Mesopotamian Ritual-prayers of “Hand-lifting” (Akkadian Šuillas)

An Investigation of Function in Light of the Idiomatic Meaning of the Rubric

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Contents
1. Introduction

1.1 A specific function for a common rubric?

The principles behind the organization of knowledge in Mesopotamia can be elusive. Units of text on cuneiform tablets are frequently marked with labels or rubrics that categorize their content, but it is not always clear how the label applies to a given text. As textual records from ancient Mesopotamia provide little theoretical or analytical explanation for natural or cultural phenomena, it comes as no surprise that explanations are lacking for many of the vast array of rubrics employed in literary and ritual texts. Modern scholars look for patterns in the usage of such labels in order to determine their function, and it is apparent that there were multiple rationales for the application of rubrics, ranging from instructing the manner of the musical performance of a text to stating the purpose of a prayer or a procedure; a given prayer might appear with different rubrics in different exemplars (see §3.2). Among the rubrics on literary texts there is no indication of a single overall system of classification (Edzard 1987–1990, 36).

This study investigates the rubric šu.la, which may be translated “lifting of the hand” or “hand-lifting.” The rubric occurs in conjunction with a variety of ritual-prayers—i.e., prayers designated for recitation during a procedure that includes other actions—that can be divided into three main families, all of which are commonly referred to as “šuillas.” The study is primarily an inquiry into the meaning of the rubric as it applies to the best-attested family of šuillas—the “Akkadian” šuillas.

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1 P. Machinist has demonstrated that in the areas of grammar, mathematics, mathematical astronomy, and divination, even though abstract discussion of principles is either lacking or at best quite minimal, textual evidence suggests that the ancient Mesopotamians were capable of employing abstract principles (2001, 24–37).

2 Among cuneiform texts of prayers and incantations, a given unit may be associated with one or more textual units that are written just prior to or just after that unit and that provide information relevant to it. Such units are called “rubrics.” The term “rubric” stems from the Latin rubrica, red chalk (from ruber, rubr-, red; American Heritage Dictionary, 4th ed. [2000]), and it originated with the use of red characters for setting apart certain portions of text from surrounding text printed in black. As these texts are employed, inter alia, in liturgical texts to set apart headings and instructions from what was to be recited, the term is apt for application to the cuneiform texts described here.

3 This rubric combines the Sumerian terms šu “hand,” il “to lift,” and the nominalizing element a, and it occurs in a variety of spellings as well as with additional elements (see §2.1). The translation “lifting of the hand” is given with the plural marker in parentheses because in many cases the cuneiform writing system does not allow us to know whether reference to one or both hands is intended. See discussion, §2.4.5.

4 While the term “prayer” in general use is not limited to verbal texts, given that the present study focuses on Mesopotamian ritual activity, in which verbal texts are distinguished from other ritual activities, I restrict the term “prayer” to verbal texts addressed to one or more deities. Regarding prayers in Mesopotamian religious practice: “Ritual activities and accompanying prayers are of like importance and constitute the religious act; to interpret the prayers without regard to the rituals in order to obtain insight into the religious concepts they may reflect distorts the testimony” (Oppenheim and Reiner 1977, 175).

5 In this study, terms such as “šuilla” and “namburbi” are presented as Anglicized forms of Ak-
2. “Lifting of the hand” as a formal salutation in an audience with a deity

2.1 Questioning prior interpretations

In the present section I call into question a dominant interpretation of the šuilla rubric, šu-il-la₂₁ (lit., “hand-lifting” or “lifted hand[s]”),¹ as a reference to prayer, arguing for a more adequate interpretation based upon an integration of linguistic and visual evidence. The rubric corresponds to Akkadian šu’ilakku (see §2.2.3), and the most common related expressions are nīš qāṭi and qāta našū. In line with current scholarship, I propose that the hand-lifting gesture signified by the šuilla rubric should be understood within the conventions of an audience with a ruler or deity in Mesopotamia as attested in both textual and visual evidence.² In his forthcoming study of the Emar šuillas, D. Shibata recognizes the importance of the audience scenario for understanding what I am calling the šuilla gesture and affirms that its meaning is better characterized as “greeting” than “prayer” (§I.2.1); moreover, he observes that this “hand-lifting” was regarded in Old Babylonian texts as a type of gift given to the deity and that it also took on a ritualized usage (§I.2.2). I offer here an independent and detailed interpretation of the šuilla gesture that converges with Shibata’s observations.

