

Ronnie Barker of Babylonia

Subliminal Magic in a Chain Incantation

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Abstract: A short Kultmittelbeschwörung for the creation of a prophylactic necklace (ROM 910x209.531) looks on first glance to be riddled with grammatical, syntactical and graphical errors. On closer inspection, it is clear that these peculiarities are better understood as intentional techniques, designed to add depth to the incantation, through calligraphic and linguistic parallelism, as well as a subtler technique of subliminally effective magic. These techniques represent a sophisticated method of enhancing the overall effectiveness of the text by subtly, and not so subtly exhorting the amulet chain to remain pure.

Keywords: magic, poetry, parallelism, repetition, calligraphic parallelism, amulet, subliminal magic

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Introduction¹

Good evening. I am the president of the loyal society for the relief of sufferers from pismronunciation; for people who cannot say their worms correctly. Or who use the wrong worms entirely, so that other people cannot underhand a bird they are spraying. It's just that you open your mouse, and the worms come turbling out in wuk a say that you dick knock what you're thugging a bing, and it's very distressing. I'm always looing it, and it makes one feel umbumfterkookle, especially when going about one's diddly tasks – slopping in the sloopermarket, for inkstands. Only last wonk, I approached the chuckout point, and I showed the ghoul behind the crash desk the contents of my trillee, and she said 'Alright, granddad, shout 'em out.' Well, of course, that's fine for the ordinary man in the stoat who has no dribble with his warts but to someone like myself, it's worse than a kick in the jackstrop. Sometimes,

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you get stuck on one letter, such as wubbleyou, and I said, ‘Well, I’ve got a tin of whoop, a woocumber, two packets of wees and a wallyflower’. She tried to make fun of me and said, ‘That will be woo pounds, wifty-wee pence.’ So I said ‘Wobblers!’ and walked out.

So you see how dickyfelt it is. But help is at hand. A new society has been formed by our mumblers to help each other in times of ex cream ices. It is bald Pismronouncers Unanimous, and anyone can ball them up on the smellyfone any time of the day or gnome, 24 flowers a spray, seven stays a creak, and they will come round and get you drunk. For foreigners, there will be interpreters, who will all squeak many sandwiches, such as Swedish, Turkish, Burkish, Jewish, Gibberish and Rubbish. Membranes will be able to attend tight stool for heaving grasses, to learn how to grope with the many complinkities of daily loaf. Which brings me to the drain reason for squeaking to you tonight. The society’s first function as a body was a Grand Garden Freight, and we hope for many more bodily functions in the future. The Garden Plate was held in the grounds of Blenheim Paliasse, Woodstick, and guest of horror was the great American pip singer, Manny Barrowload. The fete was opened by the bleeder of the opposition, Mister Neil Pillock, who gave us a few well-frozen worms in praise of the Society’s jerk, and said that in the creaks and stunts that lie ahead, we must all do out nut roast to ensure that it sucks weeds. Then everyone visited the various stores and abruisements, the rudabouts, thingboats and dodgers, and of course the old favorites such as cocoshy nuts, stry your length, guessing the weight of the cook and tinning the pale on the wonky. The occasion was great fun, and I think it can safely be said that all the men present and thoroughly good women were had all the time.

So please join our society. Write to me – Doctor Small Pith (*caption*: “DR PAUL SMITH”) The Spanner, Poke Moses (*caption*: THE MANOR, STOKE POGES), and I will send you some brieflets to browse through and a brass badge to wear in your loophole. And a very pud night to you all.²

This is the script of a brief sketch written by the English comedian Ronnie Barker, and included in a popular sketch show ‘The Two Ronnies’ in the 1970s – delivered by Barker himself in character as the officious head of a fictional organisation.³ It makes extensive use of a wide range of techniques, including spoonerisms, malapropisms, and eggcorns, to produce a text that is riddled with funny *double entendres*, but in which the meaning intended by the fictional spokesman for the fictional society is more or less always clear.⁴ In essence, this creates two texts read at the same time, both of which are meaningful – the funny underlying text is the important one, but a great deal of the humour comes from the fact that

² Barker 1999 (*Complete Works*): 219.

³ Barker also wrote and performed a sequel to this sketch, which can be watched online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJ0nFQgRApY> (accessed 31/7/24).

⁴ Allowing for cultural references specific to the time and place – Neil Kinnock, Barry Manilow, Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, and garden fêtes may need parsing for a non-British audience 50 years after the sketch was first performed.

it is not what the speaker wants the audience to hear.

The use of these kinds of techniques is very common in modern languages, but has rarely been investigated in the texts of ancient Mesopotamia. In the present article, we will suggest that an unusual Late Babylonian incantation dealing with the creation of an apotropaic necklace should be understood as an ancient precursor of this sort of thing.⁵ The text is a *Kultmittelbeschwörung* – an incantation designed to ‘activate and realise the power’⁶ of a given material or ingredient. In this case, the intention is to render a protective amulet ritually effective, and it is with this in mind that the scribe made use of an array of sophisticated literary techniques, similar in scope to the sketch just quoted.

The outstanding feature of the text is that it seems to be replete with very unusual spellings, grammatical errors, and orthographic inconsistencies. This is noted repeatedly in the *editio princeps* by Simkó and Stadhouders, and for the most part considered to be the result of a combination of ‘a post-classical type of Akkadian’ and ‘scribal inaccuracy’.⁷ We will here suggest that the apparent errors are better understood as a variety of methods – incorporating rhyme, graphical and verbal parallelism, and even subliminal messaging – used purposefully in an attempt to enhance the efficacy of the spell.

The text

The text under investigation here is known from just a single tablet, ROM 910.209.531, now held in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.⁸ The tablet is unprovenanced, but other Late Babylonian tablets from the Royal Ontario Museum are known to stem from Nippur, and so we might assume the same origin.⁹ It was recently published in a very thorough edition accompanied by extensive philological notes, contextual commentary, photographs, and a handcopy.¹⁰ Thanks to this admirable work, the many confusing grammatical forms and orthographic peculiarities of the text have been ironed out in such a way that a surface reading is straightforward. We will start with this, before moving on to a

⁵ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 25–32.

⁶ Abusch (FS Wilcke) 2003: 3.

⁷ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 27–29.

⁸ CDLI: P417279.

⁹ Assuming the tablet does come from Nippur, Michael Jursa suggests the possibility that it belonged to the Absummu archive, as this archive contains medical and magical material. No other Absummu texts are apparently known in the Royal Ontario Museum, but the distribution pattern of Absummu tablets is the same as that of the other private Nippur archives, and these are present in the ROM (Jursa, personal communication). This archive dates ‘mostly to Art. II’ (Jursa 2005 [*GMTR I*]: 111, n. 817) i.e. c.405–358 BC.

¹⁰ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 23–36. Parts of the handcopy are used below, § Calligraphic parallelism.

discussion of the formal intricacies of the text, and finally an analysis of the various unusual features and apparent mistakes. The edition here follows that of Stadhouders, with a few minor tweaks, which will be discussed below.¹¹

obverse

1. ÉN ʿat-tu-nu¹ [NA₄.MEŠ]
2. ʿd-é-a¹ ib-bi-ni-ka-nu-ʿuš¹
3. ^{d+}nun-kur-ra iš-ʿtu¹ ʿKUR-i¹ ʿel¹-lu₄
4. ú-še-rid-ka-nu-uš
5. ^dnin-imma be-let e-gub-ba-ʿi² el-lu₄
6. ina DUR GADA-e el-lu₄ iš-pu-ka-nu-uš
7. ^dgu-la ^dzu-gal-lat GAL-ti
8. lu-up-pu sa-ma-at e-lu-pu-ka-nu-uš
9. ^dkù-su₁₃ ^dša-ga-mah-ḥu ša ^{d+}en-líl
10. NÍG.NA gi-zi-lá KÙ uš-bi-ka-nu-uš
11. ^dasal-lú-ḥi ^dMAŠ.MAŠ DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ
12. ÉN-su ša ba-la-tu id-di-ka-ʿnu-uš

