

SEMITIC OR SUMERIAN? A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY IN THE INCANTATIONS FROM EBLA

By NICHOLAS M. GILL

While the textual corpus of Ebla is well-known for its assortment of incantations in Sumerian and one or more Semitic languages, the evidence put forth to identify the language of discrete spells from Ebla has not been subject to reexamination for many years. Due to the esoteric content of incantations as well as their specialized vocabulary and unconventional orthography, it is often difficult to recognize the language of a given composition or discern its subject matter. This contribution reevaluates the Semitic classification of the tenth incantation on TM 75.G.2459 (ARET 5, 19), reanalyzes its language as syllabic Sumerian, and explores its content in light of other early Mesopotamian incantations.

Introduction

Although the earliest Mesopotamian incantations originated in southern Iraq, the largest collection of Early Dynastic incantations stems from the royal chancellery of Ebla, which contained twenty tablets comprised of spells in Sumerian and an assortment of Semitic languages.¹ While the language of certain incantations inscribed upon these tablets can be discerned from duplicate compositions and parallel passages, much of the technical vocabulary found in the Semitic incantations remains impenetrable, whilst the Sumerian incantations are frequently composed in a syllabic orthography that prioritizes the phonetic shape of the recitation over its semantic meaning.² These factors, in combination with the obscurity, laconism, and abbreviation that permeate this genre of early Mesopotamian texts, make it challenging to identify the language of a given incantation or understand its contents.³ Consequently, the classification of many incantations as Semitic or Sumerian has not been reevaluated since the pioneering efforts made more than twenty-five years ago.⁴ Since knowledge of early Mesopotamian incantations has steadily advanced in the years since these initial identifications were made, several of the texts which had been formerly considered Semitic or Sumerian are ripe for reassessment.

TM 75.G.2459 (ARET 5, 19), Incantation Ten

Among the tablets bearing incantations excavated from Ebla, TM 75.G.2459 (ARET 5, 19) is notable for its exceptional size. While large collective tablets of incantations are known from contemporary sites elsewhere, ARET 5, 19 holds an unprecedented fourteen distinct incantations recorded in Sumerian and one or more Semitic languages among the tablets of Ebla.⁵ Just as the precise number of Semitic languages upon this tablet remains uncertain, the classification of several incantations as Semitic or Sumerian remains tentative.⁶ This study focuses on the tenth incantation inscribed upon ARET 5, 19. Pettinato (1979: 337, 349) provided the first transliteration of this incantation and offered selected remarks about its content as spell number twenty-four. Thereafter, Edzard (1984) published a copy of this composition (plate 26) and photos of the tablet on which it is inscribed (plates 54–55), alongside most of the other tablets bearing incantations from Ebla. Krebernik (1984: 170–171) provided the latest edition of

¹ Pettinato 1979; Edzard 1984; Krebernik 1984; Fronzaroli 1988; Krebernik 1996; Cunningham 1997: 5–43; Bonechi and Catagnoli 1998; Fronzaroli 2003a; id. 2003b. Incantations previously identified as Sumerian have been reedited in Rudik 2015, with revised readings in Rudik 2020 and ead. 2021.

² Civil and Rubio 1999: 260.

³ A new study on orality, variation, and abbreviation within early incantations is in preparation. At present, see the

remarks in van Dijk 1969: 541–543, id. 1973: 107–117, and van Dijk et al. 1985: 1.

⁴ Pettinato 1979; Edzard 1984; Krebernik 1984; Fronzaroli 1988; Krebernik 1996; Bonechi and Catagnoli 1998.

⁵ The incantations on this tablet are conveniently displayed in Pettinato 1979: 347–351.

