

TENSIONAL FACTORS AND COMPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS. CROSSOVERS BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND ART CRITICISM

Giorgio Buccellati

Abstract

Discourse analysis has focused attention on the mechanisms that hold together a text, connecting seemingly unrelated strands in a unity that links non-contiguous elements. Compositional analysis seeks to do the same for representational art. The limit of expectation is an important factor, because tensionality does not happen at random or in a vacuum. The article will outline the method using two simple examples from Syro-Mesopotamia.

The notion of structure has come to occupy a central position in modern thought, beginning with Kant and leading up to the explicit definitions in the early part of the twentieth century. But a de facto concern with structure as a governing principle in the organization of data has been a hallmark of human intellectual activity since prehistoric times. Here I would like to focus on the factors that helped define compositional coherence in early Syro-Mesopotamia, along two main lines of argument: (1) the tensional dimension that underlies the goal of (2) compositional integrity. In this light, the trend towards naturalism may be seen in purely formal terms as a conceptual framework that points expectation in the direction of a known limit: this will help us connect the two moments, the one where we view the tensional dimension that links together single elements, and the one where the tensional factor can be seen at the level of the compositional whole.

This being in the nature of an essay, I will not provide a documentary basis nor a bibliographical apparatus. Discourse analysis is a particularly well developed aspect of linguistics, and it is useful in helping refine the sensitivity for compositional analysis in the figurative arts. I will seek to accomplish this by considering side by side two examples from the textual and glyptic traditions of Syro-Mesopotamia, in the hope that this may be of interest to Stefania, a friend with whom I have enjoyed many a moment in life and in the shared pursuit of common research goals, and who has dealt with great sensitivity with issues of style and with the way in which this proves to be relevant for a humanistic appropriation of the deeper values of Mesopotamian civilization.

1. TENSIONAL FACTORS

What is it, we may ask at the outset, that triggers a drive towards structural wholeness? Concerning a tool, it may be primarily a question of functional efficiency. What is known as “spatial competence”¹ in the treatment of even the earliest palaeolithic tools may be considered one of the first examples of this trend. The operational guidelines that define the production sequence reflect a clear anticipation of the finished product as a coherent whole, which is the condition for the effectiveness of the tool itself. The early development of writing is another major structural achievement, not tied to a single concrete product, but to a coherent code of extraordinary complexity: the graphemic dimension that underlies the whole system (a tight correlation between graphic signs and linguistic phenomena, primarily phonemic in nature) depends on the perception of a coherent intellectual organism that alone makes possible for the code to be truly and powerfully effective.

But what about instances where the functional dimension is absent, as in figurative art, or else it is combined with a strong aesthetic canon, as in architecture? Part of the answer, I suggest, lies in the urge to meet a self-imposed challenge, one that sets up limits in the form of the structure of the intended whole, and at the same time elicits tensional forces that operate within and beyond that same structure.

In a poetic composition, the structural whole is essentially linear, and the realization of its coherence emerges in the measure in which the expressive stream flows forward. The limits can be quite stringent. That is the essence of metrical conditioning: it sets up limits that constrain expression well beyond the requirements of grammatical rules. It is the tension (from *tendere*) between rigor and spontaneity² that creates and sustains “attention” (from *ad-tendere*). This introduces an element of dynamism that is tied to the means of expression: the more closely wedded these are to the content of expression the more engaging the result is.

In an item of figurative art, say the impression of a cylinder seal, the structural whole is given all at once. The tensional factors that define the structure of the whole do not unfold linearly, but are visually co-occurrent. There is as if an explosion of meaning where all the elements are perceived together as a single entity. The coherence of their interrelationship emerges at the same time that their individual identity is established. The single

Wynn

¹ Thomas J. Wynn, 1989. *The evolution of spatial competence*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

² I like to recall how dear this theme was to Vivaldi, who entitled his Opus VIII (in which are found the Four Seasons concerts) as *Il cemento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione* (The debate between, harmony and invention), and his Opus III as *L'estro armonico* (The harmonic fancy). See also this interesting statement, dealing as well with music, by Wittgenstein: “In aller großen Kunst ist eine WILDES Tier: gezähmt. Bei Mendelsohn, z. B., nicht. Alle große Kunst hat als ihren Grundbaß die primitiven Trieben des Menschen. Sie sind nicht die *Melodie* (wie, vielleicht, bei Wagner), aber das, was der Melodie ihre Tiefe und Gewalt giebt. In diesem Sinne kann man Mendelsohn einen «reproduktiven» Künstler nennen.” *Vermischte Bemerkungen / Culture and Value*, ed. Georg Henrik Von Wright, with Heikki Nyman, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, p. 37 f..

components of the overall structure are ideally joined even when they are not contiguous, held together by a web of invisible filaments that span the space and lock them in place.