- §1. ¹ *šiptu attunu* [abnū]
 §2. ² *Ea ibb'nikanūš*
 §3. ³ *Nunkurra ištu šadī ellu*
⁴ *ušēridkanūš*
 §4. ⁵ *Ninimma bēlet egubbē ellu*
⁶ *ina ṭurri kitē ellu išpukanūš*
 §5. ⁷ *Gula(-)zugallat¹² rabūti*
⁸ *luppu sāmāt ellupp'kanūš*
 §6. ⁹ *Kusu šaggamahḥu ša Ellil*
¹⁰ *nignakka gizillā ella ušbikanūš*
 §7. ¹¹ *Asalluḥi mašmaš ilāni rabūti*
¹² *šipassu ša balātu iddikanūš*
 §8. ¹³ *ina kišād annanna mār annanna*
allal¹kunūš

reverse

13. *ina* GÚ ¹⁰NÉNNI A NÉNNI *a-lal-lu-ku-nu-uš*
14. *ina* EN.ʿNUN¹-ku *a-a te-ga-a²-[ma]*
15. GABA *lem-nu ù a-a-bi ter-ʿra¹*

- §1. ¹ *Incantation*. You, o [stones],
 §2. ² Ea has created you;
 §3. ³⁻⁴ Ninkurra has brought you down from the pure mountain;
 §4. ⁵⁻⁶ Ninimma, lady of the pure *egubbū*, has soaked you on a cord of pure linen;
 §5. ⁷⁻⁸ Gula, the great chief physician, has wrapped red burls (between) you;
 §6. ⁹⁻¹⁰ Kusu, chief purification priest of Enlil, has moved the pure censer (and) torch past you;
 §7. ¹¹⁻¹² Asalluḥi, exorcist of the great gods, has cast his life-giving spell over you.
 §8. ¹³ I am hanging you around the neck of so-and-so, son of so-and-so.

¹¹ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 25–29. The authors of the paper note (*ibid.* 23, n.1) that the work was divided such that the critical edition ‘was essentially the work of the second author’.

¹² We take this as a sandhi spelling of the expected reading *azugallat* ‘chief physician’, with an unpronounced divine determinative given to the epithet. See below § Mistake as an art form: linguistic parallelism.

§9. ¹⁴ *ina maššartīku ay^a tēgā[ma]*¹³
¹⁵ *irti lemnu u ayyābi terra*

§9. ^{14–15} Please, on my behalf, do not neglect
 your watch, and drive off evildoer and
 enemy for me!

Straightforward meaning

The basic narrative of the incantation centres on the creation of a chain of stones by various gods. After initially addressing the stones which form the chain, the text gives a step-by-step account of the gods' creation of the object, which is then hung around the patient's neck with an exhortation to protect him.

As already detailed by Simkó,¹⁴ each god is responsible for a particular step, from the creation of the stones to the final consecration of the necklace:

- §2. Ea, the god of both creation and magic, brings the stones into existence.¹⁵
- §3. Ninkurra, one of the craftsmen gods, whose name translates to 'Lord of the Mountain' and who bears particular responsibility for stones,¹⁶ brings the stones down from the mountain – presumably with the implication that he fashioned the unworked stones into beads.
- §4. Ninimma, presumably to be understood as Namma,¹⁷ strings the beads on a linen thread, then soaks the chain in water from the *egubbû*-vessel. The *egubbû*-vessel is a jar of sanctified water, and therefore this soaking is intended to imbue the chain with magical qualities of purification.¹⁸
- §5. Gula, goddess of healing, wraps burls of red wool between the beads. This is a commonly attested feature of amulet chain production, the woollen

¹³ The aleph auslaut is not included in the normalisation, as we understand the verb to be singular, following the singular *-ku* of *maššartīku*, and an aleph auslaut is morphologically impossible. The aleph may be taken as a marker of weakness, intended to reinforce the stress on the middle syllable, but may also have been included to introduce an element of parallelism to this word (see below §Linguistic parallelism; Calligraphic parallelism).

¹⁴ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 30–32

¹⁵ Compare most clearly the incantation known as 'The First Brick' (Lambert 2013 (*BCM*): 376–383), in which Ea creates all the other deities involved in the text.

¹⁶ The strange spelling ^d+nun-kur-ra will be addressed below. For this god's role as a stone worker, see Lambert 2013 (*BCM*): 379. See also Simons 2018 (*RA* 112): 134.

¹⁷ This will be discussed further below.

¹⁸ The *egubbû*-vessel was itself prepared in a fairly elaborate way, by soaking various minerals and plants in water, then placing the whole thing overnight in a 'House of Kusu', and purifying it further with censer and torch, all while reciting an array of incantations. The water in the vessel was presumably understood to absorb the qualities of all the materials which were used, and to have been made pure by the ceremony. See Walker & Dick 2001 (*Mīs Pī*): 54–56 and Maul 1994 (*Zukunftsbewältigung*): 41–47. An *egubbû*-vessel is presumably the focus of the end of the penultimate Tablet of *Šurpu*, as will be discussed in the writer's projected edition of the series. For now, see Simons 2019 (PhD thesis): 115–116.

burls holding some sort of ingredient required by the amulet chain.¹⁹ Given that the burls were added to the chain after the rest had been soaked in water, it seems likely that they involved ingredients which would have been damaged or destroyed by soaking, likely plants.

§6. Kusu, purification goddess *par excellence*, purifies the whole chain by means of torch and censer.²⁰

§7. Asalluhi, god of magic, casts a magical ‘life-giving’ spell over the amulet chain in order to enhance its abilities.

This sort of narrative is not infrequent in magical texts,²¹ essentially constituting an aetiological creation myth for the subject of the incantation. As has been well established, Mesopotamian magic relied on the gods for its effectiveness.²² A mythical creation in which gods were involved therefore serves to provide theoretical justification for the magic item involved.

In the present case, the aim is to offer the wearer of the chain protection through magical means. The underlying mythological narrative projects the original creation of the amulet chain into the mythical past – it is not simply a man made object, but rather an instance of an object established as functional and effective by an array of gods in time immemorial.²³ In addition, by naming specific gods the incantation attracts their attention,²⁴ and, given the amulet chain is simply presented as an earthly version of the one they created, reminds them to support the profane imitation of their divine creation. Simply put, they should all support the current production, and thereby grant it efficacy, because it is an homage to their original.

Formal characteristics

Thus far we have concerned ourselves only with the simple content of the incantation. We will now move beyond this to consider the sophisticated poetic techniques found in the formal characteristics of the text. We will begin by discussing the structure of the text as a whole and the shape, format, and layout of the tablet on which it is written. We will then consider its use of parallelism – both linguistic and calligraphic – and close with an investigation of a subliminal layer to the text.

¹⁹ Schuster-Brandis 2008 (*Steine*): 66–67.

²⁰ This is a well-attested activity for Kusu. See Simons 2018 (*RA* 112): 137–146.

²¹ See, e.g. Lambert 2013 (*BCM*): 375–383; Veldhuis 1991 (*Cow of Sin*): 8–15; Michalowski 1981 (*ZA* 71): 4.

²² See, e.g. Bottéro 1987–1990 (*RIA* VII): 213–214, and *passim*.

²³ For this idea, see Bottéro 1987–1990 (*RIA* VII): 216–218; Veldhuis 1990 (*OLP* 21): 35–36, and Ceccarelli 2024 (*Mythos als Wirkstrategie*): 95–107.

²⁴ See, e.g. Lenzi 2010 (*JBL* 129): 306–309. Names in general are powerful tools in magic, see e.g. Lambert 2013 (*BCM*): 148–160.

