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Emotion constructed upon Sumerian agricultural landscape. The anthropology of meaning

ABSTRACT: The natural landscape was the engine of daily life in prehistorical times, and, for that, it was the main source for linguistic creativity by supplying a material reality that inspired symbolic constructions and moulded a communication based on a common background. This paper considers a semiotics' approach on language and on the creation of signs of meaning based on empirical experience, to understand and describe the expression of emotion in Sumerian literature. The main argument stands for the use of universal signs of meaning for expressing feelings in a way that would be understood independently of the linguistic background. Considering an example of a text of ambiguous interpretation as well as texts with clear hermeneutic ground for a dialogic exercise, a transversal understanding of abstract images was possible since symbolic constructions were generated from interaction with nature, which tend to be a similar empirical experience in all ancient human communities sustained by agricultural production. Examples taken from literary sources regarding symbolic constructions and processes of signs of meaning acquisition are presented, described, and commented in this study.

KEYWORDS: Sumerian literature, agriculture, fear, landscape, emotions, signs of meaning, semiotics, scarceness.

0. Ancient landscapes decoded and recovered through semiotics and analogy

Sumerian language, far from being completely deciphered in terms of grammar, morphology and lexicon semantic spectrum, is still the main door to the historical past of 3rd millennium b.C. southern Mesopotamia, and the great source for understanding Sumerian speakers' daily life, their perceptions on the nature of things and their expression of abstract conceptions.¹ And if one can grasp through language, the different dimensions of expression, such as feelings and sensations, anthropological prototypes regarding human subsistence and relations with environment, may also be decoded.² For example,

¹ Jaques 2017.

² For a brief literature review regarding recent studies on emotions in Ancient Near East, see Hsu, Llop-Raduà 2020, pp. 10-12 and Kipfer 2017.

the description of a landscape can suggest feelings through the association an interlocutor spontaneously makes between the image he sees and the perception of its impact on his/her own life. Such process of empathy occurs when the interlocutor had previously experienced such reality, or when the scene described in a text corresponds to a crystallised image compounded by signs of meaning that are universally understood.³

The visible objects that are part of a natural frame each correspond to at least a sign of meaning. For example, a riverine landscape with grass growing and blooming fruit trees has at least the signs for ‘water’, ‘grass’, ‘production’, ‘output’.⁴ In that sense, the immediate meaning of the scene corresponds to the totality of the signs that compose it, that is to say, the meaning corresponds literally to its description. However, the potential for symbolic construction would depend on the context that calls it and on the hermeneutic value generated from the selection of signs that were part of the original frame. In a Sumerian text one may not be able to understand how the complete or broader landscape was or what Sumerians would have seen on their horizon and exactly what images were crystallised in their cultural thought. That happens because landscapes change with time, so the micro-cosmos that grounds creativity may also vary regarding the signs of meaning it provides. Rural communities, highly dependent on nature, may be a good example for attesting the aforementioned process of constructing and preserving abstract meaning, as it concerns a practical reality or cultural preconceived knowledge that is preserved in the collective memory. The engine of this process is the intense relationship societies that depend on agriculture have with nature. Landscapes and the effects the natural world has on farming production generate general preconceptions that can be empirically experienced and tend to be culturally transmitted.⁵

So that a standardized pattern can be followed, one must focus on a frame with a less potential for variability, showing instead general fixed signs of meaning. In that sense, it is easier to reach the data from an agricultural landscape, as one still knows what a farming and grazing landscape needs, similarly to what a rural Sumerian would have known. Once we acknowledge the landscape, the signs of meaning implied in a crystallised frame based on empirical rustic realities can bring light to the interpretation of ancient texts through

³ On literary codification and semiotic systems, I have followed Eco 2002. On Umberto Eco’s theory, vide also Lorusso 2015, pp. 117-158. On signs of meaning concerning material culture, vide Preucel 2006, pp. 21-92. On semiotics, see also Cobley 2010.

⁴ Examples of this frame can be found in Ur-Namma G ll. 17-19, *Dumuzi and Enkimdu* ll. 20-25 (SF²), *The song of the Hoe* (sHoe) ll. 94-106, among others discussed and listed in Ferreira 2019.

⁵ About the landscape in the Sumerian lamentations see Verderame 2010 and Verderame 2020.

the deconstruction of symbolic language. Literature calls on past landscapes that can still be reconstructed in its general dimension; those landscapes can be decomposed into signs of meaning that are part of the toolkit for language construction. So, if one can reach the landscape of the past, one can find some resources that ancient languages had for building meaning. A procedure for such enquiring is possible even when those texts are hard to be completely understood by a modern reader, due to the unclear contexts and as a consequence of an incipient knowledge on Sumerian lexicon. Lexical lists with Akkadian or elbaite translations do not give an extended linguistic context that could be broadened into taxonomies. And if one extends that to a verbal system where modes and stands cannot be perfectly translated and are still under debate, a modern reader may struggle when looking at cuneiform texts, even if they do not have great gaps on sentences – as often happens with Sumerian sources due to the corruption of support material, such as clay tablets, ostracon, or stone.⁶

