets or stanzas. While for epic texts this type of paratext is highly inconsistent and seems to reflect the actual structure of the text only in a few cases, the tablets preserving Akkadian hymns appear to exhibit rulings consistent with the poetic form.⁶¹

Hence, as with Theodicy manuscripts, which feature a regular division into poetic stanzas and clear metrical markers, manuscripts of Akkadian hymns often show a close relationship between materiality and poetry.

This type of material feature, like other material elements, changes over time. In the Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian periods, horizontal rulings are typically traced every 4 or more lines, while

⁵⁶ Livingstone 1989, 4-6; cf. the online edition at <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/saa03/P334930>. I am thankful to A. Häntinen, who kindly brought this hymn to my attention.

⁵⁷ The *editio princeps* of this text was first published by von Soden 1961. Cf. the online edition available on the *eBL* platform, Rozzi 2022. A new, comprehensive edition of the text will be published by the Author in the next future (Rozzi 2024).

⁵⁸ For an updated online edition of this text, see Földi 2021 with further references; cf. Lambert 1982.

⁵⁹ Cf. Hess 2015, 68 for spacing inserted within words.

⁶⁰ Lenzi 2019, 35. For an example of this kind, see e.g. IM 067630, originating from Kalhu and accessible from the Šuilla database online, at <http://shuilas.org/P363582.html>.

⁶¹ Hess 2015, 262-3; Groneberg 1971, 136.

in the first millennium manuscripts of hymns are occasionally lined every two lines.⁶² The strophic division every fourth line is especially typical of poetry.⁶³

Examples of this well-defined poetic structure can be found in several Old Babylonian manuscripts. For instance, in the hymn *Agušaya A*, the text is divided by a horizontal ruling after every eighth line. The rulings indicate distinct poetic stanzas of four lines each. This line division is due to the layout of the text, which is composed of ‘short lines’ (*Kurzzeilen*), that is, each line on the tablet contains only one hemistich, i.e. half a line (see fn. 37). In other words, each stanza consists of four lines, which are spread over eight lines on the tablet.⁶⁴

Another clear example of the division into stanzas is attested in two Old Babylonian hymns: the Hymn to Ištār for Ammīditāna and a hymn to Nanaya. The remarkable state of preservation of these two texts reveals the regularity of their structure. Each hymn is divided into 14 stanzas of 4 lines each.⁶⁵

The Hymn to Ištār for Ammīditāna is characterised by parallelism, which is closely tied to its division into stanzas. Parallelism is the most used rhetorical device in Akkadian poetry, closely interwoven with metrics and material features.⁶⁶ It can occur between two or more lines, or even within a single line. In the latter case, the two hemistichs form a parallelism.

A common type of parallelism found in Akkadian hymns, as well as in some prayers and epic poems, is known as ‘lyrical repetition’.⁶⁷ This rhetorical device, inherited from Sumerian compositions,⁶⁸ involves repeating two identical couplets, which differ only in the name of the invoked deity introduced in the second set of lines. This poetic form is clearly shown in the Hymn to Ištār for Ammīditāna, e.g. ll. 1-4:

¹[i]ltam zumrā rašubti ilātim
²litta”id bēlet nišī rabīṭ igigī
³ištār zumrā rašubti ilātim
⁴litta”id bēlet iššī rabīṭ igigī

¹Sing of the goddess, (most) awe-inspiring of goddesses;

²Let the mistress of people, great(est) of the Igigi be praised;

³Sing of Ištār, (most) awe-inspiring of goddesses; Let

⁴the mistress of women, great(est) of the Igigi be praised.⁶⁹

It is not surprising, therefore, that horizontal rulings divide the manuscript into groups of four lines.

The division of the tablet into stanzas and the marking of poetic breaks probably helped the scribes to copy and study the texts, as did the use of decimal markers.