Structure

The structure of the incantation can be represented as follows:

§1	Introduction
§2	Pivot 1
§3–7	Chain
§8	Pivot 2
§9	Conclusion

The incantation opens with a very brief introductory line 1, in which the stones which are the subject of the majority of the incantation are addressed directly. This is directly followed by the narrative section discussed above, which takes the form of a chain-like incantation,²⁵ of the type discussed at length by Reiner²⁶ and Veldhuis.²⁷ While not a chain incantation *sensu strictu*, as the individual lines do not lead one into the other (e.g. A–B, B–C, C–D ... N), the narrative section clearly follows the basic principles of a chain-like construction, as enumerated by Wasserman: it has a ‘cohesive syntactic structure’ and ‘the items listed ... are not randomly chosen, but have a direction’.²⁸ For simplicity, we will here use the term chain to refer to the chain-like section of the text.

The links in the chain are constructed on a nearly identical basis, being composed of a god’s name, usually an epithet, and a statement of the action that that god has taken in relation to the stones, in every case referred to with the suffix pronoun *-kanūš* ‘you (pl.)’. Two points stand out in this section. The first is that line 2 acts as a sort of ‘pivot line’ between the introduction and the narrative section.²⁹ Such lines are a common feature of Akkadian literature, and magical texts in particular. Through clever phrasing, they provide a formal or semantic link between the text which precedes them and that which follows, thus linking sections which could otherwise appear poorly connected or unconnected.

In the present case, the pivot is basically formal. Line 2 clearly mirrors the content of the narrative section, consisting simply of a god’s name and the action he performs, and it ends with *-kanūš*, but it is the only link in the chain which fits on a single line – the others all occupying two – and so it forms a sort of couplet

²⁵ We will here pause briefly to note the pleasing fact that this makes it a chain for a chain. It will not be mentioned again.

²⁶ Reiner 1985 (*Thwarts*): 94–97.

²⁷ Veldhuis 1990 (*OLP* 21): 30–44; Veldhuis 1993 (*OLP* 24): 41–60.

²⁸ Wasserman 2021 (*Lists and Chains*): 67.

²⁹ See Reiner 1985 (*Thwarts*): 95–97; Veldhuis 1990 (*OLP* 21): 30; Veldhuis 1999 (*Poetry of Magic*): 45–47; De Zorzi 2022 (*WZKM* 112): 385; Schmidl 2022 (*WZKM* 112): 424–427; Simons 2022 (*WZKM* 112): 452–453 for further examples of this characteristic feature of Akkadian literary texts. Another example in a similar context to that of the present text is Abusch and Schwemer 2016 (*CMAwR II*): 26, no 3.4 l. 37, which is a clear pivot line in an incantation related to the manufacture of amulet chains.

with the introductory line 1. In addition, the verb used, *ibbⁱnikanūš* ‘he has created you’, is composed of the same consonants as *abnū* ‘stones’, thereby providing internal consonance to the couplet. No semantic link is found – it could hardly be expected in such a short phrase – and so these formal parallels provide the needed connection between the introductory phrase, which would otherwise be an isolated line, and the narrative portion which follows it.

The second outstanding point, in essence an extension of the same idea, is the increasing length or complexity of each couplet, and of the importance of epithets in each clause. As just noted, Ea is given no epithet. The same is true for Ninkurra, but a prepositional phrase, ‘from the pure mountain’, modifies the verb, and so the clause is longer. Ninimma is described as ‘Lady of the pure *egubbū*’ – a specific responsibility to a particular object. Gula is given the general responsibility ‘chief physician’. Kusu is said to be the ‘chief purification priest of Enlil’ – a responsibility to an important god. Asalluhhi is the ‘exorcist of the Great Gods’ – a responsibility to all important gods. Through this increasing complexity, importance, and length, the text gains a sense of momentum – each link in the chain not only builds on the one before, but does so in a way that is more significant – requiring the attention of a god with a more important job title than the one before.

The chain culminates in a second pivot at line 13. At this point in the text, the work of the gods is complete, the loose stones have been formed into a magical amuletic chain, and the officiant declares to them that he is ‘hanging you (pl.) around the neck’ of the patient. The change of focus in this line is marked by a change of tense and person – 1st present rather than 3rd preterite. This presumably implies an embedded ritual element at this point – the chain being actually placed around the patient’s neck as the line is recited. The line is also physically separated from the preceding sections by being written on the reverse of the tablet. This is particularly striking as the tablet contains 15 lines, 12 of which are on the obverse and just 3 on the reverse of the tablet, followed by a ruling and a blank space.

These differences from the preceding section could easily make line 13 appear disconnected, but this is prevented in the same way as in line 2. Line 13 is a second pivot line maintaining a sense of stylistic continuity with the surrounding lines, thereby allowing a change of focus that is not jarring. It does this by mirroring the verbal forms of §3 with *allal^lkunūš* ‘I am hanging you’, and by beginning with *ina*, which matches the following line, and leads into the conclusion of the text. In addition, the use of the 1st person in line 13 finds a parallel in the benefactive ventive suffixes used in lines 14–15 – ‘I am hanging you’ is matched by ‘on my behalf’ and ‘for me’.³⁰

The conclusion in lines 14–15 constitutes a direct exhortation to the now completely finished amulet chain, imploring it to ‘not neglect your watch’ and to ‘drive off evildoer and enemy’. This is marked by a change of number, the suffix

³⁰ The difference in translation of the ventive suffix is in order to improve the English – it is not required by the Akkadian.

-*ku* ‘you (sg.)’ rather than -*kunūš* ‘you (pl.)’ being used in line 14, likely because the loose stones have now been united into a single item, which should be addressed directly.

This understanding differs from that of Simkó & Stadhouders, who restore -*ku*-<*nu*>, presumably on the basis of the apparently plural verbs *te-ga-a*’-[*ma*] and *ter*’-*ra*’ in the last two lines, which they read *tēga*’[*ma*] and *ter*[*rā*]. Such a reading is possible, but as it requires emendation of what seems to have been a carefully written and intricately composed text, an alternative is preferable. As already indicated above, and in the normalisation and translation, these forms are better understood as being singular forms with ventive suffixes – *tēgā*[*ma*] and *terra*. Loesov distinguishes four uses of the ventive³¹ in addition to three distinguished by Kouwenberg.³² Loesov’s uses are not meaningful for the present lines, but one of those enumerated by Kouwenberg is: ‘the benefactive is an optional constituent outside the core of the sentence, compatible with almost any verb.’³³ In the present case it offers a reasonable meaning, imploring the amulet to act on behalf of the officiant, who naturally wishes the magic to be effective.

Shape

The tablet on which the text is written deserves some comment.³⁴ The tablet is 5.8 x 4 x 1.5 cm, and inscribed in portrait format. The script is clearly inscribed in a neat Late Babylonian hand. It is not cramped at any point, there are no erasures, and the signs are all clearly legible. The tablet was not ruled, and there is a slight, but increasing, tendency for the lines to be written with an upward tilt. This is particularly notable in the final line of the obverse, in which the first signs are at the bottom of the tablet but by the last signs there is space for another line underneath. The lines are not of uniform length, and some lines on the obverse are written around the side and encroach on the reverse. This has no effect on the text, however, as the reverse is mostly blank.

The first 12 lines of the text are written on the obverse, with only the final 3 written on the reverse, followed by a ruling impressed with the length of the stylus, and a large blank space. As already mentioned, this format neatly mirrors the text, keeping the entire narrative section together and physically separating the second pivot line and the conclusion of the text. For this reason it seems probable that the text was, in a manner of speaking, “typeset” – presumably on the basis of an earlier draft.³⁵

³¹ Loesov 2006 (*Babel und Bibel* 3): 129.

³² Kouwenberg 2002 (*ZA* 92): 202.

³³ Kouwenberg 2002 (*ZA* 92): 202.

³⁴ Photographs and a copy are included in Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 25–26, 36.

³⁵ This is also implied by several of the more unusual sign choices, see §Calligraphic parallelism.