Interpreters agree that various combinations of the Sumerian terms šu “hand” and il “to lift, lifting,” the Akkadian logogram mu “lifting,”³ and the corresponding Akkadian terms šu’ilakku “hand-lifting,” qātu “hand,” našū “to lift,” and nīšu “lifting,” constitute a set of related phrasal lexemes.⁴ These lexemes share an idiomatic meaning: they refer to a communicative gesture predicated of humans toward deities. I refer to this meaning as the “šuilla gesture” and to the terms that express it as “šuilla terms.” In addition to expressions for “to lift the hand(s)” or “hand-lifting,” more complex constructions appear in which a verb, usually našū, takes an expression for “hand-lifting” as a direct object, e.g., “to lift a hand-lifting” (nīš qāṭi našū).

In this discussion I will focus on the Akkadian evidence for the hand-lifting gesture. In a detailed review of the Sumerian evidence, D. Shibata has observed that while the expressions šu…il and šu-il-la₂₁ were used before the Sargonic period, attestations that clearly signify a gesture of greeting or prayer do not appear until the early Old Babylonian period.⁵ J. Cooper has suggested that since these terms occur later than other Sumerian expressions for prayer and prayerful gestures, they may have been borrowed from the corresponding Akkadian terms (1988, 84), and Shibata

¹ For a grammatical discussion of this term, see Shibata forthcoming, §I.2.2. In many cases, the cuneiform writing system does not allow us to know whether a reference to one or both hands is intended. See discussion in §2.4.5.
² S. Maul (BaF 18, 67–71); A. Zgoll (2003a) discussed below, §2.3; D. Shibata (2010; forthcoming, §§I.2.1–3); and the present author (2008).
³ W. R. Mayer has explained how the sign mu came to signify nīšu “lifting” in Akkadian contexts (2005, 56).
⁴ Relying on the discussions of M. Aronoff (2003) and J. Lyons (1977, 18–25), I employ “lexeme” in the sense of “a single word or a phrase recognized as having a unitary meaning.” For a detailed argument for the inclusion of idioms as lexemes, see R. Jackendoff (1997).
⁵ Shibata forthcoming, §I.2.2. Regarding implications for Emar šuillas, see §1.2.
3. The šuilla rubric and the function of Akkadian šuillas

3.1 Introduction

I have argued that šuilla terms express a formal greeting appropriate for an audience with the deity, a greeting that affirms one’s loyal submission to the deity with whom one seeks to (re-)establish a favorable, reciprocal relationship and anticipates a favorable reception and recognition. This interpretation of šuilla terms makes it possible to propose a new explanation for how the šuilla rubric works as a classifier and how it applies to šuillas, in particular Akkadian šuillas. That the šuilla rubric as a ritual classifier can be best explained as a conventional gesture of hand-lifting understood as a formal greeting within an audience has been proposed in convergent perspectives by A. Zgoll, D. Shibata, and the present author. But both the audience concept and the hand-lifting gesture were probably features common to many if not all incantation prayers. Why did the suilla rubric become attached to one particular subset of incantation prayers? To answer this question, I begin by surveying the ways in which rubrics relate to the texts they classify, and I identify several rationales that explain why a given rubric has been chosen as a label for a particular set of texts. Then I examine the ways in which other scholars have explained the application of the šuilla rubric to the prayers it marks. I show that there is a connection between the way the rubric is interpreted and how it is understood to signify a set of texts, and that earlier interpretations of the rubric have obscured what is distinctive about šuillas as a group. Then, building on the new interpretation of šuilla terms advanced in the previous section, I argue that the rubric points to the common purpose of šuilla rituals by using a significant element within the ritual procedure to designate the whole. Although the gesture of hand-lifting expressed by a šuilla term is attested in the instructions for various ritual procedures, as a classifying rubric it emphasizes this greeting gesture as a central action in a particular set of rituals.