It is worth noting that hymns, already from the Old Babylonian period, tend to exhibit greater linguistic complexity than other literary compositions, frequently making use of a specific literary dialect known as the ‘hymno-epic dialect’.⁷⁰ These texts were typically written by a scribal elite and often lacked a ritual context.⁷¹ A clear layout likely facilitated both the transmission and the comprehension of these challenging texts.

⁶² Note Jiménez 2017, 73: “The most common type of stanza is the couplet. Other stanzas, such as tercets, do occur, but they are not as common”; see also Metcalf 2015, 71; Lambert 2013, 28 points out that division into couplets is typical of the late period, with the only exception of an Old Babylonian copy of *Atraḥasīs*.

⁶³ Compare also the remark by Groneberg 2003, 65: “Ideally a strophe is shown on the tablet by a separating line which should mark off the passage as a semantic unit. This happens in quite a number of texts, but there are other poetic texts that are underlined throughout, which is regular procedure in documentary texts of that time. Yet it has to be kept in mind that the four-line strophe in OB times is typical for poetry only and not for narrative texts”.

⁶⁴ See Pohl 2022, 124-34 for an updated edition.

⁶⁵ For a new edition of the Hymn to Ištār for Ammīditāna, see Pohl 2022, 176-84 with previous references; see also Pohl 2022, 227-35 for the Hymn to Nanaya.

⁶⁶ Jiménez 2017, 73-4.

⁶⁷ Groneberg 2003, 16; cf. Metcalf 2015, 22 and 60.

⁶⁸ Metcalf 2015, 22; Steinberger 2022, 295.

⁶⁹ Translation borrowed from <https://seal.huji.ac.il/node/7495>.

⁷⁰ Pohl 2022, 13-14 with previous literature.

⁷¹ Pohl 2022, 10-12.

4 Form Follows Function (and Convention): Material Features Within the *Great Hymns and Prayers*

Studying the relationship between poetry and materiality is certainly useful for understanding the poetic structure of texts, but it can also offer valuable insights into the processes by which they were composed and transmitted. For instance, the group of the so-called *Great Hymns and Prayers* shows how horizontal rulings may indicate the changes a text has undergone in the course of its tradition.

The *Great Hymns and Prayers* are a group of literary hymns and prayers, mostly preserved in first millennium manuscripts. They are characterised by a considerable length, often exceeding 200 lines, linguistic complexity, and use of poetic devices. At times they address themes like those found in wisdom literature. These features have led Assyriologists to identify them as a distinct group. In addition, another trait that sets the *Great Hymns and Prayers* apart from other texts concerns the aspect of many of their manuscripts: numerous tablets appear divided into distichs by horizontal rulings. This characteristic has aided in the identification of many parallels and has led some scholars to label this genre as “hymns in paragraphs”.⁷²

The hymns belonging to this small body of texts are nine so far, two of which (the Great Prayer to Nabû and the Hymn to Ištar Queen of Nippur) were already mentioned in the present paper. The nine Great Hymns and Prayers are:

- The literary prayer to Marduk (Marduk1)
- The hymn to Marduk (Marduk2)
- The Great Hymn to Šamaš
- The Gula Hymn of Bullussa-rabi
- The Syncretistic Hymn to Gula
- The Great Prayer to Ištar
- The Hymn to Ištar Queen of Nippur
- The Great Anûna Prayer
- The Great Nabû Prayer.⁷³

Not all compositions included in this corpus⁷⁴ exhibit the same division into couplets: the Gula-Hymn of Bullussa-rabi shows irregular rulings, sometimes apparently wrongly placed;⁷⁵ the Syncretistic Hymn to Gula does not feature consistent rulings in any of its manuscripts;⁷⁶ and the Nineveh manuscript preserving the Great Literary Prayer to Ištar, K.225, exhibits a ten-line division, unrelated to the poetic structure.

A noteworthy case is represented by the Hymn to Ištar Queen of Nippur, which is divided into stanzas of 13 lines each in three of its manuscripts. The hymn’s poetic structure resembles that of the manuscripts of the Babylonian Theodicy. Each stanza comprises six couplets and an odd line, which varies in position within the stanzas. The extra line can be identified because it appears ‘mismatched’ to the other parallel couplets, seemingly isolated among the parallel lines.