1. *Dumuzi's Dream* and a fragmented landscape with a complete meaning

An example of difficulties brought by cultural distance and deficient knowledge on Sumerian language can be found on the first lines of the Sumerian text *Dumuzi's Dream* (DumDr). We cannot completely understand the hermeneutic background because of the lack of context and knowledge on the vocabulary spectrum of Sumerian language. Nonetheless, it is possible to essay an approach to the abstract thought of that ancient text's interlocutors through the landscape that frames it. In fact, by knowing the semiotic tools ancient interlocutors had for hermeneutical interpretation, texts such as *Dumuzi's Dream* (DumDr) can help to describe the chain of relations between both the signs of meaning and its interlocutors' preconceptions:⁷

1. "His heart was filled with tears (and) he went out into the countryside.
2. The heart of the young man was filled with tears (and) he went out into the countryside.
3. Dumuzi's heart was filled with tears (and) he went out into the countryside.
4. He carried the staff on his shoulder and cried constantly."⁸

Dumuzi, 'the shepherd' and the main character in this text, shares space

⁶ See Jaques 2017 for an approach on verbs for expressing emotion in Sumerian language.

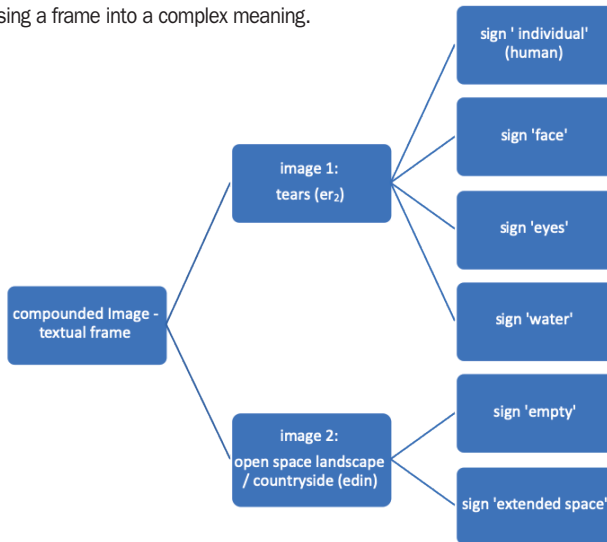
⁷ For a review of *Dumuzi's Dream* vide Tinney 2018.

⁸ Alster 1972, pp. 52-53.

with the herds. Dumuzi is said to be moving into the plains carrying a staff. The exact reason for Dumuzi's mood ($\check{s}ag_4-ga-ni\ er_2\ im-si$) is not known at this point of the text, as the text begins *in medias res*. Nevertheless, a sad Dumuzi is leaving his place ($ba-ra-e_3$) and moving towards the countryside ($edin-\check{s}e_3$), which could be understood as somewhere remote from any populated region.

The idea of the shepherd going to the open country ('edin') carrying a staff ($\check{g}idru$) is not strange, since it should correspond to his daily activities.⁹ However, in this passage, the word 'edin' may also identify an 'outside place', somewhere far away from his original location.¹⁰ We may wonder on the exact significance of moving to another place when grieving. A landscape far from civilization and human life can be interpreted as reflecting loneliness and abandonment. And from that, we can infer this location represents Dumuzi's own state of mind: emptiness or loneliness may mean sadness.¹¹ Besides the complex symbol, as that implied on a shepherd's staff, the meaning is being constructed upon the following signs of meaning:

Fig. 1. Decomposing a frame into a complex meaning.



⁹ For 'edin' as a conceptual geographical space in Sumerian literature see Verderame 2010.

¹⁰ For the Netherworld geography see Katz 2003.

¹¹ Alster 1972, p. 28 considers that "We are not informed from where he is coming, but it is reasonable to assume that he is leaving his city Uruk in order to go to his sister in her sheepfold on the plain. The feeling of being alone without the protection offered by the city fills him with fear that he must die on the plain, with the result that his family will not be able to bury him properly by weeping at his grave and by bringing him offerings. He also imagines his mother calling in vain for the rations of breads which he is to provide."

It seems that the shepherd leaves the natural boundaries of his territory and goes to an isolated place, where only fauna and flora can mourn his fate.¹² In ll.1-14 the countryside (*edin*) and the river, or any type of watercourse (*i₇*), create a framework for grief, but some questions need to be addressed to interpret the emotions in the scene:

- Why is such place being chosen?
- Is one looking into a complex/literary metaphor, or into an allegory of an isolated mind?
- Does one find here a scenario for the narrative which would have been familiar to the interlocutor?

