



3.1. Burn your troubles away The magical ceremony *Šurpu*

Version 01

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Abstract: An introduction to the macro- and micro-structure of the ritual and incantation series *Šurpu* ‘Burning’.

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ana anna ulla iqbu ana ulla anna iqbu

He says “Yes” for “No.” He says “No” for “Yes.”

This is one of hundreds of potential transgressions that, if committed by a Mesopotamian, would incur the wrath of the gods. It is taken from a very long list of such offences that forms part of the ritual and incantation series *Šurpu* ‘Burning’, which, at over a thousand lines, is the longest and most detailed Mesopotamian composition to deal with assuaging divine anger. The text consists of dozens of incantations, spread over 10 tablets (essentially chapters), which were recited with ritual accompaniment during an elaborate ceremony. The majority of the incantations are written in Akkadian, though some also feature interlinear Sumerian translations, and the final chapter of the series is written entirely in Sumerian. The ceremony involved four distinct stages, the first two and the last of which have been known since Heinrich Zimmern’s 1896 editio princeps of the text. The third stage of the ritual was discovered during the course of my PhD research, and I am currently in the final stages of preparing a study and edition of this new material for publication.

Reconstruction and macro-structure

The first stage of the *Šurpu* ceremony, from which the line above is drawn, consisted of the recitation of several extensive lists of offences that the patient may have committed to bring down the anger of the gods upon himself, coupled with a plea that the sanctions the gods inflicted be removed.

The second stage was the eponymous burning ritual, in which the patient’s offences were likened to various materials, such as garlic, wool, and reed matting, which were then pulled apart and burnt, symbolising the destruction of the patient’s problems and thereby removing them in an act of sympathetic magic.

The third stage is not yet completely known, but approximately three quarters of it, around 150 lines of text, can be reconstructed. From what survives, it appears to have consisted of various acts of magical transference in which the patient’s problems were passed into objects and locations and then absorbed, either by other people, by animals, or into the earth. This differs from the sympathetic magic rituals of the second stage in that the objects involved were not simply likened to the patient’s problems, but actually absorbed them and were then cast away or abandoned.

The final stage of the ceremony involved the invocation of an extensive list of divine figures, and a re-enumeration of some of the sins listed in the first stage, followed by a ritual purification using sanctified water. The series closes with a tablet of Sumerian *Kultmittelbeschwörungen* – incantations designed to enhance the ritual efficacy of objects, such as juniper and water, used during the ceremony.

The belief, which has persisted since Zimmern’s edition more than a century ago, that the published text was essentially complete, has prevented a clear understanding of *Šurpu*. In fact, as my work has shown, an entire section of the ceremony – approximately 20% of its total length – has been missing in every publication, and this has rendered substantial chunks of the preserved text practically meaningless. Because the text has been thought of as complete, the “meaningless” sections have been ignored. Indeed, Erika Reiner speaks of the last three tablets in her edition as having ‘defeated the purpose’ of *Šurpu*, and this belief has doubtless prevented much serious engagement with the text.

With the reintroduction of the missing material, the series can be seen to represent a unified and coherent ceremony. To this end, I am working on a complete re-edition of the text of *Šurpu*. Over 200 tablets and fragments of *Šurpu* are extant – nearly twice as many as were known when Reiner published the standard edition of the text. More than half of the manuscripts were found in the 19th century excavations of Assurbanipal’s library at Nineveh, but outside of Nineveh fragments have been found in practically every major literary site in Mesopotamia, as well as at some smaller sites. Tablets and fragments have so far been found at Assur, Babylon, Kish, Khorsabad, Nimrud, Sippar, Sultantepe, Ur and Uruk, attesting to the widespread use of the ceremony.



K. 2467+ – a fragment of *Šurpu*’s missing tablet
(c) The trustees of the British Museum

Logic of the text

A major part of my work on the critical edition of *Šurpu* is an attempt to understand the logic of the text. A good example of this is my study of the final stage of the ceremony, which opens with the line *ašši dgamliya* “I am raising my curved staffs.” This chapter of the series has long been understood to consist of a series of short, unconnected incantations. My work shows that it is in fact a single long incantation, which forms a coherent stage of the ritual. In fact, the incantation consists of three closely related sections – very clearly linked by the use throughout of the *dgamlu*, a curved staff associated with the god Amurru.

The whole incantation works as a sort of *Šurpu* in miniature – the patient’s sins are listed, they are undone with ritual action and magical recitation, and the stain they left is washed away. The exact nature of the ritual action is not clear as no ritual instructions are preserved for this section of the ceremony. However, several elements are clear from the incantation itself and from the ritual instructions preserved for other ceremonies in which this incantation is incorporated.

In section 1, the priest gives a curved staff to the patient and has him recite the incantation. This brings divine support by enlisting the help of a range of gods, though it is unclear what action is taken with the stick.

Section 2, which more or less resumes the lists from the first stage of the ceremony, presumably utilises similar ritual techniques to those used in the first stage of *Šurpu* – wiping the patient with flour then burning it, and then sprinkling the patient with water. The action involving flour is plainly another example of transference – the flour absorbs each of the sins as they are listed, then is burned, taking the sin with it. The water is presumably to remove whatever flour is left, as well as for general purification.

This leads neatly to section 3 in which the patient is washed with special water which is then poured on the ground, carrying all the problems with it. This is a sensible conclusion to the ceremony as it not only removes whatever sin-laden flour could not be wiped off, but, by virtue of using special water, it is efficacious in its own right.

Micro-structure and REPAC’s approach

My work on *Šurpu* will be heavily informed by REPAC’s approach to Ancient Mesopotamian scholarship. The text is riddled with repetitions and parallelisms, and a deeper study of these phenomena using the methods being developed by REPAC should provide many insights not only concerning the basic sense of individual lines, but also the structure and composition of the text as a whole. The aim of *Šurpu*, and indeed of all Mesopotamian magic, was to convince the gods to take action on behalf of the patient. This was achieved through a variety of means – sympathetic and transference magic, lists of apologies, and direct invocations have all been mentioned in this brief summary – but in all cases, the text of the incantation is our most important witness. Studies of other ancient magical texts have demonstrated that the use of poetic techniques in incantations is fundamental. Such texts are amenable to detailed micro-analyses of their poetic language. Poetical devices in magical texts are not a simple ornamental display of creativity; they add materially to an emotional ritual intended to resolve a crisis, carrying additive, intensifying force. In other words, they aim at increasing a magical text’s

persuasiveness. The use of parallelism and repetition transform the recitation of a list of misdemeanours into a piece of persuasive rhetoric.

A simple example can be found in the line with which we began.

ana anna ulla iqbu ana ulla anna iqbu

He says “Yes” for “No.” He says “No” for “Yes.”

It is obvious that the meaning could be expressed in myriad ways – in essence it just says “he lies” – but even in translation the version in *Šurpu* is more pleasing. In the original, it is almost a tongue twister. This is a single example from a list of over 100 offences, many of which display similarly aesthetically pleasing turns of phrase. This turns what is basically no more exciting than reciting a phone book into something which will catch the attention of the gods, and thereby significantly improves the chances of the patient. Practically no work has been done on the poetic techniques of *Šurpu*, and investigation is bound to shed light on the methods and the underlying thought processes. My major focus in earlier research has been to establish the macro-structure of the text – through the use of REPAC methodologies, I hope to begin to discern the micro-structure too.



K. 150, a tablet from Ashurbanipal's library now held in the British Museum, which is Tablet II of *Šurpu*.

(c) The trustees of the British Museum