



## **4.1. If a pig carries a reed and enters a man's house... Observations on some structuring devices in Babylonian omen lists**

**Version 03**

**January 2021**

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**Abstract:** The paper studies a sequence of eleven interrelated omens dealing with the ominous behaviour of pigs from Šumma izbu Tablet 22. My aim is to demonstrate how the authors of the omen sequence creatively operate with similarity and contrast between contiguous or near-contiguous textual elements both on the horizontal, syntagmatic, and on the vertical, paradigmatic axis.

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This article results from research conducted under the auspices of the project REPAC “Repetition, Parallelism and Creativity: an Inquiry into the Construction of Meaning in Ancient Mesopotamian Literature and Erudition” (2019-2024, University of Vienna) that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement no. 803060).

How to cite: De Zorzi, N. 2021, “If a pig carries a reed and enters a man's house... Observations on some structuring devices in Babylonian omen lists, Version 03,” REPAC (ERC Grant no. 803060), 2019-2024, at <https://doi.org/10.25365/phaidra.230> (accessed day/month/year).

In second and first millennium BCE Mesopotamia, the texts most commonly associated with the practice of divination are omen lists written in Babylonian. These texts are a still largely unexplored source of information on ancient Mesopotamian scribal creativity and on scribal strategies of meaning and knowledge production.

Omens were formulated as conditional clauses whose protases or antecedents (A) describe a sign, and whose apodoses or consequents (C) give the pertinent prediction. Omen clauses draw on schematised sets of potential phenomena and match these as ominous signifiers with an equally selected set of signified predictions. The correspondence between sign and prediction is based on a likeness of some kind between them, on the semantic, phonemic or graphic level.

The scribes' creativity was not limited to establishing connections between individual signs and individual predictions. In omen lists, this horizontal or syntagmatic level of omen production was interconnected with the vertical, paradigmatic axis, and we must still address major gaps in our knowledge here, since **the sequencing of interdependent and partly repetitive omens** has hitherto been studied only selectively, with a particular focus on sources from the Middle Bronze Age (Winitzer 2017). REPAC will offer a much-needed investigation of **omen-organisation and omen-sequencing** on the basis of Iron Age sources (WP 4).

One of REPAC's main innovations is its focus on the **micro-structure** of Ancient Mesopotamian scholarly texts. In the following, a case-study based on a sequence of eleven interrelated omens dealing with the ominous behaviour of pigs will be presented. The omens are taken from *Šumma izbu* Tablet 22 (De Zorzi 2014). My aim is to demonstrate that **the interplay of similarity and contrast between contiguous or near-contiguous textual elements** is a significant operative principle in the process of text production in omen lists. Through a process of reverse engineering, a model for the development of this sequence over several stages can be proposed. These stages probably correspond to particular phases in the text's history, as it gradually approached the stable form in which it was transmitted in the first millennium BCE:

22: 120) *šumma šaḥû qanâ naši tibûti nûnî u iššûrî / iššûrî nûnî / erbî nûnî ibbašši : tibûtu ibbašši*  
 "If a pig carries a reed - there will be a swarming of fish and birds (var.: of locusts and fish); there will be a swarming (of animals)"

22: 121) *šumma šaḥû qanâ našîma ana bît amêli îrub bêlšu išarru*  
 "If a pig carries a reed and enters a man's house - (the house's and the pig's) owner will become rich."

22: 122) *šumma šaḥû qanâ našîma ištu bît bêlišu ūši bêlšu mādûti ibissê / ibissâ immar*  
 "If a pig carries a reed and exits from its owner's house - its owner will suffer losses (var.: heavy losses)."

22: 123) *šumma šaḥû rikis qanê našîma ana bît bêlišu îrub bêlšu nêmelam immar*  
 "If a pig carries a bundle of reeds and enters its owner's house - its owner will make some profit."

22: 124) *šumma šaḥû rikis qanê našîma ištu bît bêlišu ūši bêlšu ibissâ immar*  
 "If a pig carries a bundle of reeds and exits its owner's house - its owner will suffer losses."

22: 125) *šumma šaḥû êri gišimmari naši meḥû itebbâm*  
 "If a pig carries a palm frond - a storm will rise."