⁶ Bonechi and Catagnoli 1998.

this incantation as spell number thirty-three. Since then, the composition has only been subject to selected studies.⁷

The previous editors of this laconic incantation struggled to decipher its content due to two interpretive cruxes, the ambiguous significance of NUN NI+MAŠ NUN NI+MAŠ in case xii 5 and the obscure meaning of NU.NU in case xii 6. Since this pithy composition otherwise contains only the names and titlature of Ningirima and Enki in addition to the familiar introductory and concluding formulae of the spells from Ebla, the prior editors looked to the two NUN signs and the NU.NU to ascribe a function to this spell and hesitantly connected these constructions to the Akkadian noun *nūnum*. Accordingly, this composition has been identified as an incantation in a Semitic language about fish, couched in heavily logographic writing, and it has been considered a possible attestation of Mesopotamian scribal activity at Ebla since *nūnum* does not otherwise occur in Eblaite.⁸ This analysis, however, remains uncertain. Since the Semitic identification of the language of this incantation rests solely upon the apparent similarity of NUN and NU.NU with Akkadian *nūnum*, the risk of a coincidental resemblance cannot be discounted, and it seems reasonable to explore the possibility that Sumerian is the language of this composition.

This contribution offers a new interpretation of this incantation as a Sumerian composition featuring syllabic orthography. This analysis postulates the spell is inscribed solely as a string of vocatives which invoke Enki both by name and through his titlature, while also appealing to the deities Ninmaš and Ningirima by name alone. The interpretation advocated in the following edition argues this incantation serves to call upon these deities, implore them to bear witness to the requests of the practitioner recounting the spell, and entreat them to invoke their divine powers and effectuate the appeals he has made on his own behalf or on behalf of his client(s).

Text Edition

rev. xii 4 **en₂ e₂-nu-ru**
 rev. xii 5 **nun ni-maš nun ni-maš**
 rev. xii 6 **nu-nu ^dnin-girima_x**
 rev. xii 7 **^den-ki**
 rev. xii 8 **lugal abzu-ta**
 rev. xii 9 **UD-du₁₁-ga**
 rev. xiii 1 **^dnin-girima_x**

Translation

An incantation formula. O prince, O Ninmaš! O prince, O Ninmaš! O prince, O Ningirima! O Enki, king from the Abzu! It is a recited incantation of Ningirima.

Commentary

rev. xii 5. **nun ni-maš nun ni-maš** (= **nun ^dnin-maš nun ^dnin-maš**): Pettinato (1979: 337) first connected the two NUN signs and the NU.NU to *nūnum*. He additionally suggested this spell records only key words of the recitation or is a collection of incipits due to its schematic form. Like Pettinato, Krebernik tentatively proposed the first component of the recurrent NUN NI+MAŠ is a singular form of *nūnum*, while hypothesizing the NI+MAŠ could function as a complex logogram to indicate plurality.⁹ He also interpreted the NU.NU as a plural form of *nūnum* in *status constructus* with the deity Ningirima. Bonechi and Catagnoti (1998: 29–30) also followed the earlier reading of NUN for *nūnum*.¹⁰ These analyses, however, are difficult on both grammatical and interpretive grounds.¹¹ Comparable incantations concerning fish in Semitic languages are neither found at Ebla, nor among

⁷ Cunningham 1997: 23, 43; Bonechi and Catagnoti 1998: 23, 29–30.

⁸ Pettinato 1979: 337; Krebernik 1984: 170–171; Bonechi and Catagnoti 1998: 30.

⁹ Pettinato 1979: 337, 349; Krebernik 1984: 171.

¹⁰ They also suggest NUN NI+MAŠ can be understood as 13: NUN MAŠ but note this leaves the MAŠ ambiguous.

¹¹ Cunningham 1997: 23 and 43 cites this incantation as text number forty-five and suggests the spell might be propitiatory if the fish serve as offerings to the deities.

contemporary incantations.¹² Moreover, the rest of this spell could equally denote Sumerian, as the ablative case ending in this composition suggests.¹³

Since this incantation mentions Enki by name alongside his titulature in case xii 7 and is clearly related to the following three compositions on the same tablet—each of which are Sumerian and likewise feature Enki—it seems reasonable to interpret each NUN NI+MAŠ as a Sumerian formulation.¹⁴ The sign NUN can be understood as **nun**, the Sumerian term later equated to Akkadian *rubû* “prince” rather than a form of *nūnum*. Like the sign’s parallel usage to designate his city of Eridu, **nun** is a standard epithet of Enki in both literary compositions and the Mesopotamian incantation corpus. Within approximately contemporary Early Dynastic spells from Fara (Šuruppak), for example, the deity NE.DAG is called the “child of the prince” (**dumu nun**) in a manner comparable to the titulature of Asalluhi in later incantations.¹⁵