Mistakes as an art form: Calligraphic parallelism

Throughout, the scribe of this tablet took great pains in selecting signs, the simplest explanation for which is an intention for what we propose to call “calligraphic parallelism”.³⁶ The clearest example of this is found in lines 3–4:³⁷



3. ^{d+}nun-kur-ra iš-
4. ú-še-rid-ka-

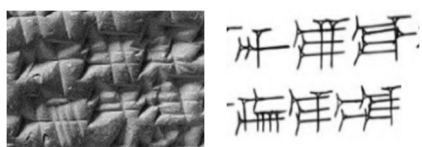
As is clear from even a cursory glance, the first four signs of these lines are extremely similar, each pair of signs sharing the same basic shape – ^{d+}nun ~ ú both consist of four vertical wedges with two offset verticals crossing through them, differing only by the addition of an extra vertical for the DINGIR part of the sign; kur ~ še differ only by a single Winkelhaken; ra ~ rid differ only in that two short horizontals in ra become verticals in rid; and iš ~ ka differ only in that two short horizontals are placed between the two verticals in ka.

This could be written off as mere chance were it not for the fact that the first sign is ^{d+}nun. As has already been mentioned, this is simply wrong – the name of the god in question is Ninkurra, and this is the only known attestation of the name written Nunkurra. More fundamentally, however, the sign ^{d+}nun is, to the best of the present writer’s knowledge, a ligature unique to this text. It is not included in any signlists, and a search of the eBL Fragmentarium produced no hits. As a ligature, it is not difficult to recognise the reading of the sign, but as a unique sign, and moreover one which results in a misspelling of the god’s name, it is clear evidence that the intention must have been to create calligraphic parallelism in these two lines.

The same sort of writings can be seen throughout the text, especially in places where errors seem to have been made. Two ‘mistakes’ in lines 7–8 are concerned with the healing goddess Gula’s actions in creating the amulet. The relevant section reads as follows:

³⁶ Taking the word ‘calligraphy’ in its simplest form ‘beautiful writing’. By ‘calligraphic parallelism’ we mean the use of visually similar signs, usually against the standard rules of orthography, to enhance the message of the text graphically.

³⁷ Throughout this section, the copy is that of Simkó in Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 25–26. The photographs are taken from the photographs at the end of the same article.



7. ^dzu-gal-
8. sa-ma-at

The first ‘mistake’ here, as discussed above, is the writing ^dzu-gal-lat in line 7 for what should be written a-zu-gal-lat. The second is in line 8, which reads *lu-up-pu sa-ma-at e-lu-pu-ka-nu-uš* ‘(she) has wrapped red burls between you.’ There are more orthographic oddities in this line than there are words, and it will be discussed further below.³⁸ What concerns us here is the fact that *sāmāt* ‘red’ qualifies a word that is not even written. The phrase should read *šipāt sāmāt* ‘red wool’, as already noted by Stadhouders.³⁹ Although it is possible to read the phrase without *šipāt*, it is unusual. As with the example just discussed, the most obvious answer is an apparent desire for calligraphic parallelism.

As written, the two groups of signs are plainly very similar to one another: /dingir/ and /sa/ each consist of two large horizontals and a large vertical, though /sa/ has several smaller wedges too; /zu/ and /ma/ differ from each other only in the presence or absence of a vertical wedge; /at/ and /gal/ each contain a group of 4 horizontals, the top and bottom of which are longer than the middle two, going into a single vertical, differing only in having either 2 horizontals preceding this, or 1 horizontal following it.

Had the line been written in standard orthography, however, this parallelism would have been markedly less prominent:



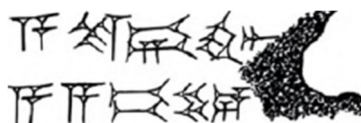
^da-zu-gal šī-pa-at sa-

Although there are still similarities between the adjacent signs, neither /zu/~at/, nor /gal/~sa/ are as close as their equivalents in the text as it is written. The combination of an inventive sandhi spelling, the parallelism of the divinised epithet, and the calligraphic parallelism apparent in these lines is something of a *tour de force*.

³⁸ See §Linguistic parallelism.

³⁹ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 28.

Another example occurs at the end of the text, in lines 14–15:



14. (a-)a te-ga-²[ma]
 15. a-a-bi ter-²ra

In line 14, the aleph sign is apparently an error. As will be discussed below, *tēgā(?)ma* is to be understood as a 2nd m.s. G stem vetitive from *egû* + ventive + enclitic ‘Please, on my behalf, (do not) neglect (your watch) and’. The auslaut aleph is morphologically meaningless in such a construction. Stadhouders and Simkó understand it on this basis as a plural form, but this is incompatible with the singular *-ku* in *maššartīku* at the start of the line.

In our normalisation, we omit the aleph, on the understanding that it is a marker of weakness and stress, which would have been left more or less unpronounced. Beyond marking the stress, however, the use of the aleph sign gives the scribe another opportunity for calligraphic parallelism. Beginning with the neatly aligned /a/ signs in each line, only /te~/ /a/ are markedly dissimilar from one another, and this could not realistically be avoided – /ga/ and /bi/ differ only in the presence or absence of two small vertical wedges, and both /²/ and /ter/ open with a group of four Winkelhaken, though what follows is less similar. The final signs in each line are broken, but were they intact, the parallelism would be even more marked:



- (a-)a te-ga-²-ma
 a-a-bi ter-ra

The addition of the /²/ does not dramatically change the sound of the text, except insofar as it may ensure that the stress falls on the second syllable. What it does change, however, is the layout of these lines – without it, /ga/ would be positioned above /ter/ rather than /bi/, and the cluster of Winkelhakens in /ter/ would be unparallelled. This relatively small addition, then, allows the scribe to bring several signs into a more pleasing alignment without compromising the text.

A further example of calligraphic parallelism, this time within a single word, is found in line 10:



10. gi-zi-lá

As in the other cases, the surface reading is clear – it is *gizillâ* ‘torch’. The normal logographic spelling, however, is GI.IZI.LÁ. When written in Akkadian (i.e. spelt syllabically), the middle sign is almost invariably /zil/.⁴⁰ Apart from the present text, only five attestations of the word in which the middle syllable is written with /ZI/ are attested. These are found in three texts, two of which are from the periphery of the cuneiform world,⁴¹ and the third of which is written in highly abbreviated syllabic Sumerian.⁴² In all three cases, the context of the text explains the spelling, and so it cannot be considered a rare variant, but simply an incorrect spelling.

It is twice attested in the Akkadian column of a Middle Babylonian copy of the lexical list Ura=*hubullu* VIII–IX found at Emar:⁴³

o i 9	MIN(gi)-izi-lá	<i>gi-zi-lu-u: šab-bu-tu</i>	Torch = Torch = Staff
o i 10	MIN(gi)-izi-lá	<i>di-pa-rum</i>	Torch = Torch
o i 11	MIN(^{gi})ig izi-lá	<i>da-la-at gi-zi-le-e</i>	Reed door torch ¹ = Door with torch

Mistakes in spelling in peripheral areas are hardly a surprise, and in this excerpt there is also a mistake in the Sumerian of line 11, which should be ^{gi}ig gi-izi-lá, as is confirmed by an unprovenanced OB school copy of the same section of the list:⁴⁴

1	gi-izi-lá	Torch
2	^{gi} ig gi-izi-lá	Reed door torch
3	gi-sal-la	Reed screen

The spelling is also found three times in Sumerian. Once in a Middle Babylonian ‘collection of Sumerian incantations in syllabic orthography’ excavated at Hat-tuša:⁴⁵

rev. VI 23’	ni-ig-na gi-z[i-la ù-me-ni]-ni	Brandish the censer and torch. ⁴⁶
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Again, the presence of unusual spellings in a peripheral text is not unexpected, but in this case, there is also the complicating factor of the entire text being written

⁴⁰ CAD G: 113–115, s.v. *gizillû*.

⁴¹ SAD 3: 20, s.v. *gizillû*.

⁴² Michalowski 1993 (The Torch and the Censer): 153.

⁴³ Arnaud 1987 (*Emar VI/4*): 82 (no. 546).

⁴⁴ AUAM 73.2575, edited by the DCCLT, s.v. P249388.

⁴⁵ KUB 30/1, Abusch and Schwemer 2016 (CMAwR II): 112 (no. 8.15, ms a).