Let us consider two examples.

The first is the wider frame of the Code of Hammurapi.

first temporal clause	v 14	<i>Inu Marduk...</i>	When Marduk...
second temporal clause	v 25	<i>inūmīšu:</i>	on that day:
subject	v 26-	<i>“Šumma awīlum...”</i>	“If a man...”
predicate	xlvi 1	<i>dīnāt mīšarim...</i>	(these are) the decrees of justice...

The entire body of “laws,” i. e., the individual *šumma* clauses (the “decrees of justice,” as they are called in the text) appears as the subject of an extremely long nominal sentence. The “laws” are in effect the subject, the predicate comes some forty columns later (“(these are) the decrees of justice”), and the entire nominal sentence is preceded by two temporal clauses (“When Marduk – on that day”). The tensional factor here is in the bold inclusion of the bulk of the text within the syntactical frame of a single proposition.

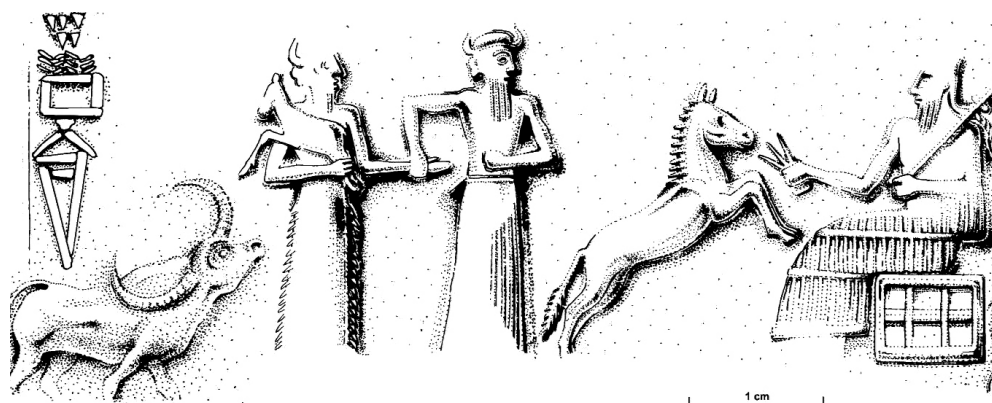


Fig. 1: Impression of the seal of Ishar-beli from the royal Palace of Urkesh.

The second example is the impression of the seal of Ishar-beli from the royal Palace of Urkesh (Fig. 1)³ Here the figures are linked and juxtaposed at the same time: the three figures in human form are static, while the animals are in movement, the diagonals of the animals' bodies contrasting sharply with the horizontal and vertical lines of the three figures, of the stool, of the writing. The tensional factor here is in the interlacing of static

³ Published by Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati in Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, “Tar’am- Agade, Daughter of Naram-Sin, at Urkesh,” in L. al Gailani Werr, J. Curtis, H. Martin, A. McMahon, J. Oates and J. Reade (eds.), *Of Pots and Plans. Papers on the Archaeology and History of Mesopotamia and Syria presented to David Oates in Honor of his 75th Birthday*, London: Nabu Publications, pp. 22-25 (available online at www.gb-cv.net).

and dynamic postures, that are emphasized in their reciprocal import precisely by being placed side by side in a single visual compositional whole.

Two important corollaries should be mentioned.

First, the impact of the tensional factors is all the more significant the greater or the less apparent is the distance between the elements that are so linked. In the case of the “Code” there is the substantial distance between the temporal clauses and the predicate, a distance that is filled in by the overlong subject. In the case of the seal there is the alternation between diagonal and orthogonal elements, whereby the elements are non contiguous and yet linked – the water buffalo locking eyes with the small quadruped held by the first standing figure, and the equid leaping up to seize the item held in the hand by the seated figure.