If one considers the landscape a literary scenario, the choice cannot be evaluated as meaningless. It never is, since even if there is no metaphor or allegory, the choice of place depends on the general idea intended to be instigated on the interlocutor's 'mental imagery set'. The river, and the natural world it touches, embraces the grief of the god. This choice can be understood as an extension of Dumuzi's common space, which are pasturelands, and maybe as a representation of his emotions, now framed as someone who is trying to avoid death in a landscape that is supposed to be the shepherd's territory and, therefore, a safe environment.¹³

There is no actual visual manifestation of grief generated by fear, and space can only relate to fear by association with previous events narrated in the text, due to Dumuzi's imminent death and the grief one can infer from the manifestation of tears. Dumuzi is being persecuted, so he may be avoiding his enemies by trying to find a safe and distant place or just moving to a place he feels comfortable in.¹⁴ Following the previous argument, the choice of this location as a place outside Dumuzi's natural habitat could also be a contrast with his natural domain, given that he could also be moving into a strange place. However, linguistically speaking, it is physically identical to Dumuzi's normal sites, that is to say, the countryside or the plains.¹⁵

¹² "Set up the cry, set up the cry! Oh countryside, set up a cry! / Oh countryside, set up a cry! O marshes, set up a lament! / Oh crabs of watercourses *girid₂*, set up a cry! / O frogs of the watercourse set up a lament! My mother will call, / my mother, my Durtur, will call, / my mother will call for five things, / my mother will call for ten things, / if she does not know the day when I'm going to die, / oh countryside, make my mother, who bore me, know." DumDr. 5-13.

¹³ DumDr 103-107: "My friend, I will put my head down in the grass! Do not reveal my place to them! / I will put my head down in the short grass! Do not reveal my place to them! / I will put my head down in the high grass! Do not reveal my place to them! / I will put my head down in the levees of Arali! Do not reveal my place to them!"

¹⁴ See Ferreira 2019, pp. 274-279.

¹⁵ See Ferreira 2019, pp. 228 on SF² ll. 65-72. Recently Tinney (2018) had revisited *Dumuzi's Dream*, published and commented by Alster (1972).

Maybe the difference between both places – countryside and ‘outside land’ – simply lies on how far away from civilization they are: one is in the countryside, but still near the city; the other is in foreign lands. As we still do not completely understand the semantics and expressive mechanisms of the Sumerian language, it is not possible to say with certainty how a sentence should be formed in order to make one place totally distinguishable from another. Undoubtedly, the realities of the language, even in the written form, would not have been so ambiguous to native speakers – one just lacks knowledge of the cultural context. Nevertheless, I would argue that if the clear difference between the location in foreign lands and Dumuzi’s usual setting was so important in terms of the clear comprehension of the lines, more information would have been presented in the text. Therefore, I understand these lines as a frame, which value is supplied by Dumuzi’s feelings, and I do not follow Alster’s (1972, p. 28) interpretation, since his approach to the text involves a context suggested by the narrated events, which cannot be defended on a lexical basis. Regarding Alster’s interpretation, one may consider that Dumuzi went to a faraway place which may have been strange to him, but would he not have been expected to run away to a familiar place to mourn or even to protect himself? (DumDr. 87-90, 165-173). Moreover, as previously said, the word ‘edin’ is usually used to identify Dumuzi’s place, as the textual *disputatio* between the gods Dumuzi and Enkimdu suggests in the Sumerian text *Dumuzi and Enkimdu* (SF² ll. 16-17).

Summing up, one can understand the text but not dive into the wider psychological experience that Dumuzi would instigate on the interlocutor of the narrative. As *Dumuzi’s Dream* (DumDr) shows, attempting to identify feelings through the landscape in a Sumerian text, when one does not know exactly what that landscape would be, is a highly speculative exercise. But this happens because of an ambiguous context and a relative short list of signs of meaning that, having been more complete, would have made the interpretation more spontaneous. Nonetheless, it must be underlined that the signs of meaning here are clear, the issue is on how they are compounded and converted into a symbol.

2. Agricultural landscapes charged with emotion

Sumerian literature is particularly fruitful concerning the signs of meaning manifestation. For example, the Dumuzi/Inana’s relationship expressed in *Dumuzi-Inana F* (DI F)text presents a kind of beauty that seems to emerge from an idyllic description of a landscape, regardless of the fact that the text

is poorly preserved. By framing what seems a typical love scene between the gods Inana and Dumuzi, it suggests a space that contains elements of a garden and therefore a beautiful scenario for this ‘beautiful’ moment (cf. Sefati 1998 320-3). The lexicon, metaphoric or literal, refers to an orchard (^{ĝi}š³kiri₆), dates (zu₂-lum), apple trees (^{ĝe}š³hašhur) and fig trees (^{mu}PEŠ₃): it is not possible to obtain a complete picture of the scenario, so it may be the case that the reference to fruits and trees are a sexual metaphor, as in other *Dumuzi-Inana* texts, rather than an aesthetic construction based on natural symbols.¹⁶ Nevertheless, this fragmented text can be read in those two ways, as the signs of meaning for the objects represented that are invariable and still exist in our own cultural matrix:

11. “The brother [...] in his orchard. [...]
15. dates [...]
16. the [...] spoke to me among the apple trees.
17. My precious sweet [...] my ¹head².
18. The .?. spoke to me among the fig trees.
19. My precious sweet [...] my [...]
20. The .?. [spoke to me] among the willow^(?) trees.”