⁴⁶ Translation after Falkenstein 1939 (*ZA* 45): 40, l. 22.

in syllabic Sumerian, which is to say Sumerian written quasi-phonetically. Note, for instance, *ni-ig-na* for *ní g-na* in the present line. By its nature, this text ignores standard orthography, and so a strange spelling is not to be given undue notice.

The third text, an incantation for a torch, is also written in syllabic Sumerian:

1. am hu-uš gal du-du gi-zi-la O mighty, angry goring ox! O torch!
 (am ḥuš gal du₇-du₇ gi-i-zi-lá)
 4. gir₃ aš₂ gar₃/am ar ar šu du₁₀-ga gi-zi-la ti-el-la ...⁴⁷

Michalowski describes this manuscript as being ‘written in an abbreviated syllabic orthography that is so elliptical that without the aid of other texts we would not be able to make sense of it. ... I know of no other text that is as laconic as this one.’⁴⁸ In one of the two more conventionally written duplicates published by Michalowski, the normal orthography, *gi-i-zi-lá*, is used.⁴⁹

Our text is, then, for all intents and purposes, unique in writing *gi-zi-lá*, which requires explanation. In light of the other examples just presented, the most obvious answer is that the scribe was aiming, once again, for calligraphic parallelism. The writing used here means that two very similar signs, GI and ZI, can be written consecutively, without compromising readability in any meaningful way.⁵⁰

An important point to note is that, in all the examples which extend over two lines, the ‘mistake’, or at least one of them, is found in the signs which were written first – ^d+*nun*; ^d*zu-gal-lat*; *te-ga*-²[*ma*]. This clearly demonstrates forward planning in drafting the text. It must already have been clear to the scribe that line 4 would begin *ú-še-rid-ka-* before line 3 was written, as the inventive writing, ^d+*nun*, is found at the beginning of line 3.⁵¹ The placement of the signs to be directly adjacent to one another was evidently very carefully planned, which offers significant support to the idea that the text was drafted first and then “typeset” to make the most attractive and effective manuscript possible.

The rationale behind the placement of these parallelisms is not clear to me, except insofar as they seem to have occurred when a relatively minor change would bring several signs into alignment. It is likely that further research could turn up more of this sort of thing, and that a broader rationale may be determinable.

⁴⁷ I am unable to offer a translation of this line. See discussion by Michalowski 1993 (The Torch and the Censer): 154.

⁴⁸ Michalowski 1993 (The Torch and the Censer): 154.

⁴⁹ YBC 8649; Michalowski 1993 (The Torch and the Censer): 153, A l. 18.

⁵⁰ One unusual result of this is that the word as written is neither logographic nor, strictly speaking, syllabic. It is difficult to know how to treat this in terms of font (italics? upper case? small caps?) and so I have taken the easy way out and given it no special treatment whatsoever.

⁵¹ My thanks to Martin Worthington for this observation.

Linguistic parallelism

Alongside calligraphic parallelism, there is extensive use throughout the text of direct repetition in parallel phrases, one effect of which is the introduction of rhyme to the text. Particularly notable is the use of *-kanūš* at the end of each clause. This method of rhyming may not sound sophisticated in English, but as Veldhuis has pointed out in connection with other magical texts, ‘a considerable part of the rhyme ... depends on morphological or syntactic similarities.’⁵² He goes on to note that the technique of direct repetition seems to have ‘appealed to Babylonian taste, and was in fact part of the poetic system.’⁵³

Elsewhere in the text we find rhymes which are more pleasing to modern sensibilities. A particularly clear example of this is found in the conclusion of the text:

14 <i>ina maššartīku ay^a tēgā[ma]</i>	Please, on my behalf, do not neglect your watch, [and]
15 <i>irti lemnu u ayyābi terra</i>	drive off evildoer and enemy for me!

As discussed above, we take these verbal forms to be singular verbs with ventive suffixes: *tēgāma* is a 2nd m.s. G stem vetitive from *egû* + ventive + enclitic ‘Please, on my behalf, (do not) neglect (your watch) and’,⁵⁴ while *terra* is a 2nd m.s. D stem imperative from *tāru* + ventive ‘On my behalf, drive (away evildoer and enemy)’.

Several elements of this are of interest. In the first place, although it produces meaningful sense, the ventive is not actually necessary here – the exhortation to the amulet to perform its tasks need not be on the behalf of the officiant. The use of the vetitive as opposed to the prohibitive mood in line 14 is also noteworthy. Again, this can be understood as bearing meaning – the vetitive is essentially a polite form of instruction,⁵⁵ which would not be out of place in an address to a quasi-divine object. This is undermined, however, by the imperative mood used in the following line, the more polite form of which would presumably be the precative, or perhaps a 3rd person form⁵⁶ – the need for politeness apparently runs out after just one line.

More fundamentally, as already noted by Stadhouders,⁵⁷ it is unquestionably

⁵² Veldhuis 1999 (Poetry of Magic): 43–44.

⁵³ Veldhuis 1999 (Poetry of Magic): 44.

⁵⁴ Note that the ventive here could be due to ventive anticipation before *-ma* (Kouwenberg 2002 (ZA 92): 218), but there is no reason to assume this as the benefactive is meaningful.

⁵⁵ ‘the vetitive expresses a negative wish directed at a person of equal or higher standing.’ (Cohen 2005 (Modal System): 101). For further discussion of the vetitive see Abusch 2018 (AMD 14): 1–6.

⁵⁶ Foster 1993 (FS Hallo): 101.

⁵⁷ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (JMC 36): 29.

incorrectly written: ‘the replacement of the vetitive particle allomorph $\bar{e}$ with ay in combination with a t -prefix is an utter anomaly not to go unnoticed.’ This mistake is the equivalent of an English speaker writing ‘a elk’ or ‘an sausage’, the $\bar{e}$ allomorph having developed from ay for reasons of pronounceability before a word starting with a consonant. It is therefore difficult to write off as a casual scribal mistake – it is simply too glaringly wrong.⁵⁸

Stadhouders suggests that the replacement of $\bar{e}$ with ay^a ,⁵⁹ as well as the use of the vetitive rather than the prohibitive, was due to a desire for poetry in the spell – ay^a providing a closer rhyme to $ayyābi$ in the following line than would $\bar{e}$ or $lā$. This is also the simplest explanation for the accretion of explicable but unnecessary grammatical complication – the scribe wanted these lines to rhyme. Either a plural or a ventive was required for this – singular forms without ventive would have been $tēgima$ and $tēr$. Adding the ventive shifts the stress in the first verb to the second syllable, turns i into $\hat{a}$ in $egū$, and allows imperative $tēr$ to lengthen into $terra$. In addition, perhaps for the avoidance of doubt regarding stress,⁶⁰ and at odds with standard orthography ($te-ga-a$),⁶¹ the scribe includes an auslaut aleph. The result of all this is that in place of the simpler and more grammatically correct $\bar{e} \ tēgima \dots ayyābi \ tēr$, there is the much closer rhyme $\hat{a}y^a \ tēgā^ma \dots ayyābi \ tērra$.

The use of the wrong negative particle in line 14 is far from the only example in the text of what seem on first glance to be basic errors. In nearly every line of the incantation, there is at least one deviation from standard orthographic practice.

⁵⁸ The ungrammatical use of negation is not unknown (see e.g. the apparently random use of $lā$ and ul in the Old Babylonian hymn ‘Ishtar Baghdad’ Streck 2003 (FS Wilcke): 310, l.21), but differs from the present instance, in that the error is rooted in pronunciation – the use of ul or $lā$ is basically a question of syntax, whereas the use of ay or $\bar{e}$ is dictated by the following letter. Grammatical confusion is less immediately jarring, at least in English, than a confusion of this type.

⁵⁹ We write ay^a in preference to ay , the correct particle for the 1st or 3rd vetitive. The word is grammatically wrong, and evidently selected to rhyme with $ayyābi$ in the following line, without sounding so wrong as to be unrecognisable, on which basis ay^a seems a preferable normalisation. Moreover, $ay \ t$ - was evidently tricky to pronounce for an Akkadian speaker, as is evident from the existence of the $\bar{e}$ allomorph, and so it is likely that when spoken ay^a would have been necessary.