Second, tensionality is self-declared. There is no overt statement that explains what the intent is. This intent emerges of its own accord, and it is all the more effective as it is at the same time subtle and yet transparent. By way of contrast one may think of the difference between versification and poetry, where the former goes through the motions of using set parameters in a purely extrinsic manner that lacks intent. Or again, one may think of heraldic and stylized renderings of figures, where one may enjoy the pleasantness of the arrangement, but may not sense any particular inner vigor arising from a self-declared tensional dimension.

2. THE LIMIT OF EXPECTATION

We may look from this perspective at the trend towards naturalism, a trend that defines, from the start, the human effort at coping with reality, whether conceptually or visually. There seems at first to be an easy answer to the question as to the why of this trend: mimesis.⁴ But this needs to be qualified.

⁴ The pertinent theory goes back to Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*. One will find a particularly interesting application of the concept to Egyptian culture in Antonio Loprieno, *Topos und Mimesis: zum Ausländer in der ägyptischen Literatur*, Ägyptologische Abhandlungen, Vol. 48, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988: mimesis as the realistic representation of a given is here compared to the idealization that emerges as recurrent topos overlaid on reality. For the notion of mimesis applied to Mesopotamia see the critique by Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image. Representations in Babylonia and Assyria*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, especially chapter 3 (I look at mimesis from a rather different point of view, but I cannot fully develop here my argument in this regard; on the other hand, another point of partial convergence is her joint treatment, in the second part of the book, of visual image and text). For an important recent treatment of mimesis in Plato see D. C. Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason. On Goodness and Truth in the Republic*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008, pp. 290-98. For the most recent treatment of the concept of realism in Sumerian sculpture see Jean M. Evans, *The Lives of Sumerian Sculpture. An Archaeology of the Early Dynastic Temple*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. The classical modern treatment of the mimesis is Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Bern: A.

The nature one seeks to imitate is part of the self-declaration to which I was referring.⁵ It is there, in the real model of which one wants to create a mimesis or an «imitation», that resides the set of parameters delimiting the configuration of the intended artistic product. It is a target that immediately defines the limits within which the artist operates. «Immediately» means precisely that this target is self-declared, without the mediation of an editorial statement. The seal carver to whom we owe Ishar-beli's seal has no need to provide an explanation about the dynamics we have just observed. It is a given that (in real life) animals in that position should «declare» movement, and that human shaped figures sitting or standing should not be going anywhere. We may better appreciate this by contrasting alternative compositional arrangements.

A non-naturalistic schematic rendering (as in the figure to the right, at the top) does not even come close: the vertical solid lines appear in some way to be more static than the oblique zigzag lines, a contrast which conveys a certain sense of dynamism. But it is at best merely indicative of motion.

The silhouette in the second rendering is slightly more suggestive of the dynamic relationship among the various figures. The elements are beginning to acquire a figurative dimension that projects a sense of flux in their reciprocal spatial relationship.

But it is only in the third rendering (the original) that the full contrast emerges. The figures emerge now in their plasticity and with all the “naturalistic details” that the artist so admirably conveys. We can now see how the reality being represented truly defines the limit of the expectation: one is intuitively led to expect limits that are «declared» by the model. And

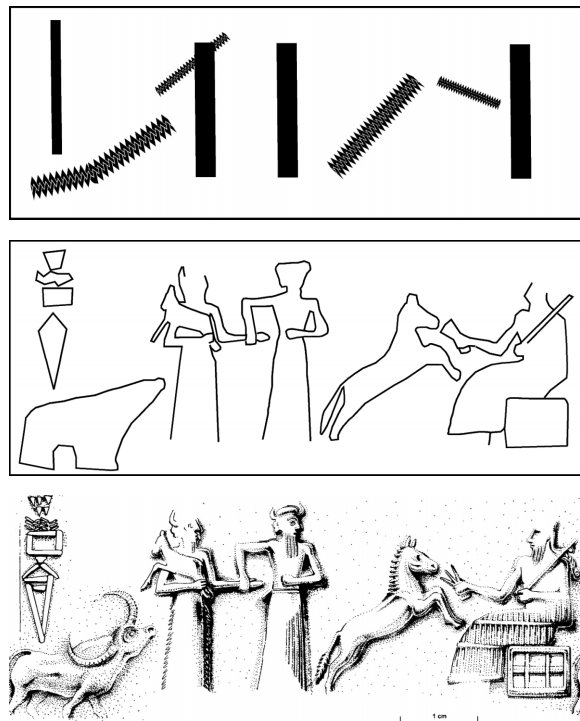


Fig. 2: Analysis of the impression of the seal of Ishar-beli from the royal Palace of Urkesh.