The use of rulings found in this text has significant implications for understanding the composition process of the hymn, as noted by Lambert in the first edition. Indeed, the division into strophes is only present in certain portions of the text, such as the hymnic introduction or the litany-like section (iii, ll. 1-38), but not, for example, in the section where a third-person lament unfolds (ii, ca ll. 3-30). This inconsistency in the text division, coupled with the variety in content and even style across differ-

⁷² Lambert 1960, 48; for the term ‘hymn in paragraphs’, cf. for instance Sidersky 1929, 22.

⁷³ With the exception of Marduk1 and Marduk2, a new online edition of all these texts is available on the *eBL* platform: <https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus>. The *eBL* platform incorporate previous editions, updating them with new fragments, new readings and a fresh translation. The author’s PhD dissertation, soon to be published, includes a comprehensive edition of the *The Great Nabû Prayer* and *The Great Prayer to Ištar*, and a study of the corpus. Marduk1 and Marduk2 will be soon published by E. Jiménez. I am thankful to Prof. Jiménez who shared with me a preliminary draft of the forthcoming edition. For the most recent edition of Marduk1 and Marduk2, see Oshima 2011.

⁷⁴ The definition of the corpus is, of course, not definitive and should not be interpreted as such. New texts may be discovered that could either confirm or contradict the current interpretation of these compositions. I borrowed the name “Great Hymns and Prayers” from Foster 2005, where translations of all these texts, except for the Great Anûna Prayer, are provided.

⁷⁵ Lambert 1982, 174.

⁷⁶ See for example K.232+, where it is difficult to identify a clear structure, since rulings are traced sparsely at obv. 6, 16, 41 and rev. 7; note, however, that two of the other Babylonian manuscripts, both from Sippar, BM 75974 and BM 76319 agree in putting rulings at l. 65’ and l. 74’; the Assur manuscript VAT 9670 + VAT 9931 shows ruling at l. 74’, but not at l. 65’. Hence, there might have been a standard layout at least for the Sippar sources.

ent sections, led Lambert to suggest that the text is a pastiche, that is, a conflation of different texts.⁷⁷

This aspect becomes even more noticeable when one observes that, in this hymn, while the use of rulings maintains a consistent pattern across copies – indicating a consensus among scribes regarding the placement of the horizontal rulings – other material features, such as the layout (e.g. whether the text is presented in four or two columns) and the distribution of lines on the tablet, exhibit considerable variability among the individual copies.

Five texts within the Great Hymns and Prayers divide their manuscripts into couplets: Marduk1, Marduk2, the Great Anūna Prayer, the Great Prayer to Nabû, and the Great Hymn to Šamaš.

All these compositions have a structure strongly based on parallelism: they are often characterised by ‘lyrical repetition’, though not necessarily throughout the entire text. Examples of this can be seen in Marduk1, Marduk 2, the Great Prayer to Nabû, and the Great Hymn to Šamaš, whereas the Great Anūna Prayer, preserved in a single, considerably damaged manuscript, never shows this rhetorical device.⁷⁸ Still, the text contains numerous synonymous and antithetical parallelisms, developed in pairs of lines, which naturally led to the division of the composition into couplets.

In Marduk1, Marduk 2, the Great Prayer to Nabû, and the Great Hymn to Šamaš, the horizontal lines often match the poetic structure, meaning that parallelisms are consistently marked through rulings. However, there are also cases where parallel lines, which clearly belong together, are disrupted by rulings.

The lack of correspondence between the poetic sense and the representation of couplets on the tablet is a common occurrence in many texts, and is often considered a scribal error.⁷⁹ Although, with Groneberg, one cannot rule out a “purely formalistic treatment of underlining” and a “secondary visual poetic ‘preparation’ for the written text”,⁸⁰ in some cases irregular lines provide clues to the history of the text, as in the manuscripts of the Hymn to Ištar Queen of Nippur (see above).