⁶⁰ According to the system of stress delineated by von Soden (1995 (*GAG*³): §38.h), the enclitic $-ma$ would cause the stress to fall on the middle syllable anyway, but there are differing opinions on the subject. For instance, Buccelati (1996 (*Structural Grammar*): 205 §31.4) considers that suffixes, including enclitic $-ma$, attract secondary stress, which would presumably lead to both the first and second syllables being stressed were it not for the $/\bar{e}/$. The question of Akkadian stress is not yet fully resolved in scholarly literature, but it is clear that the $/\bar{e}/$ has the effect of turning the second syllable of $tēgā^ma$ into a super-heavy one, which is therefore very likely to be stressed.

⁶¹ See Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 29.

In every case, there seems to be an underlying reason for this, rooted in the stylistic, linguistic, and calligraphic intricacy of the text.

For example, in line 5 we read *Ninimma bēlet egubbē ellu* ‘Ninimma, lady of the pure *egubbū*’. As noted by Simkó,⁶² this text is unique in conferring the title *bēlet egubbē* on the goddess ^d*nin-imma*, a title which is normally held by Ningirrim, or occasionally by Namma.⁶³ The surface reading of the text is likely that Ninimma is to be understood as a by-form of Namma, but this is still very unusual. Lambert argues that *namma* and *imma* are dialectal variants in Sumerian,⁶⁴ on which basis we should understand Ninimma as ‘Lady Namma’, but why should Namma be ennobled only here? A probable answer is found in the fact that the preceding clause concerns the god Ninkurra ‘Lord of the Mountain’. The writing Ninimma parallels this both phonetically and semantically in a way that Namma does not, but remains a plausible, if rare, writing of the name.

Another example is found in line 7 ^d*gu-la* ^d*zu-gal-lat* GAL-*ti* ‘Gula, great chief physician’. This spelling is not normal, the correct word being *azugallat*. Stadhouders offers several suggestions to explain the oddity, settling ultimately on *anzugallat*, interpreted as a metathesised version of the rare by-form *azungallat*. He also offers the possibility that the first sign is to be read ^d, and that *zugallat* is the result of aphaeresis.⁶⁵

That the first sign is to be read ^d seems preferable, and has been adopted here, not least because this parallels the treatment of the epithets of both Kusu and Asalluhi in lines 9 and 11, both of which are given a divine marker. Rather than aphaeresis, however, we suggest that ^d*gu-la* ^d*zu-gal-lat* is a sandhi spelling – the final /a/ of Gula being the initial /a/ of *azugallat*. This is obscured by the scribe having given a divine determinative to Gula’s epithet, but as the divine marker is not pronounced the spoken version would naturally run together as *Gulazugallat*.⁶⁶ It is also worth noting that, assuming this reading is accepted, and with the exception of the single unavoidable /z/, the line, thanks to its use of the logogram GAL for *rabīti* ‘great’, contains just three written consonants, /g/~/l/~/t/, creating a pleasing homophony.

Yet another example of this sort of linguistic inventiveness is found in line 8: *luppu sāmāt ellupp^ukanūš* ‘(Gula) has wrapped red burls between you.’ There are more orthographic oddities in this line than there are words, and it will be

⁶² Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 30.

⁶³ See Lambert 2013 (*BCM*): 431–432; Simons 2018 (*RA* 112): 138–139. Note that K.10111, mentioned in the latter, can now be identified as a manuscript of Udug-Hul I, a new edition of which is in preparation by the present writer.

⁶⁴ Lambert 2013 (*BCM*): 436.

⁶⁵ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 27.

⁶⁶ Further examples of sandhi spellings across determinatives are discussed in Worthington 2012 (*Principles*): 185 §4.4.5.

discussed further below.⁶⁷ For now, we will focus on the first word, *luppu*, which is simply incorrect. The word *luppu*, according to the CAD, means ‘leather bag, bellows’,⁶⁸ but, as pointed out by Stadhouders,⁶⁹ it is both rare and out of place here, being attested almost exclusively in economic texts, and apparently referring to a large bag rather than one which could be included on a necklace.

The word which we must understand here is, as correctly interpreted by Stadhouders, ‘a mangled instantiation’⁷⁰ of *luppu* ‘tampon, wad, burl’.⁷¹ Amulet texts frequently include such burls in between the stones, presumably partly to stop them knocking together, partly because of the opportunity they afforded to tie other materia medica to the chain, and partly because woollen string had magical properties in its own right. The spelling, however, is wrong. In the context of the present incantation, with all its intriguing oddities, an explanation which looks convincing is that the scribe altered the word in order to create vowel harmony with the verb *elluppu*‘*kanūš*’ at the end of the line. Indeed, more than vowel harmony, this creates an exact rhyme within the line which would have been impossible without the change. This is even more striking when it is remembered that *elluppu*‘*kanūš*’, from *lapāpu*, is itself the result of considerable orthographic creativity.⁷² In misspelling both words, the scribe does not make the text particularly difficult to understand, especially to a native speaker from within the cultural milieu in which it was written, but rather renders an otherwise relatively dull sentence harmonious and pleasing.

Subliminal magic

We have so far noted a range of clever and playful uses of language and text to create pleasing effects in this tablet. The apotheosis of these techniques remains to be mentioned, however. This is an example of what appears to be a subliminal message hidden in exotic orthography and variant repetition.⁷³

Purity

The verbs in several lines of the incantation are notable for extensive epenthesis, consonantal reduplication, and shifted stress, leading to ‘bizarre-looking normal-

⁶⁷ §Calligraphic parallelism.

⁶⁸ CAD L: 252, s.v. *luppu*.

⁶⁹ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 28–29.

⁷⁰ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 28.

⁷¹ CAD L: 200, s.v. *luppu*.

⁷² On which, see below §

⁷³ By subliminal, we do not mean that the message is undetectable, but rather that it is hidden below the surface of the text, and, at least without careful reading, would not necessarily be noticed by those who heard or saw the text.

isation[s]’.⁷⁴ These are parsed convincingly by Stadhouders, but they remain bizarre, and given their frequency in this text, an explanation is in order. The relevant readings are *ibb'nikanūš* for *ibnīkunūši* ‘(he) has created you’, *ellupp^ukanūš* for *ilpupkunūši* ‘(she) has wrapped (burls) between you’, and *allall^ukanūš* for *ālulkunūši* ‘I am hanging you around (the neck)’.

The obvious change brought about by the peculiar spelling is an increase in consonantal reduplication in each word – /**ibb**/ for /ib/, /**ellupp**/ for /ilpup/, and /**allall**/ for /ālul/. In fact, consonantal reduplication is particularly frequent throughout the present text. There are 56 words in the incantation, of which 24 include a reduplicated consonant. Of these, five have two sets of reduplicated consonants, for a total of 29 instances:

attunu (l. 1), *ibb'nikanūš* (l.2), *Nunkurra*, *ellum* (l. 3), *Ninimma*, *egubbī*, *ellum* (l.5), *turri*, *ellum* (l. 6), *anzugallat* (l.7), *luppu*, *ellupp^ukanūš* (l. 8), *šaggamahhu* (l. 9), *nignakka*, *gizillā* (l. 10), *Asalluhi* (l. 11), *šipassu*, *iddikanūš* (l. 12), (*annanna*, *annanna*), *allall^ukanūš* (l. 13) *massartiku* (l. 14), *ayyābi*, *terra* (l. 15)

The phenomenon of consonantal clustering, or geminate ballast, as a literary technique has been discussed at some length by Noegel.⁷⁵ In the present case, however, something more sophisticated seems to be behind the reduplication. Of the 29 instances of reduplication in the text, 13 concern the consonants /l/, /b/, or /p/. These are also the consonants affected by the apparently superfluous reduplication in the unusual verbal forms discussed above. When it is considered that four of the other instances occur in the phrase *annanna mār annanna* ‘so-and-so son of so-and-so’ which would have been replaced by personal names when the text was recited, this means that just over half of all consonantal reduplication in the text concerns these three consonants. In fact, /ll/, /pp/, or /bb/ is found in all but two lines (ll. 4 and 12) of the body of the text, and is found twice in four lines (ll. 5, 8, 10, and 13).