Francke, 1946; most recent English translation: *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, with an important introduction by Edward W. Said, pp. i-xxiv.

⁵ On this and on the concept of the “limit of expectation” see my “Principles of Stylistic Analysis,” *Bono Homini Donum: Essays in Memory of J.A. Kerns*, ed. Y. D. Arbeitmann and A. R. Bomhard. Amsterdam: Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science 4, pp. 807-836, especially p. 832 f. (available online at www.gb-cv.net).

it is these limits that affirm the tensional dimension of the work itself. The scene on Ishar-beli's seal respects a certain canon (the realistic canon), and yet one moves freely within it. The question is to what degree is freedom allowed, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the original. It is, we might say, the clash, or the harmony, of two coherences: the coherence of the model given in reality, and the coherence of the chosen configuration given in the representation.

If so, naturalism is a code that assists the artist in his or her self-declaration mode. It is the same as when a poet utters the first few words in, let us say, English, and one naturally expects the poem to continue in that same language, with no need for an explicit statement saying: «I am going to speak in English». The self-declared limit of expectation is built into the work itself. It proclaims the limit of the tensional possibilities of any given work of art or literature.

The two coherences (that of the model and that of its representation) never present a perfect match: inevitably, and intentionally, there is a selection of elements to be included in the representation of the whole of which they form a part.⁶ This is part of the tensional factor: given that the model sets the standards (a prancing equid defines and delimits the range of expectations of what is possible with such a figure), which elements are in fact privileged? And also: where is the expectation not met? Expressionism is an example: certain traits are exaggerated, and the degree of exaggeration can be measured against the original model (this is how the expectation finds its answer: the result is different from what was anticipated). If the exaggeration extends to a complex of factors, then the contrast between expectation and verification is even greater: monstrous beings are an example of this.

Standardization and stylization go in this direction; art that is specifically non-representational avoids the setting of a natural model as the accepted limit. Here it is as though the self-declared limit of expectation were explicitly transferred to another plane, one where nature, seen as a canon, is set aside. A more extreme case is the intentional distortion or dislocation of the natural sequence. The deliberate effort in this sense on the part of modern art is perhaps the most notable example, also because of the theoretical underpinnings on which it was based. But there are certainly many examples throughout history.⁷ Here I only wish to stress the significance of the relationship (proposed or rejected) with nature as the natural model, which I see as the standard through which a

⁶ This is where the notion of a topos inserts itself, the theme that Loprieno develops in a theoretical vein in his work cited above, n. 4. An implicit application of this principle, as it pertains to a particular major work of Syro-Mesopotamian art, may be found in the three chapter on the Naram-Sin stele in Irene J. Winter, *On Art in the Ancient Near East. Vol. II. From the Third Millennium B.C.E.*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East, Vol. 34.2, Leiden: Brill, 2010, pp. 85-149, see especially pp. 111-116 (originally published in 1999).

⁷ The seminal paper by Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Le dédoublement de la représentation dans les arts de l'Asie et de l'Amérique," in *Renaissance: revue trimestrielle publiée par l'Ecole Libre des Hautes Etudes de New York*, 1944-45, pp. 168-186; reprinted in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*,

limit of expectation is raised that defines and delimits the range of tensional factors implicit in a work of art.⁸

At the root of these various modes of expression there is, then, a built-in call for coherence. This coherence is set by extra-referential standards, i. e., standards that are derived from parallel orders of being. In representational art, the standards are set by the world of nature, and the structural coherence of the product is measured on the basis of its comparison with the structural coherence of the model. The expectation defines the limit within which both a match and a deviation are measured, and the tensional dimension derives from how this may be realized. In non-representational art, on the other hand, the coherence derives from factors such as symmetry, i. e., factors that are not derived from the world of nature but are set up as a different limit of expectation, with which the artist still has to operate.

In this perspective, one can see how the degree of conformity to the model can vary greatly, all the while the basic dependence on it remains operative. In the final analysis, Picasso's *Guernica* is no less naturalistic than an Assyrian battle relief, or, for that matter, the photograph of a battle field. The rendering always includes a deviation from the model, according to accepted parameters and standards. What remains as the central function of the model is to declare the limits within which the representation can take place. Mimesis is not, in this regard, duplicating. It is framing, i. e., the setting of a frame borrowed from a known order of things (nature). Mimesis is the declaration of limits.

3. COMPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS

Composition is what holds the tensional elements together. On the one hand, the compositional process fuses the elements we have seen so far into a single structural whole.⁹ On the other, compositional analysis identifies the criteria that are originally intro-

Paris: Plon, 1958, pp. 269-294, develops in detail the notion of dislocation, and offers important methodological considerations.

⁸ Surrealism is another pertinent dimension of modern art, that has found fertile ground in the vast science fiction imaginarium. The recent monograph by David Wengrow, *The Origins of Monsters. Image and Cognition in the First Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, deals at length with composite images that, while maintaining "a certain basic coherence on the anatomical plane" (p. 27), combine different elements in ways that are not given in nature. The author's approach is "visual and technical, rather than moral or psychological" (p. 113, n.3 – hence his preference for the term "composites" instead of "monsters" in the course of the book): in other words, he aims for a formal analysis of the type for which I argue here.

⁹ The classical work by H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort, *Arrest and Movement. An Essay on Space and Time in the Representational Art of the Ancient Near East*, London: Faber and Faber, 1951, remains very significant. With regard to formal analysis see, e. g., Lorenzo Nigro, "Per una analisi formale dello schema compositivo della stele di Naram-Sin," in *Contributi e materiali di archeologia orientale*, 4 (1992), pp. 61-100; Pauline Albenda, *Monumental Art of the Assyrian Empire: Dynamics of Composition Styles*, Monographs on the Ancient Near East, 3/1, Malibu: Undena Publications, 1998, pp. 72. The

duced to obtain such a fusion. The term used in the case of word based texts (whether spoken¹⁰ or written) is discourse analysis or rhesiology.¹¹ What is common to both the visual and the textual record is the presupposition of, and search for, an underlying coherence of the whole. Its main overall trait is structural inclusivity: each of the components depends on the other (hence the dimension of tensionality) and it excludes elements that do not share in this reciprocal dependence.

We have anticipated the fact that tensionality operates not only at the level of individual elements because of the way in which they relate to each other, but also at the compositional level, in the way in which non-contiguous elements are effectively brought in virtual contact with each other across either space or time, with the visual or the textual record respectively. It will help to highlight this close correlation between tensionality and compositional organization if we reorganize the elements in our two examples by removing the factors that establish tensionality.

The “Code” could have followed a pattern common in normal royal inscriptions, where after the prefatory temporal clauses a direct verbal sentence describes the actual event brought about through the agency of the king. For instance, a cone we owe to Hammurapi’s chancery¹² relates as follows the construction of the city wall of Sippar:

first temporal clause	1	<i>Inu Šamaš...</i>	When Shamash...
second temporal clause	28	<i>inūmišu:</i>	on that day:
subject	29 ... 35	<i>Hammurapi ... anāku...</i>	I, Hammurapi, ...
verb-object	41-42	<i>ussī dūr Sippar in eperi...</i>	I raised the wall of Sippar by (packing) earth...

coherence of the formal representational scheme is also emphasized by the way in which textual elements are incorporated in the larger monuments in which the stelae were included, and the way in which they were perceived by the scribes who accurately copied these text portions indicating their placement on the monument, see Giorgio Buccellati, “Through a Tablet Darkly. A Reconstruction of Old Akkadian Monuments Described in Old Babylonian Copies,” in M. E. Cohen, D. C. Snell and D. B. Weisberg (eds.), *The Tablet and the Scroll. Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, pp. 58-71.

¹⁰ An important study on the structure of oral poetry is that of J. M. Foley, *Immanent Art. From Structure to Meaning in Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1991. The notion of “traditional referentiality,” which he introduced, underscores the significance of the broader cultural (“traditional”) context with built in frames of reference (“referentiality”): the poet’s perception is conditioned by these frames and responds to them (in ways that relate to what I have described as the limit of expectation).

¹¹ For this term see my 1981 article “Principles,” pp. 817 and 820, cited above, note 5; and “On Poetry – Theirs and Ours,” in T. Abusch, J. Huehnergard, P. Steinkeller (eds.), *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, Harvard Semitic Studies 37. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990, 107f. (available online at www.gb-cv.net); and my *A Structural Grammar of Babylonian*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996, p. 332f. The 1981 article (“Principles”) deals in some detail with the specific topic of compositional analysis.