In this respect, the Great Hymn to Šamaš presents an interesting text-division in many of its ruled manuscripts.

4.1 The Great Hymn to Šamaš: Rulings and Couplets

This text provides a clear example of the use of parallelism in Akkadian poetry, as it is mostly composed of pairs of parallel lines. However, the hymn also presents some exceptions that make it sometimes difficult to decide how to divide the text, such as triplets, or pairs of lines that obviously belong to the same couplet, but are in fact separated by the horizontal rulings.⁸¹ Indeed, in the first edition of the text, Lambert already noted that the rulings seem occasionally to be drawn mechanically, and do not agree with the parallel couplets.⁸² These layout-irregularities are accompanied by a distinctive content: the composition begins with a very standard hymnic framework, but contains a long wisdom section in the middle, before ending on a hymnic note. Lambert postulated a “patchwork” composition process for the text due to its structure, akin to that proposed for the composition of the Hymn to the Queen of Nippur. According to Lambert, the Šamaš Hymn might have been composed in multiple stages, resulting in a mixture of different texts.⁸³

Despite this, the text shows a general uniformity in its copies. Almost all library manuscripts preserving it are divided into couplets by rulings. It is worth pointing out that the division into couplets is also attested in the Assyrian school manuscripts of the hymn and in one school tablet from Sippar (BM 65461+)⁸⁴.

⁷⁷ For pastiche in Akkadian literature, see Fadhil, Jiménez 2022, 256-7.

⁷⁸ Lambert 1960a, 44.

⁷⁹ Lambert 2013, 28; Hess 2015, 267, Groneberg 2003, 66.

⁸⁰ Groneberg 2003, 66.

⁸¹ Lambert (1960b, 122) already noted these inconsistencies, mentioning as the most striking example of this mechanical division into couplets ll. 174-5: *ayyūtu ḥursānū (ša) lā litbušū šarūrūka | ayyātu kibrātu ša lā ištāḥḥanā namirta šētkā*, “Which are the mountains that are not arrayed in your beams? | Which are the corners of the earth that are not warmed by the brightness of your rising?” (transl. by Foster *apud* Rozzi 2021). Other examples of improper division can be observed, for example, in ll. 176-7, which form a clear synonymous parallelism, and in ll. 182-3, which constitute a synthetic parallelism.

⁸² Lambert 1960b, 121-38. For the updated edition, see Rozzi 2021, where all the manuscripts here mentioned can be found. A new edition in print is in preparation and will be published by the author within the SAACT series.

⁸³ Lambert 1960b, 122.

⁸⁴ See George, Taniguchi 2019, no. 141 for the copy of BM 65461+.

Three school tablets from Assur preserve excerpts from the Great Hymn to Šamaš: VAT 10071, VAT 10756, and VAT 10174.⁸⁵ The first two contain lexical extracts, technical texts, and literary texts. Both VAT 10071 and VAT 10756 quote the same compositions, with the quotations of the extracts in VAT 10071 immediately preceding those in VAT 10756 in the original texts. VAT 10174 contains only excerpts from literary texts, including Marduk2.

These school tablets employ horizontal rulings to divide the different excerpts. VAT 10071 contains ll. 138-9 of the Great Hymn to Šamaš, while VAT 10756 contains ll. 140-1. Both library manuscripts, one from Nineveh (K.3182+) and the other from Sippar (IM 124633), that preserve this portion of the hymn feature a horizontal line between ll. 138 and 139 and between ll. 140 and 141. This indicates a different text structure than that shown in the Assur school tablets. However, upon reading the text, it becomes clear that the division into couplets as presented in the school fragments is more logical. If indeed we consider the preserved lines on the two school tablets as distichs, the passage of ll. 138-41 would be divided as follows:

Great Hymn to Šamaš, 138-41:

¹³⁸*šamaš imaḥḥarka alaktu ētiqū puluḥti*

¹³⁹*tamkāru allāku samallû nāš kīsi*

¹⁴⁰*šamaš imaḥḥarka bā'iru (ina) katimti*

¹⁴¹*šayyādu māḥiṣu muterru būli*

¹³⁸Šamaš, there turns to you the caravan passing through danger,

¹³⁹The travelling merchant, the agent carrying (his) purse.