That these three reduplicated consonants are focal to the incantation is not, in fact, surprising. Of the 24 words containing a reduplicated consonant, four are forms of the word *ellu* ‘pure’ (ll. 3, 5, 6 and 9), which is a central theme of the incantation. It seems probable that the eleven instances of /ll/ in the incantation were intended to produce consonance with the same word,⁷⁶ thereby evoking it in echo – acting, in essence, as a subliminal message evoking the concept of purity.⁷⁷

If this is accepted, it is not too great a leap to suggest that /bb/, and to a slightly

⁷⁴ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 28.

⁷⁵ Among other contributions, see Noegel 2005 (*Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 5): 153–167 and Noegel 2015 (*FS Ben Zvi*): 417–432.

⁷⁶ Note that this is consonance, not alliteration, as the consonants in question are not limited to the begininings of the words.

⁷⁷ A similar technique is used in Old Babylonian literature, see e.g. Wasserman 2018 (*FS Klein*): 38.

lesser extent its unvoiced equivalent /pp/ was intended to call to mind the related word *ebbu* ‘clean’. In Mesopotamian magic, purity, whether *ellu* or *ebbu*, was the principle defence against supernatural assault, which is precisely the problem which the amulet is supposed to address.⁷⁸ Although *ebbu* is not explicitly included in the text, it is essentially synonymous with *ellu* in a magical context. Given that it would be difficult to produce a natural sounding text where every word somehow sounds like *ellu*,⁷⁹ it is not especially surprising that the scribe reached for an extra consonant (whether voiced /b/ or voiceless /p/) to produce the same effect.

The varying treatment of the verbs in the text speaks in favour of this proposal. As already mentioned *ibb'ni* for *ibni* (l. 2), *ellupp'* for *ilpup* (l. 8) and *allall'* for *ālul* (l. 13) are extremely unusual forms. Nonetheless, they are just three of the seven verbs used in the body of the text. The other four verbs were not written in such an unusual way as were these three – they do not include epenthetic vowels or unusual reduplication – despite the fact that two of them do contain the relevant consonants /b/ and /p/. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that it is not feasible for these verbs to be altered in a way which would produce /ll/, /bb/ or /pp/ without rendering the word unrecognisable.

In line 10, the verb is *ušbikanūš*, from *šubū'u* ‘to move (an object) alongside (a person for ritual purposes)’, the Š-stem of *bā'u* ‘to walk along’. As the word is a Š-stem, epenthetic reduplication in the manner that produced the three verbs just discussed would produce something like **ušbbu'u*. As this includes an impossible consonant group /šbb/, it cannot be written while still producing a meaningful text. Perhaps a second epenthetic vowel could be added, but the resultant form would end up very unlike the word being written.

Despite this, the scribe has evidently made an effort to get as close as possible to the same effect. As noted by Stadhouders it is extremely rare for the final radical, *ʔ*, to be omitted from this word.⁸⁰ Given the prevalence of /bb/ in the text, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that the intention in dropping the *ʔ* was to emphasise the /b/, even if singular. The omission of the *ʔ* also has the effect of creating a smaller parallel with *išpukanūš* from *šapū* in line 6 (*/ušbi/* ~ */išpu/*) which would not be as neat with an additional consonant *ʔ* at the end.

The /p/ in *išpukanūš* is similarly impossible to reduplicate through epenthesis of the type found in the other three verbs, the result of which would be *iššip'kanūš*. Assuming the intention was to create a plethora of /pp/s, this would be counter-productive as the emphasis would naturally fall instead on the reduplicated /šš/. The final two verbs in the body of the text, *ušēridkanūs* and *iddikanūš*, are also written in standard orthography. Epenthetic vowels could easily have been added to either of these words, but they were not. The clearest connection between the

⁷⁸ See, e.g. Ambos 2012 (Purity): 89–94.

⁷⁹ Excluding tongue-twisters.

⁸⁰ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 27.

words written in standard orthography is the impossibility of varying them to produce one of the reduplicated consonants found in the ‘misspelt’ verbs – /l/, /b/, or /p/.

Durability

There is a second element to the subliminal magic of this incantation. Alongside the sound /l/~/bb/~/pp/ in nearly every line of the text, every clause contains the suffix pronoun *-kanūš*.⁸¹ As already noted by Stadhouders, *-kanūš* is extremely unusual. He interprets it grammatically as ‘an apocopated by-form of *-kanūši*, which in turn has been defined as a rare Late Babylonian variant of *-kunūši*, the dative pronominal suffix of the second person plural masculine, being used in late texts for direct and indirect object indiscriminately’.⁸² This is doubtless, in essence, correct, but the use of such an obscure and unlikely form still calls for explanation, even more so because in line 13 the suffix changes to *-kunūš*, which is closer to the expected form *-kunūši*.

We would like to suggest that, just as epenthesis and consonantal reduplication are used to subliminally indicate the idea of ‘purity’, the use of *-kanūš* is an attempt to evoke the word *kānu* ‘to last, to endure, to remain in effect’. The cumulative effect of these two techniques, then, is a subliminal message meaning something like ‘be enduringly pure’ repeated in every clause. This is, in essence, the aim of the incantation – the amulet is supposed to protect the wearer from ‘evil-doer and enemy’ in the form of supernatural assaults. For it to remain enduringly pure would guarantee the best possible defence.

Support for this idea comes from line 13 of the text, in which, for no immediately obvious reason, *-kanūš* is written *-kunūš*. As noted already, *-kanūš* is apparently an apocopated by-form of *-kunūši*, and so *-kunūš* is actually closer to the expected spelling. This does not explain the change, however – the scribe had written *-kanūš* six times already by this point so why the sudden change to *-kunūš* in the final line?

The change makes no difference to the surface reading of the text – *ina kišādi NN mār NN allal^l kunūš* ‘I am hanging you around the neck of NN son of NN’. Working on the subliminal level, however, there is a striking change. In contrast to *-kanūš*, which sounds more or less like the G stem *kānu*, evoking the image of ‘enduringness’, *-kunūš* sounds more or less like the D-stem *kunnu* ‘to place an object correctly in a specific place (said of ritual and votive objects)’.⁸³ A particularly revealing example of *kunnu* used in context is found in a royal inscription of Nabonidus, in which it is used to describe the placement of a valuable cylinder seal made of jasper: *ina GÜ^d30 ú-kin-ni* ‘he had [it] firmly placed around the neck

⁸¹ Found in lines 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12.

⁸² Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 27.

⁸³ CAD K: 162–163, s.v. *kānu* A 3a 1’.

of the god Sîn'.⁸⁴ Thus, at the moment the officiant places the amulet around the patient's neck, the subliminal message changes subtly, and for just one line it evokes the word for the very action that is being performed.

A final point to take into consideration is found in the concluding lines of the text. From this point on, the incantation addresses the chain in the singular, and drops the subliminal phonetic references to pureness and durability. This makes sense from the logic of the text – the chain as a whole has now been fashioned and applied. At this point, it is being instructed, not crafted, and so the time for enhancement is over.

That said, however, the scribe may have included a final wink towards this subliminal message. In line 14, the 2nd s. suffix pronoun is written with *-ku* in place of the standard *-ka*. While this is not especially uncommon in the Late Babylonian period, or for the archive from which the tablet may have stemmed,⁸⁵ in a text which is otherwise so intricately composed it is likely that this was yet another stylistic choice. Although it cannot be shown unequivocally, it is plausible that the scribe wrote /KU/ to make a homophonic link to the sign /KÙ/, Akk. *ellu* 'pure', in one of the only lines of the text not to mention a 'pure' word.