If we decompose this scenario into the following signs, we are able to compare other scenes from more complete and complex texts to corroborate this analytic proposal (cf. fig. 2, p. 110).¹⁷

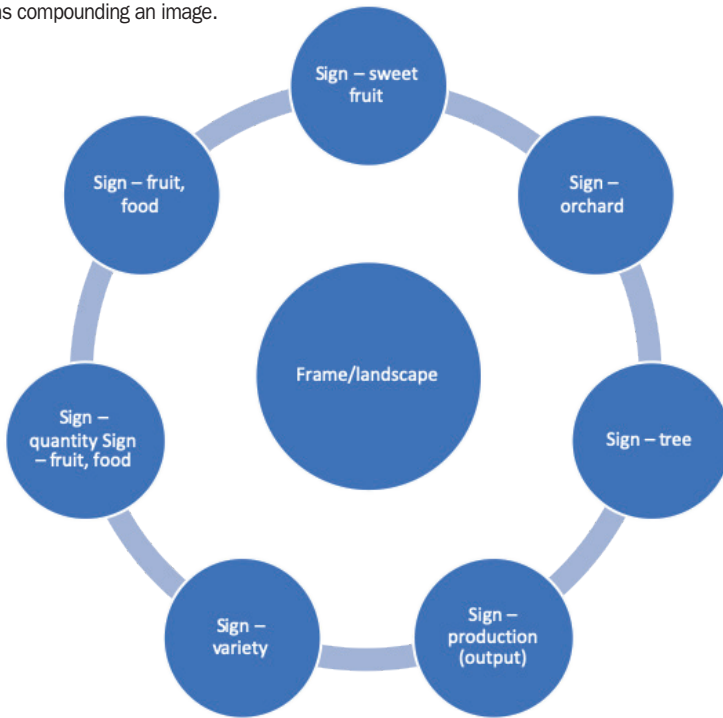
When observed by human eyes, a landscape has a culturally implicit and empirically explicit semantics, constructed through spontaneous interpretation by interlocutors and their generated feelings. Each of the elements that are part of that interpretation is a sign that describes and gives it an abstract meaning: the interlocutor’s background may distort the interpretation, but the sensations are there. Returning to *Dumuzi’s Dream* (DumDr), and using the mentioned mechanisms of decomposing natural frames, one may identify feelings in ll. 144-150, where the landscape is a visual description that reveals a *topos*, together with a manifestation of fear:

144a. “[Dumuzi] hid his head in the vegetation, but I know not his place.” (cf. l. 144)

¹⁶ Considering the sexual metaphor by analogy with the literature associated with Dumuzi and Inana vide Tinney 1999. Also, for an approach to sexual metaphor in Sumerian literature, see Couto-Ferreira 2017.

¹⁷ Cf. *Dumuzi and Inana T* (DI T).

Fig. 2. Signs compounding an image.



145. They looked for Dumuzi's head in the vegetation, but found him not. (cf. l. 147)

146. "He hid his head in the short vegetation, but I know not his place." [...]

148. "He hid his head in the high grass, but I know not his place."

149. "They looked for Dumuzi's head in the high vegetation, but found him not."

150. "He emerged into the levees of Arali, but I know not his place." (Alster 1972, DumDr ll.144-150)

Dumuzi is a shepherd and this landscape is his natural environment. There is no metaphor, just a description. The text simply represents a normal grassy landscape associated with the shepherd's world. Nevertheless, something which is obvious can also be used as an image capable of generating abstract linguistic meaning, since the reference to the *topos* and its value do not vary. The landscape is that of the shepherd and it is where he seeks protection. The fact that he is hiding allows one to deduce fear. The scenario that receives a dramatic action, regarding its symbolic expression, can only be understood by an interlocutor familiar with the landscape and capable of imagining a vast landscape where Dumuzi can be hiding: the magnitude of the landscape im-

pulses the perception and the dimension of fear. In this case, fear can only be assumed by the context, landscape just helps on expanding it. A landscape crystallised in the collective mind can be a catalyser for symbolism, something one can find in other scenes from Sumerian literature, which are particularly abundant and clear in Sumerian lamentations.¹⁸

Lamentation texts present what one could call ugly scenes based on sensitive emotional perceptions.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, there is no clear concept of ugliness in these texts, although it may be implied by the idea of corruption of a natural frame and the inversion of a harmonious or pleasant past. The text *the dead of Ur-Namma A* (UrN A ll. 22-30) depicts this kind of scenario: the god Utu (l. 14) did not appear in the sky, i. e. rain, and the day was full of sorrow. Thus, one of the signs that creates the symbology of beauty and visual pleasure is transformed into something unpleasant that brings the idea of chaos and future privation.²⁰ Obviously, this is a modern and partial interpretation, but the signs of meaning are there.²¹ *The dead of Ur-Namma A* (UrN A) clearly presents destruction regarding the consequences of the shepherd 'being no more'.²²

5. “[X] cities were [completely] [destroyed]; the people were seized by fear.

6. Evil came to [Urim] and made the trustworthy shepherd withdraw.

[...]

22. “[The early flood] poured into the [canals], the canal-inspector was silent (?);

23. [the barley and the flax] grown in the meadow, the life of the land, was submerged.”