Given that the NUN signs could refer to Enki’s typical Sumerian title of **nun** and function as an unmarked vocative like ^dnin-girima_x and ^den-ki later in cases xii 6 and xii 7 respectively, perhaps each NI+MAŠ should likewise be analyzed as a vocative form corresponding to a Mesopotamian deity. As the divine determinative can be omitted within incantations written in phonetic orthography from Ebla and elsewhere, the two NI+MAŠ constructions in case xii 5 may be interpreted as **ni-maš**, a syllabic writing of ^dnin-maš.¹⁶ From the third millennium onwards, Ninmaš appears in a wide array of contexts, often in a pairing with Ninpiriĝ, and is also notably attested alongside Ninpiriĝ in a spell from the approximately contemporary incantations of Fara, a promising precedent for the possible appearance of this deity in the tenth spell of ARET 5, 19.¹⁷

rev. xii 6. **nu-nu** ^dnin-girima_x (= **nun** ^dnin-girima_x): Whereas the previous editors interpreted NU.NU as a plural form of *nūnum* in *status constructus*, it can also be analyzed as **nu-nu**, a variant syllabic writing for Enki’s title of **nun** in case xii 5.¹⁸ The **nu-nu** could then stand in apposition to cases xii 7–8: ^den-ki **lugal abzu-ta**, “O Enki, king from the Abzu!” If the final vowel of **nu-nu** is grammatically significant, it may indicate a vocalic case ending which has undergone vowel harmony. Analyzed as **nun-e**, the form could be ergative, but the incantation has no corresponding verbal form, and the spell concludes immediately after Enki’s titulature in cases xii 9–xiii 1. This incongruence may suggest the tenth composition inscribed upon ARET 5, 19 is an early exemplar of a text that records an abbreviated written version of a recited incantation, as Pettinato observed.¹⁹ Such abbreviation is clearly documented in the first half of the second millennium when texts recording incantations become more abundant. As this practice deserves a dedicated study, for the purpose of this contribution it is sufficient to specify that scrutiny of texts with multiple duplicates reveals abridged

¹² Fish imagery occurs in the Early Dynastic incantation MRAH O.1920 in a spell directed against wind. Editions are found in Veldhuis 2006 and Rudik 2015: 158–160. A possible Akkadian parallel is found as the second incantation inscribed on the Old Babylonian tablet IM 95317, but considering later parallels, this spell may be directed against the sick belly as well; see Gill 2024: 264–265. For the former interpretation, see Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 1994: 82–85 and Wasserman and Zomer 2022: 214–215.

¹³ A different interpretation of the ablative is offered in Krebernik 1984: 171.

¹⁴ A new edition of the eleventh incantation is forthcoming, while treatments of the twelfth and thirteenth are currently in preparation. At present, see their treatments in Krebernik 1984: 170–183. Additional editions of the eleventh and thirteenth incantations are available in Rudik 2015: 136–139 and *ibid.* 357–360. The twelfth incantation has previously been understood to contain both Sumerian and Eblaite, but the author has identified it as a unilingual Sumerian spell.

¹⁵ The fifth incantation on the collective tablet VAT 12597 (SF 54) features this title of NE.DAG. Editions are found in Krebernik 1984: 32–35 and Rudik 2015: 147–149.

¹⁶ Ningirima lacks a divine determinative in the concluding formula of two syllabic incantations from Ebla, TM 75.G.1315 obv. iii 4: **ne-gi-ri₂-ma** and TM 75.G.2195 (ARET 5, 11) rev. vi 4: **ne-gi-ri₂-ma₂**. The former of these was originally published in Krebernik 1996: 7–14 and received an edition in Rudik 2015: 188–191. The latter was edited in Krebernik 1984: 64–72 and Rudik 2015: 123–128.

