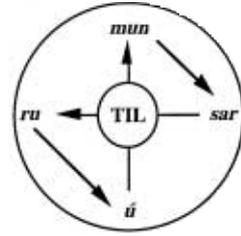
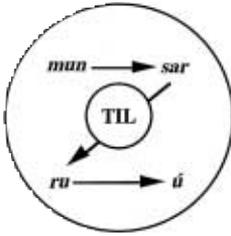


NABU 1993-84 Paul-Alain Beaulieu

Divine Hymns as Royal Inscriptions – Some years ago W.G. Lambert published an interesting group of eight cylinders and cylinder fragments from Babylon and Sippar inscribed with hymnic compositions in honor of the god Nabû (« Nabû Hymns on Cylinders, » in *Festschrift Lubor Matouš* II [Budapest, 1978] 75-111). On the basis of paleography and orthography Lambert dated those manuscripts to the period covered by the Neo-Babylonian and Persian empires, though some of the compositions themselves may of course be earlier. In addition to being written on cylinders, a medium otherwise reserved for royal inscriptions in the first millennium, the hymns display one striking peculiarity : they are all framed within rows of repeated signs, each row repeating a different sign, and each frame repeating the same combination of signs which read like an acrostich : *mu-sa-ru-ú* « royal inscription. » One of the texts is framed with a more elaborate acrostich reconstructed by Lambert as follows : [*mu-sa*]-*ru ša* [dNÀ] « [royal inscription] of [Nabû]. »

Recently W.R. Mayer published three more examples of such cylinders (« Ein Hymnus auf Ninurta als Helfer in der Not, » OrNS 61 [1992] 17-57). The three cylinders are inscribed with the same hymn to the god Ninurta, while one of them also contains a šu'illa prayer to Nabû previously edited by Mayer in OrNS 59 (1990) 459-66 (« Nabû 6 »). This prayer also appears as the main text on one of the cylinders published by Lambert (BM 68835). These interrelations suggest that we are dealing with a group of texts considered by ancient scribes to make up a single literary genre. Indeed the cylinders edited by Mayer are also framed with the acrostich *musarû* and two of them possess one additional distinctive mark. The base end of one and top end of the other are again inscribed with the word *musarû*, this time written *mun-sar-ru-ú*, which winds in Z shape around the sign TIL :



The word *musarû* displays a very narrow semantic range : it almost exclusively refers to royal inscriptions or the objects bearing them. The word is often encountered in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian building inscriptions in reference to the old foundation deposits and other inscribed objects which frequently turned up during excavations of the foundations of old buildings, mainly temples. For this reason I would read the sign in the center of the inscriptions on the end of the above cylinders as *labîru* « old, » even though several other readings of the sign TIL (i.e. BAD) are possible : this yields a ribbon shaped inscription which reads *mu(n)sa(r)rû labîru* « old royal inscription. » This has at least one parallel. In the inscription commemorating the consecration of his daughter as high-priestess of Nanna-Sin, Nabonidus mentions the find of a *musarû labîru* during excavation of the Egipar at Ur : YOS I, 45 ii 1. *mu-sar-û la-bi-ri šá en.an.e.du₃ nin.dingir.ra úri^{ki}* « (I set my eyes upon) an old inscription of Enanedu, the high priestess of Ur. »

Insofar as the medium upon which these hymns are inscribed is concerned, the designation *musarû* doesn't pose any problem, the clay cylinder being the medium par excellence of first millennium royal inscriptions, especially during the time of the Neo-Babylonian empire. But when we come to the hymns themselves, some questions arise ; isn't the designation *musarû* inappropriate for divine hymns (one of the texts is otherwise attested with the subscription *šu'illa*), and the medium on which they are inscribed also ? This apparent anomaly is removed, however, when the contents of the hymns and the personalities of the gods honored are taken into consideration : for they are, above all, concerned with kingship, and in particular they reflect the concept of kingship which prevailed during the Neo-Babylonian empire.

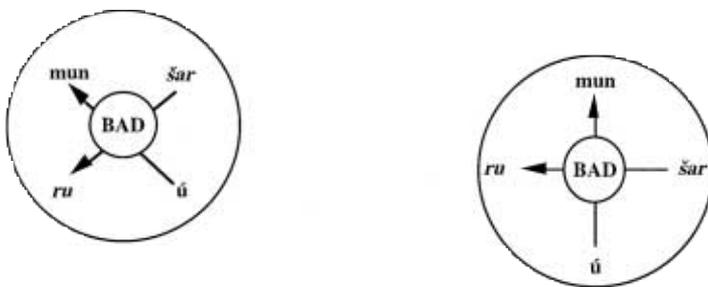
One theme recurs in all the hymns. Nabû and Ninurta are praised as kings of the