3.2 Ritual rubrics and their rationales

The rubrics that appear on cuneiform tablets may be sorted according to two basic functions: to give instructions and to classify. An instructional rubric specifies details of a ritual procedure such as participants, actions, materials, time, and location. A classifying rubric specifies an aspect of a prayer or ritual procedure by which it may be

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1 Zgoll’s proposal is presented and critiqued in §3.3.2. Elsewhere I have proposed that the šuilla gesture understood as a greeting for gaining the favorable recognition of the deity offers a promising rationale for explaining how this idiom was appropriated as a rubric for a class of rituals (Frechette 2008, 45). Shibata has also affirmed that the šuilla rubric as a ritual classifier derived from the gesture of hand-lifting that is best characterized as a greeting gesture; he correlates this gesture with the purpose of Emešal šuillas and with that of the šuillas of the exorcist, both of which are intended to greet the deity, but in different contexts (2010, 74–75; forthcoming, §I.2.5).

2 For instance, the instructions for the mīs pî ritual employ šuilla terms to specify hand-lifting in connection with the recitation of certain incantations (SAALT 1, 40: 51–53; 70: obv. 3–4; 71: obv. 10; see Appendix 1, §§1.1–2), but not in connection with the recitation of the šuilla prayers.
4. Akkadian šuilla prayers: Identification, structure, and distinguishing features

4.1 Introduction

The remainder of this study is devoted to the question of what unites Akkadian šuillas as a group. As shown above, a recurring theme in the study of Akkadian šuillas is the difficulty of describing what differentiates them as a set within the larger set of incantation prayers. There are no striking formal distinctions, since Akkadian šuilla prayers have the same basic structure as other incantation prayers. Previous interpretations of the šuilla rubric itself have not seen it as a label that refers to a distinguishing feature of Akkadian šuilla prayers. The interpretation of the šuilla rubric as a general reference to “prayer” has fostered the impression that they are distinguished by being concerned with well-being in a general way or by being generally effective. Even the literal interpretation of the rubric as a reference to a hand-lifting performed in the context of an audience does not automatically lead to the conclusion that šuillas are distinctive, since all incantation prayers presume the context of an audience, and hand-lifting is not a gesture limited to the performance of šuillas.

The previous section argued for a different approach to the problem of the meaning of the šuilla rubric, taking the interpretation of the rubric as a reference to hand-lifting one step further. The literary and pictorial evidence examined in §2 shows that the act of hand-lifting is not simply a feature of an audience; rather, among the prerequisite gestures, words, and gifts for initiating communication with a deity, it is particularly apt as a ritual activity because of the convention by which hand gestures were imagined to be reciprocated by the deity in Mesopotamian mental iconography. Thus, whether greeting the deity when approaching with a petition (Akkadian šuillas) or greeting the deity upon its animation as a cult image (mīs pî šuillas) or upon its return from a procession (Emesal šuillas), the human’s hand-lifting gesture both affirmed loyal submission and anticipated a favorable reception.

Once the full significance of the hand-lifting gesture is clear, it is easier to understand how the šuilla rubric could identify a distinct subset of incantation prayers. Like the mīs pî rubric, which came to refer to an animation ritual because it names what was perceived as the central element in that ritual, the šuilla rubric here names the central element in the šuilla ritual: the hand-lifting gesture made when greeting a deity as a prelude to making a request. By focusing on the greeting gesture, the rubric alludes to the overall purpose/function of the ritual. Thus, Akkadian šuilla prayers are not a collection of generic ritual-prayers; they perform a fundamental function by establishing a favorable relationship between a human and the deity addressed, with a view toward gaining that deity’s influence in reconciling the person with the divine sphere.

That the šuilla rubric could define a subset of ritual-prayers by indicating their common purpose is now clear; that it did define a subset of ritual-prayers remains to be established. The approach taken here is to examine both aspects of these šuillas—the prayers as well as their use in ritual—for literary features that distinguish them from other ritual-prayers, and for evidence of their use as greeting rituals in a variety of contexts. This section begins by identifying the set of šuilla prayers according to the