¹⁷ Ninmaš is discussed in Cavigneaux and Krebernik 1999–2001: 468–469. Within VAT 12597 (SF 54) obv. v 7, the single divine determinative in the middle of this case refers to both deities, perhaps to underline their pairing. An edition of this incantation from Fara is offered in Krebernik 1984: 32–35, with a new copy of the tablet at *ibid.* 382–383. For another edition, see Rudik 2015: 147–149.

¹⁸ Bonechi and Catagnoti 1998: 30 n. 47 also suggest the NU.NU may stand for *nūnum*, a metal object that they postulate could be identified as a harpoon.

¹⁹ Pettinato 1979: 337.

writings are pervasive within incantations, as earlier research on spells directed against snakebite and scorpion sting has demonstrated.²⁰

It is also possible, however, that the final vowel of **nu-nu** is superfluous. Comparable syllabic writings with redundant final vowels are found in the phonetically inscribed incantations from Ebla, such as **din-gi-li hul**, where a duplicate spell in conventional orthography also from Ebla reads **diġir hul**.²¹ Moreover, a distinct lack of standardization marks the employment of phonetic writings at Ebla, as incantations written in phonetic orthography frequently utilize different signs to render identical elements. The verbal base **nu₂** is written both phonetically as **nu** and with its conventional sign NA₂ within various incantations inscribed upon ARET 5, 19.²² Additionally, the conjugation prefix /ba-/ is transcribed with both BA and PA in a single incantation, also upon ARET 5, 19.²³ Accordingly, the use of both **nun** and **nu-nu** to render the same noun in the tenth incantation of ARET 5, 19 may not be unusual. As this interpretation of the spell does not necessitate an abbreviated text, it seems preferable to analyze **nu-nu** as a pseudo-syllabic writing of **nun** comparable to **din-gi-li** for **diġir**. The tenth incantation upon ARET 5, 19 could therefore be understood as a spell that serves to invite Enki, Ninmaš, and Ningirima to listen to the petition of the incantation priest and convince them to grant their power to his cause.

Discussion

Although the tenth incantation upon ARET 5, 19 lacks duplicates in the corpus of early Mesopotamian incantations, its content can be partially understood through comparison with later Sumerian incantations. Similar vocative openings are found within the body of consecration incantations that serve to purify cultic practitioners, sacred objects, and ritual ingredients, including the Old Babylonian torch incantation YBC 1828 (YOS 11, 59), in which the object is referenced with second person pronouns, asserting the use of the vocative.²⁴ Given the laconism of the tenth incantation on ARET 5, 19 and the presence of divine names and titulature in the comprehensible sections of this incantation, it might be best to interpret the composition as a list of divine names and titles in the vocative.

Whereas Enki and Ningirima are frequently found within early incantations along with their titulature, the appearance of Ninmaš—if NI+MAŠ indeed refers to this deity—is more surprising. Though Ninmaš appears in numerous and varied contexts, he or she is also found in several Old Babylonian incantations, which can perhaps shed light upon the role of Ninmaš within both this composition and the fifth incantation on VAT 12597 (SF 54) from Fara.²⁵ In the Sumerian incantation BM 78185 (CT 44, 31), a spell later incorporated into the canonical **udug hul** series as the third incantation of the fourth tablet according to Geller's reconstruction, Ninmaš and Ninpiriġ appear among the other netherworld gods whom the sun god visits at night in his capacity as the god of judgement.²⁶ Moreover, the pair are also invoked due to their association with the sun god in YBC 4598 (YOS 11, 21), an Akkadian incantation for judicial victory.²⁷ Similarly, Ninmaš and Ninpiriġ are likely invoked as celestial bodies in the twentieth spell of the Old Babylonian tablet VAT 8379 (VS 17, 10), which is directed against scorpion sting according to its rubric:

²⁰ For abbreviated incantations against snakes, see the spell reconstructed at van Dijk 1969: 545 and compare also VAT 8342 (VS 17, 2), an incantation against snakebite which abridges the entire recitation except for the actions Enki prescribes to Asalluhi and the final speech act. For editions, see Finkel 1999: 232 and van Dijk and Geller 2003: 59.