¹² D. Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period (2003-1595 BC)*. The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Early Periods, Vol. 4. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990, pp. 333-336, Hammurapi 2.

If the “Code” had been similarly constructed, it would have sounded somewhat like the following:

first temporal clause	v 14	<i>Inu Marduk ...</i>	When Marduk...
second temporal clause	v 25	<i>inūmīšu:</i>	on that day:
subject	i 50	<i>Hammurapī ... anāku...</i>	I, Hammurapī, ...
object-verb	adapted from beginning of epilog	<i>dīnāt mīšarim ukīn-ma mātam ussam kīnam u rīdam dam-qam ušašbit.</i>	I established the decrees of justice and thus caused the people to take the straight path and good behavior.
the “laws” as a separate text	v 26	<i>“Šumma awīlum...”</i>	“If a man...”

Comparing this imaginary version of the “Code” to the original is instructive in that it shows how much more static the overall structure is. What is lost is the tension in the original, where the prolog and the epilog are part of the one and the same syntactic whole, *within which* the “laws” are encased as the subject of a vast nominal sentence. In the Sippar inscription, the object of the king’s activity is external to the inscription – it is the city wall built around Sippar itself. In the “Code,” instead, the object is *within* the text of the stela, and the syntactical organization of the inscription emphasizes this through the tensional arrangement of its parts.

We may apply a similar transform to the seal of Ishar-beli. In the figure ^{below} ~~on the right~~, I have grouped together in the center of the overall composition the vertical figures, along with the cuneiform legend, and I have placed at the two ends the oblique figures of the two animals. The linear orientation of the elements still conveys a certain contrast between vertical/static and oblique/dynamic, but the impact is clearly quite different from the original, where the naturalistic rendering is intrinsically woven into the realistic representational aspect.

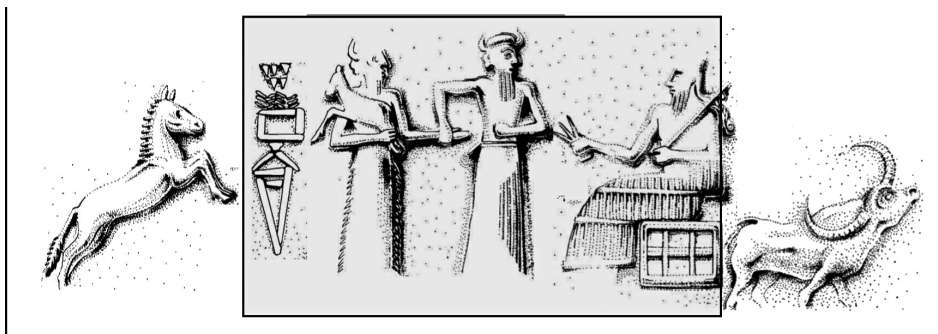


Fig. 3. Reorganization of compositional structure of seal of Ishar-beli.

4. CONCLUSION

Both compositional and discourse analysis depend on the concept of structure. What I have sought to highlight is the relationship between the individual components, in their reciprocal tensionality, and the resulting coherence of the structured whole. Both of these aspects presuppose and construct, at the same time, a degree of expectation: tensionality to the extent that one element tends to the other, and coherence to the extent that these component parts hold together as if by necessity. Because of the structural dimension, every element declares the unity and coherence of the whole.

The approach may be applied to other areas, such as architecture, where topics like space syntax or perceptual analysis are especially pertinent, and may fruitfully be developed along the same line of argument.¹³ My intent was to propose a conceptual framework sufficiently broad to do justice to an analysis of the evidence coming to us from the broken tradition of Syro-Mesopotamia, i. e., a tradition with which we do not have a continuous line of self-interpretation. The self-declaration that I propose to read in this evidence derives from the regularity of formal patterns that can be seen as the trigger of a response on the part of the ancients, and thus can in turn be appropriated by us as the trigger of our own response. It is, in other words, a hermeneutic procedure that seeks to mend the brokenness of a remote tradition.

¹³ I plan to do this in the fourth volume of the series *Il paese delle quattro rive*, of which two volumes have appeared (“*Quando in alto i cieli...*,” Milano: Jaca Book 2012, and *Alle origini della politica*, Milano: Jaca Book 2013.)



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FROM THE TREASURES OF SYRIA

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