22: 126) *šumma šaḥû pitilta naši [su]nqu ina mâtî ibbašši*  
 "If a pig carries a string plaited from date palm fibres - there will be a famine in the land."

22: 127) *šumma šaḥû kilibba našîma ina sūqi ittallak maḥîru ibbašši*  
 "If a pig carries a large reed bundle and runs about in the street - there will be active trading."

22: 128) *šumma šaḥû kilibba našîma immelil tîb meḥê*  
 "If a pig carries a large reed bundle and plays with it - there will be a storm."

22: 129) *šumma šaḥû kilibba našîma ištu bābi ana bīt bēlišu ūši bīt bēlišu išarru*

“If a pig carries a large reed bundle and goes from the (city) gate towards its owner’s house - its owner’s household will become rich.”

22: 130) *šumma šaḥû kilibba našîma ištu bīt bēlišu ana bābi ūši bīt bēlišu ibissâ immar*

“If a pig carries a large reed bundle and goes from its owner’s house towards the (city) gate - its owner’s household will suffer losses.”

Let us look at single omens first: swarming birds, fish or locusts – we have different manuscript traditions for omen 120 – are a frequent prediction in omen lists. The reed-carrying pig may condition their appearance because of the habitat it shares with bird and fish at least – the reeds. “Swarming” is also conditioned by the semantic proximity between the words used for “to carry” (*našû*) and “to swarm” (*tibûtu*) – both involve the idea of “rising.”

The symmetrical pair 121 and 122 is based on 120 and add the dichotomy “entering” – “exiting:” in 121 the reed is being brought by the pig into the man’s house, while in 122 the reed is taken out of the house. The former suggests “getting rich,” the latter “impoverishment” (losses) – the underlying conventional analogy is intuitively intelligible. 123 und 124 are variations of 121 and 122. The “reed” is replaced by a “reed bundle,” and the dichotomy richness-losses is substituted by the dichotomy profit-losses.

The structure of 125 is that of 120: only we have a palm frond instead of a reed. The prediction refers to a topos also found in literature: date palms must face the wind and lose their fronds in a storm. The verb used, “rising” of the storm, *itebbâm*, is etymologically linked to the “swarming” of 120 (*tibûtu*). The structure of 126 follows that of 125: the string plaited from date palm fibres evokes a famine because palm fibres are eaten *in extremis*.

Omen 127 uses another word for “reed bundle” (*kilibbu*) and has the pig walk in the street. Street, *sûqu*, also means “market” in Akkadian, thus explaining the association with active trade. Omen 128 follows 127 structurally. The use of *immelil* “to play” in the protasis motivates the “storm” in the prediction: it is a topos in Babylonian to express the whirling of dust storms by this same word.

Finally, the couple 129 and 130, built around the binary opposition between the inward/outward movement of the pig, is a variation on 121-124: in this case, the “richness-losses” theme has a larger focus: it concerns not just the pig’s owner (121-124), but his whole household.

The following tables offer schematic presentations of this text’s structure with coloured graphs. Their purpose is to allow readers to follow the analysis more easily. In the first table, colours highlight the patterns of association between omens:

	Protasis	Apodosis
120	If a pig carries ( <i>naši</i> ) a reed (in its snout)	There will be a swarming ( <i>ribû</i> ) of fish and birds (var.: of locusts and fish), there will be a swarming (of animals)
121	carries a reed and enters a man's house	(The house's and the pig's) owner will become <i>rich</i>
122	exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer <i>losses</i> (var.: heavy losses)
123	carries a bundle of reeds and enters its owner's house	Its owner will make some <i>profit</i>
124	exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer <i>losses</i>
125	carries a palm frond	A storm will rise ( <i>itebbām</i> )
126	carries a string plaited from date palm fibres	There will be a famine in the land
127	carries a large reed bundle and runs about in the street ( <i>suḡu</i> )	There will be active trading
128	plays ( <i>immedil</i> ) with it	(There will be) rising of a storm
129	goes from the (city) gate towards its owner's house	Its owner's household will become <i>rich</i> .
130	goes from its owner's house towards the (city) gate	Its owner's household will suffer <i>losses</i>

Let us now focus on the structure of the sequence. Starting with 120, the pig with the reed (120-122) begins a sequence of omens in which the pig carries a bundle of reeds (123-124), a palm frond (125), a string plaited from palm fibres (126), and a large reed bundle (127-130):

