



2.1 Gudea Cylinder A

Observations on the text's micro-structure

Version 02

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Abstract: The text of Gudea Cylinder A provides evidence for many different repetition phenomena. The composition, written in Sumerian and dating to the end of the second millennium BCE, celebrates the building of the Eninnu temple by the ruler Gudea and is a sophisticated literary work. My aim is to investigate the role played by some forms of repetition as structuring devices in this complex hymn. To achieve this, I select and discuss some examples of ring compositions, structural formulas, textual parallelism, and narrative repetition within the text. Such phenomena and their significance in the creation of meaning in cuneiform texts are currently the focus of REPAC's research. This study is only meant to offer an example of REPAC's approach to the analysis of an ancient Mesopotamian literary composition such as Gudea Cylinder A.

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The Gudea cylinders are two lengthy literary compositions that celebrate the building of the Eninnu temple by the ruler of Lagash. In Cylinder A, Gudea collects the materials to build the temple and performs several rites and prayers to ensure the favor of the gods to his work; then, he builds the temple structure. Cylinder B records the rites performed after the completion of the temple. The texts, preserved on two large clay cylinders and dating to Gudea's reign (c. 2144-2124 B.C.), were edited for the first time by Thureau-Dangin in 1905. Afterwards, several scholars provided new editions and studies of the two cylinders – among them, Falkenstein (1966), Averbeck (1987), Edzard (1997), Suter (2000) and Römer (2010).

Gudea Cylinder A is a complex and refined literary work. As Suter 2000, 132-133, remarks, the motif of the divine fate frames the entire text in a huge ring-composition structure. In the following, we will offer an example of REPAC's approach to Ancient Mesopotamian literary compositions by focusing on some of the devices shaping the text, with its contiguous and near-contiguous textual units, on the micro-level. These devices include structural formulas, textual and inter-textual parallelisms, and narrative repetitions.

By focusing on such phenomena, REPAC's research seeks a deeper understanding of how meaning was created in Ancient Mesopotamia. Our aim in the present context is more modest; we simply seek to highlight the role played by some forms of repetition as structuring devices in a sophisticated written product such as Gudea Cylinder A.



Cylinder de Gudea
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Macro-Structure – The Ring Composition Frame

The theme of divine fate encloses the entire Gudea text in a ring composition frame. The motif is introduced in the opening formula u_4 /an-ki- a nam tar-[re]-/da\, “When fate was being decided in heaven and earth” (lit. “in the day in which fate was being cut in heaven and earth”).

This formula is borrowed from the epic genre and occurs in Sumerian narrative from as early as the Early Dynastic period (Black 1992, 93-95). This opening therefore constitutes an intertextual reference that places the hymn within a long tradition. Furthermore, the formula is meant to set the narrative action in a mythological past, thereby giving a mythological character to Gudea’s deeds.

The theme of divine fate and will occurs again at the closure of Cylinder B (CB 24, 9-17), when the Eninnu receives divine blessing, having been ‘joined together’ with heaven and earth (Suter 2000, 132-133).

Micro-Structure – Formulaic Repetitions and Repetitive Narrative Patterns

Formulaic Repetitions

Successive series of narrative sequences constitute the internal structure of Gudea’s Cylinder A, and fixed sets of expressions which we define structural formulas mark the transition from one of these narrative sequences to the subsequent one. These expressions consistently occur in the same narrative context – that is, at the end or at the beginning of a given narrative section. The initial part of Gudea’s text provides evidence for three such formulas.

One of these, sipa-zi gu₃-de₂-a gal mu-zu gal i₃-ga-tum₃-mu (“the right shepherd, Gudea, learnt much and put much into action”) occurs at four different places in the text. It marks the transition to a new action sequence, or a pause between two events (Averbeck 1987, 264-

265). It is used after Nanshe's revelation (CA 7:10), after Gudea has celebrated the rituals for Ningirsu (CA 12:20) and after the building of the Eninnu is finally completed (CA 25:22-23). The presence of the prefix /nga/ in the verbal form i_3 -ga-tum₃-mu is a significant marker, since it is rare and was definitely not productive anymore by the Gudea's time, but it only occurs in fixed expressions (Jagersma 2010, 513).

Two more formulaic repetitions occur in the initial part of Cylinder A in a similar context. One is the clause ga-na ga-na-ab-dug₄ ("I really must tell it to her"), which introduces Gudea's speech to the goddess Nanshe. The second consists of a longer clause, ama-ĝu₁₀ ma-mu- ĝu₁₀ ga-na-de₆ ("I shall bring my dream to my mother") which opens the section in which Gudea tells Nanshe about his dream.

These two formulas also involve **sound repetition**. In the first case (ga-na ga-na-ab-dug₄) the directive expression /gana/ reproduces the exact same sounds of the two prefixes at the beginning of the following verbal form, the modal prefix ga- and the indirect object prefix – (n)na-. The second formula includes an alliteration of /m/ and /ĝ/ as well as the assonance of /a/ and /u/ (ama-ĝu₁₀ ma-mu- ĝu₁₀).

Repetitive Narrative Patterns

The 'naming of the stelae' (CA 23: 8 – 24: 7) is a long narrative sequence that shows repetitive patterns, and in particular structural parallelisms. Gudea names each of the seven stelae which he has erected surrounding the Eninnu. The naming of each stela takes up five lines.

The first line consists of an opening expression, which identifies the stela by the place where it was erected – an example from CA 23: 13 consists of na kan₄-sur-ra bi-du₃-a-na 'to his stone, which he set up at the Kan-sura gate'. This follows the fixed structure na 'stone' — locative noun phrase – verbal form bi₂-du₃-a-na ('that he erected'). The locative noun phrase changes according to the context, but the noun na 'stone', that functions as the absolutive of the relative clause, and the nominalized verbal form bi₂-du₃-a-na 'which he erected' are repeated in all the seven episodes.

The second line consists of the noun phrase na-du₃-a 'stela' (literally 'erected stone') in the absolutive. The name of the given stela follows, starting with a periphrasis referring to Ningirsu. In the first occurrence, the sequence reads: na-du₃-a lugal kisal si "the stela, 'the king who fills the courtyard...'"

The name of the stela continues in the third line, which is always repeated identically and places Gudea's name alongside Ningirsu's (gu₃-de₂-a en ^dnin-gir₂-su₂-ke₄, 'Gudea, the lord Ningirsu...'). Ningirsu is always the agent of the sentence, whereas Gudea does not always maintain the same logical function. In the first occurrence, this name is the direct object, in the second it is in the terminative, and so on. But no case marker follows his name. The notation of the case marker after a vowel was not common in Gudea's time, but its systematic omission here may indicate an intention to preserve the symmetry and repetitive pattern of the passages.

The main verb of the clause (mu-zu) appears in the fourth line, preceded by a noun phrase with an adverbial meaning – the first occurrence includes gir₂-nun-ta mu-zu 'he knows him from a princely way'.

The fifth line consists of the closing formula na-ba mu-še₃ im-ma-sa₄ 'to this stone he gave it as a name', which is identical in every instance.

Similar examples of structural parallelisms can be detected in many more places in Gudea's text. Examples include the sequence of Gudea's prayers which is repeated three times, first, to Ningirsu, secondly to Gatumdug, and thirdly to Nanshe. Many more of these patterns may be identified. Because of their repetitive narrative structure, these sequences resemble very closely the 'typical scenes' and the 'themes' that characterise oral and aural poetry (Lord 2005, 133-134). The wider ramifications of this phenomenon cannot be discussed here exhaustively, but they are currently being studied within REPAC.

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