This is an image of a wasteland. Its meaning, as far as it can be reconstructed, clearly displays the signs of the symbol: something that should have brought fertility and abundance, brought an end to the harvest instead, for the meadows are submerged (zi kalam-ma ba-su) by the early flood (cf. *A šir-namgala to Nanna L* ll. 21-23).²³

¹⁸ For a commentary on emotions regarding Sumerian Lamentations texts vide also Loisel 2021.

¹⁹ E.g. *Lamentation over Sumer and Ur* (LSUr), *Lamentation over Ur* (LUr), *Curse of Agade* (CA), see Ferreira 2019, pp. 66-69.

²⁰ See García-Ventura (2021, pp. 220-237) for a commentary on grief and mourning manifested in this text and for her discussion on those concepts in one administrative text recording the funeral of Baranamtara of Lagash (XXIV century b.C.) and in the *Epic of Gilgameš* (George 2003).

²¹ Cf. *Curse of Agad* (CA) ll. 272-280.

²² Cf. Letter from Lugal-nesaĝe to a king radiant as the moon (Version A from Nibru) ll. 1-15, comp.t.: Ali 1964; ETCSLc.3.3.02. Cf. LSur l. 68, ll. 266-268.

²³ Ferreira 2019, pp. 61-68.

Sumerian Lamentations stand for loss and tend to represent the reverse of prosperity and order, and therefore happiness, through images of poverty and future doom, often using supplies and foodstuff, or its original landscape of products, as a source for generating symbolic imagery. The possession of goods is a guarantee of well-being, if there is a disruption of surplus, the future is threatened. Property ensures a kind of stability since it provides welfare and sustenance. If one does not have it, there will be no signs of meaning from which the semantic value of prosperity can be constructed, such as ‘food’ and ‘quantity’. Absence is then the way of transmitting an image of distortion of harmony and the consequent image of suffering.

38. “Bad weeds should grow on the two banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates,

[...]

42. the hoe should not plough the arable fields, the seed should not touch the soil;

43. the sound of the cowherds should not be heard in the open country,

44. butter and cheese should not be made in the cattle-pen, dung should not be spread on the land.” (*Lamentation over Sumer and Ur*, LSUr)

Here, the fields and pasturelands are empty: no one is working in the fields (gan_2-ne_2 $zid-de_3$ $gisal$) or putting cattle out to graze; summing up, production/supply no longer takes place. Therefore, there is no future. The compounded meaning draws on the signs of meaning for a harmonious landscape that does not exist. In other words, distorts the crystalised image of how things should be and foodstuff or its potential are the sources of images of desolation in an agricultural landscape that should frame prosperity. In that sense, the signs of meaning for building a symbolic frame for ‘happiness’ can be identified through their opposites (LSUr):

3. “To overturn the divine powers of Sumer,

4. to change the favourable reign in its household,

5. to destroy the city, to destroy the house,

6. to destroy the cattle-pen, to level the sheepfold;

7. so that the bull should not stand in the pen,

8. the sheep should not multiply in the sheepfold, (cf. LUr ll. 266-268)

9. watercourses should carry salty water,

10. weeds should grow in the good fields,

11. mourning plants should grow in the open country.”

Instead of a fertile scene, there is land in decay. The future is ruined, since

animals have been killed, the farms are overgrown with weeds and water is brackish. All the goods that guarantee welfare are absent, and instead there is a scene of desolation. As it is obvious that these goods are essential for subsistence, there is no need to engage in any hermeneutical analysis: essentially, the scene establishes a state of famine and absence of happiness, by identifying things that should not have happened. There is a suggestion of generalised destruction and a compromised future existence defined through the frame of the agricultural landscape and its compounding signs (cf. LSUr ll. 49-51).

Agricultural life has been suspended, so life itself is at stake (cf. LSUr ll. 85-91, ll. 123-132). As there is little surviving evidence on farms and empirical practices of Sumerian farming, it is impossible to measure the full economic cost, but the cultural impact on the construction of language and thought can be identified. These texts present the rural world as the basis of human social existence, describing what should not have happened in terms of welfare and happiness of the people. In other words, the argument of these lines is a rejection of the destruction of the fields and pastures that has taken away the possibility of happiness in these lands. When agricultural work is disrupted, society cannot be fed and therefore cannot exist;²⁴ an expression of mourn is what comes out.

In short, there is no future, since nothing will grow and there will be no food on the table. The opposite of not having good crops is known, and therefore value is attributed to its semantic image (cf. *Enlil in the E-kur* (Enlil A), ll. 109-123). Essentially, when the entire visual landscape is destroyed, there is no life: the idea of total destruction is based on an unknown future that has no natural riches. Products from the land represent the prosperity of the people, and this would have been clearly recognised in the traditional culture of peasants in ancient times, used to dealing with the hardships associated with their dependence on nature. (vide supra LSUr ll. 38-44)

Regarding lamentations, sadness is measurable through everything that is absent, ultimately, resulting in starvation (cf. LSUr ll. 303-317).²⁵ In *Lamentation over Ur*, society is crushed because the principles that sustain it, such as the farmer and the hoe (LUr ll. 271-274) or the herds (LUr ll. 1-26), no longer exist. In LUr, CA and LSUr, the famine caused by the disruption to the

²⁴ Cf. *The curse of Agad* (CA ll. 170-175, ll. 245-255); see Ferrara 1995.