	Protasis	Apodosis
120	If a pig carries a reed (in its snout)	There will be a swarming of fish and birds (var.: of locusts and fish), there will be a swarming (of animals)
121	carries a reed and enters a man's house	(The house's and the pig's) owner will become rich
122	exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer losses (var.: heavy losses)
123	carries a bundle of reeds and enters its owner's house	Its owner will make some profit
124	exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer losses
125	carries a palm frond	A storm will rise
126	carries a string plaited from date palm fibres	There will be a famine in the land
127	carries a large reed bundle and runs about in the street	There will be active trading
128	plays with it	(There will be) rising of a storm
129	goes from the (city) gate towards its owner's house	Its owner's household will become rich.
130	goes from its owner's house towards the (city) gate	Its owner's household will suffer losses

This vertical sequence is broken up at the beginning by the insertion of two binary pairs built around the dichotomy “entering” – “exiting” describing the pig’s movement: 121-122 and 123-124. These two pairs of omens are tightly interconnected: the underlying association is the same (“entering” – “richness/profit”, “exiting” – “losses”).

Omens 125-126 share the same structure of 120: the pig simply carries an item and no further action is taken into consideration. The tight connection between 120 and 125 becomes evident if one focuses on their respective apodosis: the apodosis of 125 repeats with a variation the “rising” (*tebû*) theme of 120.

Starting with omen 127, a differently structured vertical sequence is inserted (127-130). The element “If a pig carries a large reed bundle” does not form a protasis on its own as the two preceding elements do (125-126), but it is extended with different horizontal expansions describing various activities of the reed-carrying pig: running about in the street (127), playing with the reed bundle (128), going from the city gate towards the man’s house and the other way around (129-130).

The last couple of omens (129-130) are built around the binary opposition between the inward/outward movement of the pig, and, as already mentioned, are a variation on 121-124 with a larger focus (the household):

	Protasis	Apodosis
120	If a pig carries a reed (in its snout)	There will be a swarming of fish and birds (var.: of locusts and fish), there will be a swarming (of animals)
121	carries a reed and enters a man's house	(The house's and the pig's) owner will become rich
122	exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer losses (var.: heavy losses)
123	carries a bundle of reeds and enters its owner's house	Its owner will make some profit
124	exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer losses
125	carries a palm frond	A storm will rise
126	carries a string plaited from date palm fibres	There will be a famine in the land
127	carries a large reed bundle and runs about in the street	There will be active trading
128	plays with it	(There will be) rising of a storm
129	goes from the (city) gate towards its owner's house	Its owner's household will become rich.
130	goes from its owner's house towards the (city) gate	Its owner's household will suffer losses

Let us now focus on the apodosis section of the sequence. On this level, there is **significant repetition** between the lines after the introductory omen (120): the dichotomy between richness-profit and loss is explored in 121-124, as well as in 129-130; both 125 and 128 deal with the rising of a storm and represent a variation on the “swarming”-theme of 120; 126-127 seem to introduce, with famine and active trading, a variant to the “richness/profit-losses” theme:

	Protasis		Apodosis
120	If a pig	carries a reed (in its snout)	There will be a <b>swarming</b> of fish and birds (var.: of locusts and fish), there will be a swarming (of animals)
121		carries a reed and enters a man's house	(The house's and the pig's) owner will become <b>rich</b>
122		exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer <b>losses</b> (var.: heavy losses)
123		carries a bundle of reeds and enters its owner's house	Its owner will make some <b>profit</b>
124		exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer <b>losses</b>
125		carries a palm frond	A storm will <b>rise</b>
126		carries a string plaited from date palm fibres	There will be a <b>famine</b> in the land
127		carries a large reed bundle and runs about in the street	There will be <b>active trading</b>
128		plays with it	(There will be) <b>rising</b> of a storm
129		goes from the (city) gate towards its owner's house	Its owner's household will become <b>rich</b>
130		goes from its owner's house towards the (city) gate	Its owner's household will suffer <b>losses</b>

Importantly, the sequence generally avoids exact repetition. A theme is stated over and over, but with each appearance some aspect of it changes: the swarming of animals (120) turns into the rising of a storm (125 and, with variation, 128); richness (121) becomes first profit (123), then active trading (127); losses (122, 124) become famine (126). In the last couple of omens (129-130) the “richness-losses” theme has a larger focus: it concerns not just the pig’s owner (121-122; 123-124), but his whole household.