²¹ The phonetic writing is found at TM 75.G.1722 (ARET 5, 10) obv. iii 4. The conventional orthography duplicate is on TM 75.G.2459 (ARET 5, 19) obv. viii 3. Krebernik 1984: 122–124 and Rudik 2015: 264–266 offer editions.

²² This verb is written phonetically as **nu** in cases xiii 7 and xiv 1, while **nu₂** is written at case xvi 9, and **nu₂-a** appears at case xvi 3.

²³ The thirteenth incantation renders this conjugation prefix in conventional orthography as **ba-e** (for **ba-e₃**) at case

xvi 1 and in phonetic orthography as **pa-sal** (for **ba-sal**) at case xvi 4.

²⁴ This spell is edited in Conti 2000.

²⁵ An overview of this deity is found in Cavigneaux and Krebernik 1999–2001: 468–469. Thanks are offered here to the anonymous reviewer who brought the following additional citations and discussions of Ninmaš to the attention of the author: Collon 1986: 69; Lambert 1988: 254–258; Garfinkle 2000: 393; Maul 2005: 84–86; Sibbing Plantholt 2017: 56 n. 152; Simons 2018: 129–130; Selz 2019: 45.

²⁶ The most recent edition of the Sumerian incantation is found in Geller 2016: 154–160, 165–172 as manuscript hh.

²⁷ This incantation is edited in Wasserman and Zomer 2022: 351–352.

^dnin-piriĝ ^dnin-maš dumu ^den-lil₂-la₂
 am dab₅-ba-gin₇ šu ba-e-la₂
 šilam dab₅-ba-gin₇ a₂ šu ba-e-ni-la₂
 gu₄ ur₃-ra a₂ ba-e-ni-dab₅ a₂ ba-e-ni-la₂
 piriĝ-gin₇ da 'ri'
 ka-inim-ma ĝiri₂-tab-a-[kam]

O Ninpiriĝ, O Ninmaš, children of Enlil, you have caused it to be trapped like a captured wild bull. You have caused the limbs to be trapped like a captured cow. As for the rear ox, you have caused the limbs to be captured. You have caused the limbs to be bound. Set it on a side like a lion! It is an incantation for a scorpion.²⁸

The proposed celestial understanding of Ninmaš and Ninpiriĝ in this spell stems from numerous other scorpion incantations which mark the scorpion with the determinative MUL to designate it as the scorpion constellation or otherwise feature celestial imagery.²⁹ The contents of this group of incantations can be pieced together to reconstruct a myth wherein the celestial bodies struggle to restrain the scorpion constellation as it attempts to break free of the heavens, an action which would therefore allow its terrestrial counterparts—the scorpions who dwell upon the earth—to run rampant. While incantations containing the motif of the celestial scorpion have not yet been subject to extensive study, new research focusing on this group of spells is currently underway.³⁰ Given the inclusion of Ninmaš and Ninpiriĝ within other early incantations seems contingent upon the celestial affiliations of the pair, particularly their relationship to Utu, perhaps Ninmaš should likewise be understood in light of his or her celestial capacity as part of the entourage of the sun god in the tenth incantation of ARET 5, 19, as well as both the fifth incantation on VAT 12597 (SF 54) and its fragmentary duplicate TSS 170, where the same pair of gods might be lost in the break. This suggestion, however, remains speculative, as the precise function of each of these incantations is abstruse.

Conclusion

Although the function of the tenth incantation of ARET 5, 19 remains uncertain, the language of this incantation can more plausibly be classified as Sumerian than Semitic. With the proposed identification of the NUN and NU.NU within this spell as components of Enki's standard titlature as **nun** and the suggested analysis of NI+MAŠ as a potential phonetic writing of ^dnin-maš, this laconic composition might be understood as a Sumerian incantation invoking Enki, Ninmaš, and Ningirima rather than a Semitic language spell mentioning fish. Considering this spell appears to consist solely of divine names and titlature, it seems reasonable to suggest this incantation served to invite Enki, Ninmaš, and Ningirima to lend their heavenly power to the petition of the incantation priest who invoked them, though it is also possible that much of the content of this orally recited composition was not committed to the tablet's clay.