²⁵ Fleming 2003 says "The gods have abandoned their homes and left their people defenceless. Nanna and Ningal have decamped from Ur, and now they find themselves mourning the loss that they somehow had tolerated. After all, humans are the servants who work the fields of the gods and tend their herds and flocks, who provide the gods with their meals and tuck them in at night."

land, with scarcity of water, grain and cattle, reflects interrupted prosperity, meaning the collapse of society:²⁶ when cattle are destroyed, so is the economy (LUr ll. 129-132, ll. 185-192, ll. 359-366). For example, the idea conveyed by a perished lamb is the impossibility of reconstruction, since the entire subsistence economy has been razed to the ground with the destruction of the herd, reflected in the death of its offspring (ll. 65-66). In *Lamentation over Ur* (LUr) the animals are the sources of such metaphor.

The symbols constructed from signs based on supplies, dairy products or productive animals are defined by contrasts. In that sense, and regarding the abstract language based on agricultural images, it could even be said that happiness is an imagining illusion, a concept of something that should exist, but does not: imagining it involves excess transposed into reality. A superior manifestation of the state of things or its harmonious maintenance always involves comparison with a certain potential reality or possibility. Although this interpretation depends greatly on context, examining the archaeology of thought entails looking at the history of the silent people and how they lived and experienced their world. And, at such level of disruption, it was understood that to improve the present, prosperity had to be restored by recovering what was lost (LSUr ll. 464-469).²⁷

498. “May the Tigris and Euphrates carry water and may An not change it.

499. May rain be in the skies and barley and flax be in the ground and may An not change it.

500. May the canals have water and the fields have grain and may An not change it.

501. May the marshes carry fish and birds and may An not change it.²⁸

502. May old reeds and fresh reeds grow in the margins and may An not change it.”

Instead of showing destruction, the end of *Lamentation over Sumer and Ur* composition (LSUr ll. 502-506) asks for a better future for the country, and this notion of improvement can only be expressed by the return of the rain,

²⁶ Cf. the famine in Eridu (*The Eridu Lament*, 6th kirugu, ll. 15-17; ETCSL c. 2.2.6; Green 1978); cf. also the hunger and desolation shown in CA ll. 177-192 and in Cohen (1988: 401-412, ll. 34-38). Cf. also Cohen 1988, pp. 186-207, ll. 13-17 (CLAM), which presents a scenario of destruction in which grain is used to express loss.

²⁷ Cf. the image of prosperity in *Enlil in the E-kur* (Enlil A) ll. 144-155. Cf. the abundance brought by Ur-Namma by digging canals (*Ur-Namma the canal-digger* (UrN D) ll. 1-12, Nippur version).

²⁸ Ferrara 1995 comments on the relationship between water/fish and the symbolism of inundation.

of new reeds and grain, i.e. of the harmonious landscape.²⁹ The return to the landscape of the signs for crops and growth is a common-sense idea of improvement and this is why they are used in semantic constructions. In short, if the rivers return to their normal course, everything will run smoothly and harmony or balance concern to a state of happiness.³⁰

Given that poverty and wealth were conditions that anyone could understand, within the agricultural framework, people would have wanted to remain or become prosperous, manifesting that desire through the linguistic tools they had available. This was the aim of life, and if the community were to lose its expectations of abundance, it would also lose its foundations, since scarcity recalls a past when everything was better, and to which people would want to return.³¹

21. “My compassionate lady of the precious house no longer notices me.
22. Like a sick tree that gives no fruit, no one is happy because of me.
- [...]
24. May my king attend to me and may I return to my former status.”

Without doubt, material prosperity makes life easier and consequently increases the likelihood of achieving happiness, and food stands for its materialization. Ignoring modern standards of welfare and discussions on the ‘coefficient of happiness’,³² it may be considered that happiness follows a pattern of events and their reception/perception by individuals. For example, considering the situation presented in *A balbale to Enlil for Ur-Namma* (UrN G), it may be said with some certainty that happiness is implied there:

7. “Enlil [...] to Ur-Namma.
8. He [¹granted¹] him early floods^(?), wheat and colourful barley.
9. Ur-Namma, may the people prosper in abundance under your rule.
10. The plough will set good barley (for you), and your cultivated fields will be pleasing.
11. Trees, seeds, good barley, the plough, and the fields will be good.
12. The plough and good barley X (X) the fields ...

²⁹ A prayer for better circumstances which uses the agricultural landscape as a framework is reproduced in CA II. 222-236.

³⁰ See Jaques 2017 approaches on happiness in Sumerian literature.

³¹ *Letter from Lugal-nesaê to a king radiant as the moon*, Version A (from Nibru).

³² See Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser (2018) - “Happiness and Life Satisfaction”. Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction> [Online Resource]. We make this statement with some reservations and considering the problematic and complex philosophical discussion about general welfare standards. For a study about the theories and science on well-being vide Alexandrova 2017.