A closer look reveals that the apodoses create **structures of thematic symmetry (ABB'A'B''A'''B''')**:

120	Swarming of animals	<i>tibût nūnī u iṣṣūrī / iṣṣūrī nūnī / erbī nūnī ibbašši : tibûtu ibbašši</i>	A
121	Richness	<i>bēlšu iṣarru</i>	B
122	Loss / Heavy Loss	<i>bēlšu mādūti ibissê / ibissâ immar</i>	
123	Profit	<i>bēlšu nēmelam immar</i>	B'
124	Loss	<i>bēlšu ibissâ immar</i>	A'
125	Rising of a storm	<i>meḥû itebbâm</i>	
126	Famine	<i>[su]nqu ina māti ibbašši</i>	B''
127	Trade	<i>maḥīru ibbašši</i>	
128	Rising of a storm	<i>tīb meḥê</i>	A''
129	Richness	<i>bīt bēlišu iṣarru</i>	B'''
130	Loss	<i>bīt bēlišu ibissâ immar</i>	

Another pattern is inscribed within the sequence, as omens 121-125 and 128-130 can be shown to create a chiasmic thematic structure: richness-losses (A) – rising of storm (B) – rising of a



storm (B) – richness-losses (A). Interestingly, the two predictions inserted between the two components of this virtual chiasm, 126-127, are closely interconnected as they stand in a semantic opposition to each other: famine and active trade. In the highly repetitive sequence of the apodoses, they stand out, as their wording differs significantly from that displayed by the apodoses with which they share the general “richness-losses” theme (121-124, 129-130). If we now bring the protases back into the picture, we see that this opposition plays an important role in the structuring of the whole sequence: through this opposition the authors of these omens tie the second vertical sequence, 127-130, to the preceding one, 120-126:

	Protasis	Apodosis
120	If a pig carries a reed (in its snout)	There will be a swarming of fish and birds (var.: of locusts and fish), there will be a swarming (of animals)
121	carries a reed and enters a man's house	(The house's and the pig's) owner will become rich
122	exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer losses (var.: heavy losses)
123	carries a bundle of reeds and enters its owner's house	Its owner will make some profit
124	exits from its owner's house	Its owner will suffer losses
125	carries a palm frond	A storm will rise
126	carries a string plaited from date palm fibres	There will be a famine in the land
127	carries a large reed bundle and runs about in the street	There will be active trading
128	plays with it	(There will be) rising of a storm
129	goes from the (city) gate towards its owner's house	Its owner's household will become rich.
130	goes from its owner's house towards the (city) gate	Its owner's household will suffer losses

The text achieves here (126-127) the linking of two separate vertical sequences by drawing on a binary opposition at the juncture. This technique, of which REPAC's ongoing work is bringing to light numerous other cases, is revealing itself as an important structuring device in divinatory compendia.

A complex literary process is at work in this sequence: it involves textual expansion founded essentially on the use of **similarity and analogy**. There is a clear concentration in the vertical extension and the interconnections between the signs in the protases. This concentration on the level of the sign, however, implies a stronger schematisation of the predictions, which cannot keep up with the increasing complexity of the signs in the protases. The diviners' hermeneutic code, their repertoire of analogical associations, was clearly not sufficiently elaborate. **At the same time, our example demonstrates that Ancient Mesopotamian diviners did try to match the complexity of the protasis on the level of the apodosis by variation of single elements, and, particularly, through clever arrangement of relatively standard phrases.**

In conclusion, we have seen how the authors of the omen sequence analysed here creatively operate with similarity and contrast between contiguous or near-contiguous textual elements, both on the horizontal, syntagmatic, and on the vertical, paradigmatic axis. Their modus operandi can be described as a creative process, as a construction of meaning principally based on analogical reasoning. Ancient Mesopotamian scribes conceived of this process as a matter of discovering pre-existent information written into the fabric of the world by the gods. In any

case, this process, etically of creation, emically of discovery, is based on textual means and leads to knowledge of socially recognised validity.

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