The cumulative effect of these subliminal readings is the same as that produced by the Ronnie Barker sketch quoted in the introduction. In essence, two texts are written at once – the straightforward one translated above, and a second, far simpler one, in bold text here:

- | | |
|---|---|
| §1. 1 <i>šiptu attunu [abnū]</i> | §1. 1 <i>Incantation. You, o [stones],</i> |
| §2. 2 <i>Ea ibbⁱnikanūš</i> | §2. 2 <i>Ea has created you; pure, endure</i> |
| §3. 3 <i>Nunkurra ištu šadī ellu</i>
4 <i>ušēridkanūš</i> | §3. 3-4 <i>Ninkurra has brought you down from the pure mountain; pure, endure</i> |
| §4. 5 <i>Ninimma bēlet egubbē</i>
<i>ellu</i>
6 <i>ina ʔurri kitē ellu</i>
<i>išpukanūš</i> | §4. 5-6 <i>Ninimma, lady of the pure egubbū, has soaked you on a cord of pure linen; clean, pure, pure, endure</i> |
| §5. 7 <i>Gula zugallat rabīti</i>
8 <i>luppu sāmāt luppuⁿkanūš</i> | §5. 7-8 <i>Gula, the chief physician, has wrapped red burls (between) you; pure, clean, pure, clean, endure</i> |
| §6. 9 <i>Kusu šaggamahḥu ša</i>
<i>Ellil</i>
10 <i>nignakka gizillā ella</i>
<i>ušbīkanūš</i> | §6. 9-10 <i>Kusu, chief purification priest of Enlil, has moved the holy censer (and) torch past you; pure, pure, pure, endure</i> |

⁸⁴ Weiershäuser & Novotny 2020 (*RINBE* 2): 70–71, X 42'.

⁸⁵ My thanks to Michael Jursa for this information.

- §7. ¹¹ *Asalluhi mašmaš ilāni* §7. ^{11–12} Asalluhi, exorcist of the great gods, has cast
rabûti his life-giving spell over you; **pure, endure**
¹² *šipassu ša balātu iddi-*
kanūš
- §8. ¹³ *ina kišādi annanna mār* §8. ¹³ I am hanging you around the neck of so-and-so,
annanna allal¹⁴ kunūš son of so-and-so; **pure, pure, correctly placed**
- §9. ¹⁴ *ina maššartiku ay^a* §9. ^{14–15} Please, on my behalf, do not neglect your
tēgā [ma] watch, and drive off evildoer and enemy for me!
¹⁵ *irti lemnu u ayyābi* **pure**
terra

Naturally, there is no suggestion here that the subliminal text was ‘read’ like this, but rather that through the repetition of homophonous sounds the basic image of ‘enduring purity’ was projected into the mind of the audience – in particular into the minds of the gods, to whom the incantation was chiefly addressed. The variation of *-kanūš* to *-kunūš* at the point in the ritual when the officiant actually hung the amulet around the patient’s neck offered the scribe a chance for a final virtuoso change of subliminal message to one that directly mirrored his actions.

Conclusion

The short incantation discussed here contains multitudes. A straightforward reading of the text gives a clear and logical narrative that describes the process of crafting an amulet chain, thereby creating a mythological origin for the chain, and securing divine backing for its recreation by the officiant. In itself, this would have been understood as magically effective, and is of interest for what it can tell us about magical practice in Mesopotamia. Far more than this, however, the scribe who wrote it was able to include sophisticated techniques in practically every line, each of which enhance both the beauty and the magical effectiveness of the text. This propels this short incantation into the realm of high literature.

It is a well established feature of Mesopotamian scribal culture that skilled practitioners frequently used unusual spellings in order to create layers of meaning. A good example of this is found in an Old Babylonian prayer to Ištar which begins by saying she is a woman (*sinništum*), spelling this [^{d+e}]n.zu-ni-iš-tu-um (*sîn-ništum*). As George points out, this incorporates both the name of her father, Sîn, the moon god, and her animal, *nēštum* ‘lioness’, and thereby ‘effectively characterises the goddess as the “Moon Lioness.”’⁸⁶

The present text, however, is notable for the proliferation of techniques used, and the creation of meaning through parallelism in cryptic spellings. In his

⁸⁶ George 2009 (*Schøyen Literary Texts*): 76. Several further examples have been collected by Stefan Maul (Maul 1999 [Commentaries / Kommentare]: 12: Maul 2003 [Hieroglyphen]: 72–73).

commentary to the prayer just quoted, George states that ‘[a]side from the first word, the spelling is largely unremarkable.’⁸⁷ Conversely, in our text there is barely a word which does not warrant comment, and the signforms, alongside the format and layout of the tablet, complement the text in both complexity and creativity. The scribe carefully created a text in which the surface meaning remained completely clear, despite just under half the words being spelt incorrectly, and in so doing made the incantation more harmonious, and the calligraphy more well-balanced, than it could otherwise have been.

Although our text is notable for its high concentration of these techniques, they are not especially rare, though they have not so far been well explored in the scholarly literature.⁸⁸ Where the incantation studied here becomes truly unique, however, is in its use of repetition and variation of cryptic spellings. To the best of the present writer’s knowledge, no other Mesopotamian text has so far been identified in which the repetition and variation of creative and cryptic (mis)spellings serves to create a subliminal message reinforcing the main text.

The underlying refrain ‘enduringly pure’ is not addressed to any particular audience, and so it can be understood to have been a plea to the gods, a reassurance to the patient and their family, and even as an exhortation to the amulet itself. The variant repetition in line 13 which allows an understanding ‘correctly placed’ at the moment the chain is placed stands out as a subliminal example of an Austinian speech act. All of this would certainly have been understood to have enhanced the magical efficacy of the amulet, which would, in turn, help to cure or protect the patient.

Given the size of the Mesopotamian magic corpus, it is unlikely that the present incantation is actually unique among ancient texts in its use of subliminal magic, but much work remains to be done in the literary analysis of ancient texts. Were more understood generally about the poetics of magic, we might begin to suggest reasons for the particularly dense accretion of literary techniques and tricks in the present text, but in the absence of a more thorough study we can only speculate. That said, it seems unlikely that the lateness of the text is directly relevant, as suggested by Simkó and Stadhouders.⁸⁹ As we have seen, the scribe was both creative and careful to produce a meaningful text. The fact that his first language was likely Aramaic probably made this harder – clever word play is usually simpler in one’s mother tongue.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ George 2009 (Schøyen Literary Texts): 76.

⁸⁸ There are several notable exceptions to this regarding ancient magic (e.g. Michalowski 1981 (*ZA* 71); Reiner 1985 (Thwarts); Veldhuis 1990 (*OLP* 21); 1991 (Cow of Sin); 1993 [3rd *OLP* 24]). Beyond magic, a recent, and extremely thorough, example of close reading in Akkadian literature is Worthington 2020 (Ea’s Duplicitry).

⁸⁹ Simkó & Stadhouders 2020 (*JMC* 36): 27

⁹⁰ In addition, we should note that earlier texts, though so far rarely analysed in the manner attempted here, clearly display similarly cryptic orthographic methods, likely for

One observation can be offered, however. The intricacy of the text, coupled with the careful layout of the tablet – its apparent “typesetting” – suggests that this incantation was not simply copied, but was actually composed by the scribe who wrote this manuscript. It is not impossible that the linguistic and calligraphic parallelisms and the careful formatting of the tablet could have been accretions to a base text over time, individually added by successive generations of scribes, or that they were copied without error on the basis of a now lost original, but it seems more likely that the sophistication of the tablet reveals the hand of an individual author who lavished care on its production. The simplest answer, then, is perhaps the best – the scribe of this text was clever and creative, and produced a work of high literature in miniature.

Regardless, the incantation studied here should be understood as an example of the great skill and intricate playfulness of an anonymous scribe – an ancient counterpart to Ronnie Barker – and as a landmark in the use of variant repetition to create meaning and influence the world.

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similar purposes. A good example of this is the Late Old Babylonian incantation against dog bite, BM 79125, of which Finkel notes ‘The scribe has employed unusual ideograms and exceptional syllabary to the point that one might accuse him of a weakness for cryptography’ (Finkel 1999 (Mesopotamian Magic): 215).

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