¹⁴⁰Šamaš, there turns to you the fisherman with his net,

¹⁴¹The hunter, the beater, the one who drives the game.⁸⁶

The repetition of identical words at the beginning of ll. 138 and 140 (*šamaš imaḥḥarka*) may suggest that this was the original structure of the text. However, in the Assur school texts, the practice of quoting together lines that belong to diverse sections in the standard versions of the cited texts was widespread. This practice was likely intended to improve learning, as it required a greater effort to recall the broader context.⁸⁷ Thus, it is highly probable that the scribes of VAT 10756 and VAT 10071 were neither copying from a manuscript of the hymn with a different layout than that of the manuscripts from Nineveh, nor independently reinterpreting the text. Rather, the scribal exercise likely involved copying lines belonging to two different couplets. It is thus impossible to verify whether the textual structure found in the two Assur school fragments mirrors an earlier and perhaps more accurate form of the hymn, although it cannot be entirely ruled out either.

The school fragment VAT 10174, which preserves ll. 143-54 of the hymn, also exhibits a division into couplets. However, unlike the other two school tablets mentioned earlier, the division here follows that attested in the library manuscripts (three manuscripts from Nineveh: K.3182+, K.3474+ – indirectly joined to K.3650 – and K.20637; four from Sippar: BM 65472+, BM 74197, IM 124633 and Si 15+). Moreover, the couplets in this school fragment are presented differently compared to the others school manuscript from Assur. The scribe of VAT 10174 copied two lines on the same line of the tablet, marking the division between them with a *Trennkeil* and tracing a horizontal ruling. As observed by Zimmern,⁸⁸ the *Trennkeil* is normally used to divide lines that semantically form a distich.

⁸⁵ For the edition of these fragments, see al-Magasees and Manasterska, no. 29, *apud* Maul, Manasterska 2023 (VAT 10071); Kikuchi *apud* Maul, Manasterska 2023, no. 30 (VAT 10756); Koubková and Maul *apud* Maul, Manasterska 2023, no. 33 (VAT 10174).

⁸⁶ Rozzi 2021.

⁸⁷ Maul, Manasterska 2023, 22.

⁸⁸ Zimmern 1896, 88.

Interestingly, the excerpt from Marduk2 in the same fragment shows a division into couplets as well, but this is not the case in the other literary excerpts preserved in the same tablet, namely a hymn praising Babylon⁸⁹ and the Epic of Erra. Neither of these two excerpts shows rulings. In fact, the library copies of Erra do not have rulings, and accordingly, the extract on the school tablet is also unruled.⁹⁰

The Sippar school manuscript of the Hymn to Šamaš (BM 65461+) is a 2a-type tablet, according to Gesche's classification, as it preserves excerpts from literary and lexical texts.⁹¹ On the obverse, BM 65461 contains ll. 163-71 of the Great Hymn to Šamaš, followed by *Enūma eliš* III, ll. 64-72. On the reverse, the manuscript shows an excerpt from Ura = *hubullu*.⁹² Similarly to the case of VAT 10174, BM 65461+ features horizontal rulings every two lines, but only in the portion of the tablet containing the excerpt from the Hymn to Šamaš. The division into couplets in this section precisely matches that found in the library manuscripts that preserve the same lines of the hymn (e.g. K.3474+(+)K.3650: lines 163-70; K.3182+: lines 163-5 and 169-71; Si 15+: lines 168-71; BM 74197: lines 169-71). However, after obv. l. 9', corresponding to line 171 of the hymn, the rulings on BM 65461+ stop abruptly. The final line of the excerpt is 'unpaired,' meaning it does not have the corresponding line it is usually paired with in library manuscripts, and remains isolated between the previous couplet and the beginning of the next excerpt. The following text, the excerpt from *Enūma eliš*, has no rulings. In this respect, it is worth noting that no known manuscript of *Enūma eliš* features a division into couplets.⁹³ In addition, there are no rulings on the reverse, which preserves the lexical excerpt.