13. King, cultivate the fields with oxen, and your [cultivated] fields will be good;

14. Ur-Namma cultivates the fields with them, and your cultivated [fields] will be good.

15. The oxen will make cultivated fields good; your cultivated fields will be good.³³

There is no reference to any word meaning happiness, and the form in which such a debatable abstract concept would have emerged in Sumerian social consciousness is not known. One can easily infer the concept of ‘joy’ in Sumerian literature, but ‘happiness’, at least in modern linguistic and philosophic terms, highly concerns to context, which tends to be fragmented. The scenario represents wealth that is to come, since, according to agricultural expectations, everything is running well: the fields are, or will be, productive, it seems that the work of the plough will bear fruit, and so there will be abundance (*nam-he₂-a*) and prosperity. This is a materialistic perspective on happiness that cannot be associated specifically with Sumerian people, but there is one important aspect that needs to be considered objectively: with abundance, there are no problems, such as starvation. And that is the main issue in an abandoned landscape.

Following the same line of thought, in *Curse of Agade* (CA), domesticated nature has been taken over by wilderness (CA ll. 264-271). Abandonment has transformed a prosperous landscape into a barren land (CA ll. 25-39 vs. ll. 149-175). From an agricultural perspective, such a place would be ugly, as it is not productive, and nature is not under control (CA ll. 256-271). Therefore, the expected value has been distorted:

- wild animals, instead of herds; (l. 56, ll. 267-268)
- grass growing in the fields, instead of crops; (ll. 263-266)
- no cattle eating the tall vegetation; (ll. 264-265)

Hence, the objects that give meaning to a harmonious landscape have been perverted. This is also shown clearly in the *Letter from Lugal-nesaê to a king radiant as the sun* (Version A), which describes the corruption of a kind of beauty, or a good state of things that has turned bad.

14. “Like a garden that has not been cared, my joy has rotted.”

This text mourns for a situation that is not pleasant. The character in the text uses an analogy with a neglected garden to show that he has lost his value, like

³³ Cf. *Gudea E3/1.1.7.CylB* col. xi ll. 15-26 (Edzard 1997, p. 95).

a garden that has not been cared for or watered. There is one curious aspect: the inversion of beauty shows what beauty could be, by reversing a good state. It is the crystalized idea of a good garden that gives meaning and intensity to the scene described by inversion, through signs of ‘ugliness’ – a process of converting positive values into negatives. Emotions are implied and suggested by landscapes and, therefore, suffering and ugliness can be expressed, as well as happiness and beauty. This leads us to believe that, in texts such as *Dumuzi’s Dream*, the landscape gives meaning to the action, even when it cannot be interpreted accurately. For example, in line DumDr. 25-39, there is a manifestation of disturbance on animals’ behaviour. That disturbance generates disruption on the landscape, an abnormal situation that potentiates the sensation of discomfort, framing the fear Dumuzi may feel.

Obviously, as the previous examples show, it is easier to understand the context when the signs of meaning of the landscape are culturally known, as in the case when rural world is the source of images. There is no need for interpretation or knowledge on the psychology of the gods. The agricultural landscape provides the basis for abstract expression and semantic constructions that can be spontaneously apprehended. For instance, one can clearly understand what happened to the city of Ur, once powerful as a bull, now bent as an ox would be (LUr):

259. “Ur, like a great and aggressive bull, [bowed] its neck [to the ground].”

The metaphor can be interpreted as a representation of the city of Ur, now tamed as an ox would be by his master, since the wild bull (‘am’) seems to have been domesticated, similarly to the ox that pulls the plough and has no free will. The symbolic meaning is constructed upon the following signs:

- sign: ‘strength’
- sign: ‘power’
- sign: ‘submission’
- sign: ‘work’

It is important to underline that the symbol is made of various signs. Those signs are rooted in a crystalised picture which flows through the traditional thought of a community that recognised the abstract framed image as a construction based on the signs of meaning. The semantic value of the image comes from the common-sense assessment made by the interlocutor of the ploughman’s daily activities; the listener or reader of a text like *Lamentation over Ur* (LUr) would understand spontaneous analogies between his notion of the materiality of the ploughman’s work and its abstract representations, which

had an exact linguistic meaning. The process of transforming the surrounding natural world into a creative source for the construction of traditional thought and abstract language is, without a doubt, universal and transversal. Moreover, it can be identified in abstract language, even when the signs of meaning are deduced from their absence. In that sense, maybe the lines of the text published by Cohen (1988), *The Bull in His Fold*,³⁴ describing the grieving of a bull (ll. 1-2), refer to animal suffering due to the absence of the ploughman, although this is just one possible interpretation of the text. In the scene, a bull mourns, representing an entire country that has been invaded (ll. 9-16). The allegory is clear, but the hermeneutics of the text is not immediately decodable:

1. “The bull in his fold moans painfully,
2. in his fold, the bull in his fold (moans) painfully.”

Another example can be identified in *Lamentation over Sumer and Ur* (LSUr ll. 1-37), which starts by referring to abandoned cattle, implying a compromised future.³⁵ The destruction of the city heralds the end of the goods from pasture and harvesting and, once again, the image of the animal helps to construct meaning of a disrupted society:³⁶

52. “Ur, a great charging wild bull, confident in its power,
53. the city that was the seed for lordship and kingship, erected on sacred ground.
54. bows its neck to the ground like a roped ox.”