As a Sumerian incantation repeatedly invoking Enki by his title **nun**, this composition would initiate a series of four sequential Sumerian incantations on ARET 5, 19, each of which invokes Enki by name. Following the tenth incantation, the eleventh composition describes Enki transporting a sick patient to the sanctuary of Ĝirinun on his barge to receive healing, whereas the twelfth and thirteenth compositions are Sumerian incantations against snakebite that associate the dangerous

²⁸ VAT 8379 (VS 17, 10) rev. v 7–12. The verbal construction **da—ri** is restored from a parallel with vowel harmony, the Ur III scorpion incantation BM 111089 b. ed. 1: **am-gin₇ da 'ga'-a-ra₂**, “I shall set you on a side like a wild bull.” Both incantations depict dangerous animals rendered helpless upon their side after being hunted and trapped. For other interpretations, see Al-Rawi 2008 and Rudik 2015: 378–381.

²⁹ Old Babylonian incantations featuring this motif are summarized in Gill 2024: 194–199. An Ur III incantation featuring this motif is BM 111089, published in Al-Rawi

2008 and Rudik 2015: 378–381. This motif is also found on the final incantation of the Early Dynastic collective tablet MS 4549/1 (CUSAS 32, 1). A first edition of this spell is offered in Mokry 2023.

³⁰ The author's ASOR affiliated research project entitled “The Celestial Scorpion: A Renegade Constellation in Early Mesopotamia” has received financial support in the form of a Herbert Warren Mason Fellowship to study this group of ancient incantations and compose new text editions with philological commentaries.

serpents with Enki through their chthonic associations as creatures who dwell alongside him in the Abzu. These four incantations thus appear to form a conscious grouping of compositions upon ARET 5, 19, and hint at an incentive to gather spells that draw upon Enki's power in a place far removed from his center of worship in southern Mesopotamia. Through the invocation of Enki and other deities of the ancient south, the rulers of Ebla would have attained additional means by which they could ascertain any negative condition that afflicted them and find the appropriate response, thereby minimizing their own vulnerability and any threat to their kingdom at large.

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Appendix

TABLE A TM 75.G.2459 (ARET 5, 19), Incantation Ten

Case	Transliteration	Conventional Orthography
rev. xii 4	en ₂ e ₂ -nu-ru	en ₂ e ₂ -nu-ru
rev. xii 5	nun ni-maš nun ni-maš	nun ^d nin-maš nun ^d nin-maš
rev. xii 6	nu-nu ^d nin-girima _x	nun ^d nin-girima _x
rev. xii 7	^d en-ki	^d en-ki
rev. xii 8	lugal abzu-ta	lugal abzu-ta
rev. xii 9	UD-du ₁₁ -ga	tu ₆ -du ₁₁ -ga
rev. xiii 1	^d nin-girima _x	^d nin-girima _x

Nicholas M. Gill
 Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures
 The University of Chicago
 Chicago
 USA
nmgill@uchicago.edu

هل هي لغة سامية أم سومرية؟ حالة من الخلط في تحديد هوية بعض التعويذات من إبلا
 نيكولاس جيل

على الرغم من شهرة المجموعة النصية لمدينة إبلا بجمعها لتشكيلة التعويذات باللغة السومرية وواحدة أو أكثر من اللغات السامية إلا أن الأدلة المقدمة لتحديد لغة التعويذات المنفصلة من مدينة إبلا لم تخضع لإعادة الفحص والتحليل لسنوات عديدة. ونظراً لطبيعة المحتوى المعقد للتعويذات فضلاً عن مفرداتها المتخصصة وقواعد الإملانية غير التقليدية فإنه غالباً ما يكون من الصعب التعرف على تركيبة لغة النص أو فهم موضوعها. وتعيد هذه المساهمة تقييم تصنيف اللغة السامية للتعويذة العاشرة من المجموعة (ARET 5,19) TM 75.G.2459 ، وتعيد تحليل لغتها باعتبارها اللغة السومرية المقطعية، كما وتستكشف محتواها في ضوء التعويذات الأخرى القديمة في بلاد ما بين النهرين.