Hence, the Babylonian school fragment BM 65461+ not only marks the parallel couplets in accordance with the division found in the library manuscripts, but also, like the Assyrian school manuscript VAT 10174, clearly distinguishes between the literary texts quoted, indicating which excerpt should be divided into couplets and which should not.

There are also other examples of this type of line division in two Babylonian school tablets from Sippar (also belonging to the 2a-type) preserving Marduk2.⁹⁴

The use of rulings exclusively in the excerpts from the Šamaš Hymn and from Marduk2 in both Assyrian and Babylonian school tablets suggests that the convention of dividing these two texts into couplets was well known. These examples also highlight the close relationship between the graphic representation of a text and its form: the material characteristics of the school fragments probably reflect both paleographic conventions and the scribes' awareness of the poetic structure of the texts they copied and transmitted. Moreover, the fact that in BM 65461+ the last line quoted from the Great Hymn to Šamaš - l. 9' on the tablet, corresponding to l. 171 of the hymn - is left 'orphaned' and not copied together with its parallel line, probably reflects the same scribal practice observed in the Assur school tablets: that is, to combine in the same excerpts passages belonging to different portions of the standard text (see above). This provides further evidence supporting the hypothesis that the scribes were aware that the Great Hymn to Šamaš was structured into couplets. However, if parallel couplets were consistently represented through rulings in the manuscript tradition, how can we explain the occasional irregularities observed in library manuscripts, as well as the differences in the text-divisions both across the school fragments, and between the school fragments and the other manuscripts?

These irregularities include deviations from the expected layout, stanzas consisting of three lines instead of couplets, or lines that appear 'mismatched'. One possible explanation for this can be found in another text belonging to the *Great Hymns and Prayers*, namely the literary prayer to Marduk labelled by scholars as "Marduk1".

⁸⁹ Publication Fadhil, Jiménez forthcoming.

⁹⁰ Cf. Maul, *Manasterska* 2023, 119.

⁹¹ The 2a-type tablets were copied in the advanced stage of scribal education and are usually one-column. They comprise excerpts from literary texts and from lexical texts on the reverse or on the lower side of the obverse side. See Gesche 2001, 172-9.

⁹² George, Taniguchi 2019, 8.

⁹³ Cf. the most recent edition of the text in Heinrich 2021.

⁹⁴ See for instance BM 77118 (Gesche 2001, 646-7; Lambert 2013, plate 7) or BM 76640+ K.20949 (Oshima 2011, plate xix, Lambert 2013, plate 16; cf. Heinrich 2021). Both these fragments comprise several lines from Marduk2 and a passage of *Enūma eliš*: also in these cases, the excerpt from Marduk2 is divided into couplets, while the excerpt from *Enūma eliš* shows no rulings at all.

4.2 Marduk1: Paratext and Text Changing over Time

This literary Prayer to Marduk is the only one among the *Great Hymns and Prayers* to be preserved in an Old Babylonian manuscript, BM 78278,⁹⁵ as well as in first millennium copies.⁹⁶

As in the Old Babylonian copies of the Nanaya- and Ištar of Ammīditāna-hymns, the stanzas in BM 78278 are also marked by horizontal rulings every four lines. The prayer displays ‘lyrical repetition’, which aligns with the division every four lines.

In addition, some late library copies of this prayer are divided into couplets, meaning a horizontal line is drawn every two lines. It appears evident, therefore, that the text was perceived as composed of sets of parallel lines as early as the Old Babylonian period, and then the scribal practice of dividing the text into couplets was retained in the later periods. The Old Babylonian manuscript contains a significant portion of the prayer, but not the complete text, so we cannot ascertain if there are substantial differences between the older version and the one that has come down to us from first millennium sources.

