

Repetition, Parallelism and Creativity:
An Inquiry into the Construction of Meaning in Ancient
Mesopotamian Literature and Erudition
REPAC (ERC StG, 2019-2024)

- **PI:** Nicla De Zorzi (University of Vienna, Department of Near Eastern Studies)
- **Idea:** Variant repetition in erudite compositions as principal vector of Ancient Mesopotamian creativity
- **Sources:** Ancient Mesopotamian literature, magic and divination (first millennium BCE)
- **Scientific Team:** PI (70%), 4 PostDocs (2 in the first half, 2 in the second half of the project's time), 2 doctoral students (4 years)
- **Grant:** EUR 1.494.198 (5 years)

The sources

Ancient Mesopotamian

- **Literature** (ca. 10.000 lines)
- **Magic** (ca. 160 compositions)
- **Divination** (ca. 7000 omens,
e.g. If a bird flies to the right
of a man to his left, the man will become rich)

- Cuneiform script, Akkadian language (Babylonian)
- First Millennium BCE



Idea and objectives of the project

Variant repetition and its functions

“The re-statement of some linguistic feature in a similar form close after its first occurrence”

- ... draw on the belief in the **interconnectedness** of words, concepts and things sharing an element of similarity, i.e. work through **analogical reasoning**
- **Variant repetition is central to the Mesopotamian creative effort**
- Comprehensive description of the forms of repetition in Ancient Mesopotamian erudite compositions (literature, magic, divination)
- Study of the functions of repetition in context
- Grounding of repetition in an analogistic worldview
- Two case studies of cross-cultural comparison

Cross-cultural comparison

- Case study 1: **Biblical Hebrew poetry**
 - REPAC data as untapped reservoir of comparative material and proxy data for investigating the functions of variant repetition, esp. parallelism
- Case study 2: **Ancient Chinese literature**
 - Shared features: analogistic worldview, literary culture based on a non-alphabetic writing system
 - Textual form (esp. parallelism) as part of the argument

Deliverables

- Three monographs on (variant) repetition in Mesopotamian divination, literature and magic
- One conference volume
- Journal papers and conference presentations
- Digital material

Selling points

Ambition: an original, ground-breaking idea which addresses important challenges. [but promise what you believe you can deliver!]

REPAC: **innovative** interpretation of a neglected textual feature; it is based on my previous work on Mesopotamian divination [expert] but it also represents **a clear qualitative leap forward** [not an incremental continuation of extant work!]; in terms of intellectual ambition it is **unique** in that it is the **first** Assyriological cross-genre project drawing on newly available textual corpora for investigating fundamental questions of structure and function; it also unique with respect to its comparative aspects.

Strong profile of the PI: strong publication record, evidence of independent creative thinking (StG); international network.

REPAC: all reviewers commented at length on my 2014 monograph (PhD thesis; published in Italian but with a detailed English summary).

Salience and Timeliness: the project goes significantly beyond the state of the art (knowledge gap!) and has the potential of making a major contribution to one own's field of research.

Planning

- 2017 was my last chance to apply for an ERC Starting Grant (2-7 years since PhD) [risky]
- The idea has been on my mind for some time. I started collecting material and bibliography around seven months before the deadline (October 2017).
- The proposal took around five months to write. I first wrote the synopsis (5 pages) and then the scientific proposal (15 pages). It took countless versions before submitting the final version of the proposal. [polish, polish, polish]
- I had no access to successful ERC StG proposals from my own field, but I had some previous experience in writing grant proposals (Marie-Curie, Austrian Science Fund) and two colleagues read the proposal and offered useful feedback. [get help]

- **Research methodology:** based on my experience, it is important to describe in detail how will all of the components of the team connect together to achieve the overall goal.
- **Feasibility and risk management:** the project should be ambitious but challenges should be acknowledged through a risk management strategy [REPAC's risk management plan will see the large textual corpus evaluated in two phases: after a general sifting and classification of the evidence (18 months), an evaluation phase (6 months) will establish a more restricted yet representative corpus whose analysis in detail is feasible].
- **Proposal writing:** it should be intelligible to specialists and non-specialists (especially the synopsis). As far as possible, it should use the 'ERC language' (e.g. high-risk high-gain, ground-breaking nature, state of the art vs. knowledge gap, potential impact). Write positively: „I will be the first to...“ (not „this has never been done before“).

Readability: I tried to enhance it by using paragraphs, headings, and bullet points (list of objectives). I also included a schematic time chart and bold characters for key-words and important statements. Neat layout.

- **Budget:** the resources requested should be explained in detail, including your own role and time commitment, the roles and time commitment of the future team members, their profiles (MA, PhD, PostDoc) and how they will be enrolled [1 ½ pages of my scientific proposal was dedicated to this; it included a detailed estimation of travel costs, publication costs, and the costs for the organization of workshops and conferences (as a complement to the budget table!).]
- **PI's commitment and motivation:** a brief explanation of how an ERC will contribute to the PI's career and intellectual development might help [I had a paragraph on this at the beginning of the budget section: a couple of reviewers made reference to it in their reports].
- **Panel:** it is important to choose the right evaluation panel. 'Secondary evaluation panel': only if one feels really confident in more than one field [at the interview the most tricky questions came from a member of my secondary evaluation panel!].
- **Abstract and acronym:** think carefully about both. Hopefully, they will accompany you for five years.