The metaphor refers to a factual image made up from the signs of meaning of ‘power’ and ‘leading’. In addition to the destruction, this text also recalls the value of the ploughman, as he is the one who controls the powerful bull.³⁷

Conclusion

Emotions have recently drawn the attention of Assyriologists, as evidenced by publications such as those of Hsu, Llop-Raduá, Jaques (eds. 2021), Kipfer (eds. 2017), or the research of Couto-Ferreira (2010, 2017). However, and despite the effort to approach texts and social culture from different perspectives, the use of semiotics as a tool for complementing lexicon and hermeneutic

³⁴ Cf. Cohen 1988, pp. 152-154, ll. 1-5 (CLAM).

³⁵ I interpret the butchering of cattle by analogy with the text *Utugin Eta - Come out like the Sun*, in Cohen 1988, p. 105, ll. a+227-232 (CLAM).

³⁶ Cf. ll. 8’-12’, CUNES 53-08-060, Cohen 2013, pp. 37-49.

³⁷ See Ferreira 2019, 146-148.

approaches tends not to be considered very seriously, which means part of the mechanisms ancient interlocutors had to understand and to communicate symbolic expression may be left behind. As this paper intended to show, semiotics can play a role in textual interpretation, but also in gathering anthropological knowledge on ancient people, by looking into the original empirical sources for the construction of meaning, contrasting it with literary sources.

The following symbols and composing signs of meaning were identified in the Sumerian texts here quoted:

COMPOUNDED TRADITIONAL SYMBOLS FROM THE LANDSCAPE OF ABUNDANCE AND SCARCENESS

richness (sR), beauty (sB), prosperity (sPP), harmony (sH), hapiness (sHa),
poverty (sPPP), famine (sF), sadness (sS) uggly (sU)



composing Signs in Sumerian context and symbols they represent:

work (sB)(sH) (sHa) (sS) (sU)
growing (sR) (sB) sPP (sH) (sPPP)(sF)(sHa) (sS) (sU)
crops (sR) (sB) sPP (sH)(sF)(sHa) (sS) (sU) (sPPP)
providing (sR) (sB)(sH) (sF) (sPPP)
quantity (sR) (sB) (sPP)(sHa) (sS) (sU)
variety (sR)(sB) (sPP) (sHa) (sS) (sU)

Fig. 3. Signs of meaning as components of compounded symbols.

It was possible to establish a dialog between a text of complex interpretation due to the limited display of signs of meaning, with other texts that, despite lacking context, are constructed both from similar linguistic sources and abstract thought, and, for that reason, better interpreted. The fact is, *Dumuzi's Dream* is not completely transparent regarding feelings, as the signs there are not enough to solve the ambiguities generated by context and language. However, one can see clearly that, in it, emotions are represented and are built in the same way as in other texts. Doubts lay on how those emotions affected the action of the main character and exactly what emotions are being manifested. Yet, we know feelings were expressed and understood by the interlocutors of the text, because the frame is not at all ambiguous and is linked to a landscape of meaning that semiotics helps to decode.

The original landscape provides us with the signs of meaning, whereas the literary texts allow their selection and convergence as a variable symbolic out-

put. One can help recover the other, and even in texts where the symbolic language is somewhat partially loss, we can at least see what an ancient interlocutor saw, even though we are not able to understand what the image would have meant to him.

List of abbreviations

- CA – *Curse of Agade* (Cooper 1983; ETCSL: c.2.1.5)
 CAD – Roth, Martha T. 1956-2014, ed., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Vol. I-XXI. Chicago
 CDLI – Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, <http://cdli.ucla.edu/>
 CLAM – *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Cohen 1988)
 DI F – *Dumuzi-Inanna Song F* (ETCSL c.4.08.06; Sefati 1998, pp. 171-76)
 DumDr – *Dumuzi's Dream* (ETCSL 1.4.3; Alster 1972)
 Enlil A – *Enlil in the E-kur* (ETCSL c.4.05.1)
 ETCSL – The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk)
 LUr – *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (ETCSL c.2.2.2; Krecher 1996, Vanstiphout 1998)
 LSUr – *The lament for Sumer and Urim* (ETCSL c.2.2.3; Michalowski 1989)
 sHoe (Al) – *The song of the Hoe* (ETCSL c.5.5.4; Edzard 2000)
 SF² – *Dumuzid and Enkimdu (The Shepherd and the Farmer)* (ETCSL c.4.08.33; Sefati 1998 324-43)
 UrN A – *Death of Ur-Namma* (Ur-Namma A) (Flückiger-Hawker 1999; ETCSL c. 2.4.1.1)
 UrN D – *Ur-Namma the canal-digger, Nippur version* (Ur-Namma D) (ETCSL c.2.4.1.4; Tinner 1999)
 UrN G – *A balbale to Enlil for Ur-Namma* (Ur-Namma G) (ETCSL c.2.4.1.7)

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