Nevertheless, the text layout in later manuscripts may suggest a change that occurred in the composition of the prayer.

Like the Great Hymn to Šamaš, many late manuscripts of Marduk1 exhibit an overall regular division into couplets. However, closer inspection reveals instances of irregular division. The structure of the text appears clear up to l. 60, and there is consistency even in the ruled manuscripts that preserve that portion of the prayer. There are three such manuscripts, BM 76492,⁹⁷ IM 124504+ IM 124566,⁹⁸ both from Sippar, and K.3158+,⁹⁹ all displaying rulings at the same places. Up to l. 60, the division into couplets corresponds to the meaning of the text, in which the ‘lyrical repetition’ interchanges with other types of parallelism (e.g. synonymous and antithetical). However, from l. 60, there is a clear break as an extra line is introduced.¹⁰⁰ Ll. 60-1 are very similar, which raises doubts about whether one of them was mistakenly inserted into the text. Indeed, at this point, the division into couplets no longer corresponds to the poetic sense and appears to be purely artificial. This is evident upon reading the following passage:

Marduk1, 53-65:

⁵³*bēlu attā-ma tukīl napištuš*
⁵⁴*ṭiṭtiš(-ma) iteme itūru uppuššu*
⁵⁵*marduk attā-ma tukīl napištuš*
⁵⁶*ṭiṭtiš(-ma) iteme itūru uppuššu*
⁵⁷*naplis-ma bēlu šūnuḫa aradka*
⁵⁸*lizīqa šārkā-ma zamar napširšu*
⁵⁹*lištapših šērtaka kabitta*
⁶⁰*rumme maksīšu lippuš surriš*
⁶¹*rumme illurtašu puṭur maksīšu*
⁶²*ela mutim-ma qūl šitālšu*
⁶³*uggukka ay iššagiš gimil napšassu*
⁶⁴*marduk ana ardīka qūl šitālšu*
⁶⁵*uggukka ay iššagiš gimil napšassu*

⁵³O Lord! It is you who preserves his life,
⁵⁴(Of) him turned to clay, returned to his grave,
⁵⁵O Marduk! It is you who preserves his life,
⁵⁶(Of) him turned to clay, returned to his grave.
⁵⁷Regard, O Lord, your wearied servant!
⁵⁸Let your breath blow upon him, relent in an instant!

⁹⁵ Oshima 2011, 137-8, cf. CT 44, n. 21 (Pinches 1963).

⁹⁶ The only other composition within this corpus written on an Old Babylonian manuscript is the Great Anūna Prayer. However, this prayer was not preserved in any other manuscript, making it difficult to determine how widely known and copied it was in later centuries.

⁹⁷ Oshima 2011, pl. I-II.

⁹⁸ Fadhil, Jiménez 2019, 165-6.

⁹⁹ Lambert 1960, pls XII-XV.

¹⁰⁰ Fadhil, Jiménez 2019, 162.

- ⁵⁹Soothe your heavy punishment!
⁶⁰Loosen his shackles, that he breathe forthwith!
⁶¹Loosen his fetters, release his shackles!
⁶²Heed the man, consider him!
⁶³Lest in your rage he be slaughtered, spare his life!
⁶⁴O Marduk! Heed your servant, consider him!
⁶⁵Lest in your rage he be slaughtered, spare his life!¹⁰¹

Line groups 53-6 and 62-5 clearly constitute two pairs of parallel distichs, featuring ‘lyrical repetition’. Also ll. 57-8 likely form a couplet, as they are semantically very similar, and the same can be said of ll. 59 and 60. However, the structure becomes unclear at l. 61, which suspiciously resembles l. 60. Therefore, as convincingly noted by Fadhil, Jiménez,¹⁰² it can be suggested that either l. 60 or l. 61 is an ‘extra’ line.