gods and upkeepers of the cosmic order. As pointed out by Lambert (op.cit., p. 77-79), Nabû became the supreme god of Babylonia alongside his father Marduk during the Neo-Babylonian period. In one of the cylinder hymns Nabû usurps Marduk's titulary and is attributed a string of names in the style of the list of Marduk's names in *Enuma Elish* (BM 34147). The high incidence of theophoric names with Nabû among the Neo-Babylonian rulers (Nabû-apla-ušur, Nabû-kudurri-ušur, Nabû-na'id) suggests that Nabû was in all likelihood the patron deity of that dynasty, and it is possible that some of the hymns which portray him as king of the gods were composed at that time under royal patronage. As for Ninurta, he was also endowed with the qualities of kingship and rulership. Starting with the Middle-Babylonian period Assyrian and Babylonian theologians systematically transferred his imagery and titles to their own « king of the gods » : Aššur, Marduk, and finally Nabû¹. The mythology of Ninurta became, so to speak, an original « blueprint » for divine rulership which continued to flourish alongside theologies of those three major gods.

Although Assyrian and Babylonian rulers of the first millennium were never deified, the king was still considered an earthly counterpart of the supreme god, especially in his role as maintainer of order. The fact that supreme rulership of the gods was conceptualized on the model of human kingship ensured that the metaphors of kingship could freely apply to divine rulership, and conversely those of divine rulership to the king. That hymns to the king of the gods could be recast as *musarû* « royal inscriptions, » even as « royal inscriptions » of the god which they honor (*musarû ša Nabû*), is but a corollary of that ideology. By using the medium of royal inscriptions, the scribes who, most probably at the turn of the 6th century², literally invented this new genre, were in this manner not only praising Nabû as a king, but also their king as an earthly counterpart of Nabû. By conferring on these texts an aura of great antiquity (*musarû labīru*), as if they had just been rediscovered in one of those archaeological digs which are the hallmark of Neo-Babylonian culture, they were also legitimizing the position of Nabû as king of the gods ; Nabû's rise to head of the pantheon was indeed the result of a very recent theological speculation.

The proposal that the choice of cylinders as a writing medium for these texts was motivated solely by a self-conscious reference to kingship may seem a bit speculative. However, unequivocal confirmation of its validity was enciphered

by the scribes themselves in the round inscriptions at the end of the cylinders published by Mayer. These inscriptions display two anomalies. One is the orthography of *musarû* : *mun-sar-ru-û* in both cases, while only the spelling *mu-sa-ru-û* is found in the rows which frame the inscriptions on all the cylinders. This irregular spelling seems quite odd since the word contains neither a phoneme /n/ nor a reduplicated /r/. The other anomaly is the winding shape assumed by these four signs when read in order, especially considering the fact that the only comparable examples of circular inscriptions enclosing a final sign, the two gameboards published by J. Bottero and E. Weidner in *Syria* 33 (1956) 17-25 and 175-83, are read in a perfect clockwise order, ending with the central sign. The inevitable conclusion is that these two anomalies were deliberate and must conceal a second layer of interpretation giving the key to the meaning of the texts. I propose to schematize this second layer as follows :



If the inscription was arranged in Z shape instead of clockwise, the reason was evidently to place the four signs in two opposing pairs on each side of the central sign : *û*←—→*mun*, and *šar*←—→*ru*. Correspondingly, if *musarû* was spelled *munsarrû*, this is because the syllables /mun/ and /šar/ were a necessary ingredient of the cipher. There is therefore no doubt that the inscriptions must also be read like a crossword : *šar-ru* « king » and *û-mun* (*umun*), the Emesal equivalent of Akkadian *bēlu* « lord, » and also equated with *šarru* in the series Aa (MSL XIV, 282 l.76 : *u-mun U gi-gu-ru-u šar-rum*). The crossword artfully revolves around the central sign which, as the logogram *BAD*, can of course also be read *bēlu*. In a fashion typical of late Babylonian scholarship, the word *musarû* is thus shown to contain the words « lord » and « king, » and the first reading of the inscription, *musarû labīru*, which describes the typically regal medium on which

our hymns were (re)inscribed, can be provided in notarikon style³ with a second reading *umun+šarru+bēlu*, i.e. the Emesal word « lord-king » with its two Akkadian translations. Nothing indeed could be more appropriate for texts mainly concerned with kingship and rulership.

1. See especially W.G. Lambert, « Ninurta Mythology in the Babylonian Epic of Creation, » in *Keilschriftliche Literaturen* (XXXII^e RAI ; Berlin, 1986) 55-60.

2. Some of these compositions are known from earlier, mainly Neo-Assyrian, manuscripts. These early manuscripts are all on tablets. Therefore the idea of reediting them on cylinders must be Neo-Babylonian in the strictest chronological sense, that is to say, contemporary with the Neo-Babylonian empire. At that time the scribes may have added new compositions to the corpus, especially hymns extolling Nabû as king of the gods.

3. For the comparison of late Babylonian hermeneutics with Jewish exegesis, especially notarikon, see A. Cavigneaux, « Aux sources du Midrash, l'herméneutique babylonienne, » *Aula Orientalis* 5 (1987) 243-256.

Paul-Alain Beaulieu (20-09-93)

Babylonian Collection, Sterling Memorial Library

Yale University, New Haven CT 06520 USA