This hypothesis can be supported by the fact that the Old Babylonian copy of the prayer, BM 78278, features horizontal lines where one would expect them. Indeed, although the manuscript is partially damaged and only preserves the text from l. 64 onwards, it maintains the unity of the stanza formed by ll. 62-5, showing the horizontal ruling after l. 65. In contrast, all later manuscripts break the stanza, exhibiting the line division at l. 64.

The presence of horizontal rulings between ll. 60 and 61 in all three first millennium manuscripts suggests a possible corruption of the text during transmission, as it disrupts the previously consistent couplet structure. Hence, the extra line may serve as a clue for the history of the composition of the prayer.

This could also clarify comparable inconsistencies in the Great Hymn to Šamaš. Rulings that appear to be traced in the wrong place may, in fact, be the result of progressive changes in the text, supporting Lambert's hypothesis of a ‘patchwork’ composition. Moreover, the Great Hymn to Šamaš also contains lines that seem to be superfluous repetitions and compromise the overall structure and coherence of the text. For example, l. 109, which is an identical repetition of l. 104, and l. 159.¹⁰³ Both lines in question appear similarly misplaced, not fitting within their current context. It cannot be ruled out, therefore, that although we lack an Old-Babylonian manuscript of the Hymn to Šamaš to confirm these hypotheses, ‘extra’ lines may have been added to this hymn as well, causing a ‘shift’ in the division into couplets.

In sum, it is possible that the texts of the Šamaš Hymn and Marduk1 – although the latter probably to a lesser extent – underwent multiple stages of composition and modification before reaching their current form.

5 Conclusion

Materiality is a fundamental aspect of the study of cuneiform sources. It aids in determining text types, identifying provenance and dating, and can provide valuable insights into the composition of the texts. The material features found in Akkadian literary compositions, such as shape, fabric, and paratexts are diverse in nature. While not always consistent and homogeneous, they are often closely related to the poetry of the text itself. Manuscripts of Akkadian hymns and prayers frequently exhibit paratexts, both visual (such as metrical caesuras and horizontal rulings) and textual (such as colophons, rubrics, subscripts, and catch lines). The most distinctive paratext in Akkadian hymns, and the most striking material feature overall, is the division into stanzas or couplets through horizontal rulings.

This scribal practice is used especially in the corpus of literary compositions known as the Great Hymns and Prayers. In particular, horizontal rulings are found in the manuscripts of the Great Hymn to Šamaš, Marduk1, Marduk2, the Great Anūna Prayer and the Great Prayer to Nabû. Many library manuscripts preserving these texts display this form of layout. In addition, the division into couplets is also attested in several school manuscripts, both Assyrian and Babylonian.

The fact that in some Assyrian school manuscripts as well as in a few 2a-type Babylonian tablets the excerpts taken from the Great Hymn to Šamaš and Marduk2 are ruled, while excerpts from other literary texts are not, suggests that scribes in the advanced school curriculum were likely taught that these texts should be divided into couplets. It is thus possible that this type of visual paratext was un-

¹⁰¹ Fadhil, Jiménez 2019, 162, 165.

¹⁰² Fadhil, Jiménez 2019, 162.

¹⁰³ This was already noted by Lambert 1960a, 123.

derstood to be a typical feature of the *Great Hymns and Prayers*, or at least of some of them. Hence, this can be considered an example of a paratextual aspect that is indicative of, or at least closely connected to, a textual genre.

In most cases, the horizontal rulings in the manuscripts of the Great Hymn to Šamaš, Marduk1, and Marduk2 are drawn at the same positions. However, examining instances where discrepancies appear across the manuscript tradition, or where there is incongruence between the rulings and the poetic text (as, for example, in the first millennium manuscripts of Marduk1, especially when one compares them with the Old Babylonian witness of the text), enables us to hypothesise about potential alterations or errors in the textual tradition.

This sheds light on the complexities of manuscript transmission and the evolution of literary compositions over time, including the possibility of changes being introduced to the original texts.

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