

ACHRAG Research Report

The “Hymn to Babylon” Musicalisation Project

An acoustic reconstruction of a lost ancient hymn, grounded in a scholarly restored text

Published: 8 August 2026 | Issued by: ACHRAG Sacred Resonance Division

Abstract

This report describes the background, methodology, and scholarly grounding behind the Division’s adaptation and musicalisation of the “Hymn to Babylon” (original title: A Hymn in Praise of Babylon and the Babylonians), an ancient Mesopotamian hymn whose restored text was published in 2025. The Division composed an Arabic-language adaptation of the lyrics and realised the work as a six-song suite using AI composition technology.

This work does not aim to be a scientifically accurate reconstruction of the original Akkadian sound. It is a scholarly-grounded musical and poetic adaptation, using phonological kinship within the Semitic language family as its guiding thread. This distinction is stated here at the outset and is deliberate.

1. What is the Hymn to Babylon?

The source text of this work, the “Hymn to Babylon”, is a cuneiform document composed in Akkadian — an extinct ancient Semitic language with no living speakers — believed to date from around 1000 BCE. Lost for nearly three millennia, it was reassembled from more than thirty clay tablet fragments by a joint research team from the University of Baghdad and Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU), using AI-assisted fragment-matching techniques. Their work successfully restored roughly two-thirds of the text.

This project takes that scholarly restoration as its primary source and, through the Division’s own adaptation and musicalisation pipeline, reconstitutes it as a suite of six songs.

2. Scholarly Source

The restored text underpinning this project is drawn from the following publication.

Fadhil, Anmar A. and Jiménez, Enrique (2025).

“Literary Texts from the Sippar Library V: A Hymn in Praise of Babylon and the Babylonians.”

Iraq, volume 86 (2025), pp. 21–78.

Cambridge University Press, on behalf of The British Institute for the Study of Iraq.

DOI: 10.1017/irq.2024.23

Access: Open Access (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This paper is openly accessible, with the full original text, English translation, and scholarly apparatus available at no cost. The Division took the paper’s published English translation as its primary source for the adaptation work described in the sections that follow.

3. Method of Adaptation — Why Arabic Was Chosen

As Akkadian has no living speakers, it cannot be faithfully “sung” using current speech-synthesis or music-generation technology. The Division therefore selected Modern Standard Arabic (Fusha) — widely regarded among Semitic languages as retaining the highest degree of phonological conservatism relative to Akkadian — as the linguistic basis for the adaptation.

The adaptation goes beyond straightforward semantic translation. Lyrics were constructed by identifying, wherever possible, cognate word pairs between Akkadian and Arabic on the basis of phonological correspondences established in comparative Semitic linguistics.

For example, the Akkadian word for “god”, *ilu*, corresponds to Arabic *ilah*; and the Akkadian word for “peace”, *shulmu*, corresponds to Arabic *salam*. Where no clear cognate relationship exists, standard Arabic translations were used to convey meaning.

Note: this work is not a scientific reconstruction of the original Akkadian sound. It is a musical and poetic adaptation guided by the phonological kinship of the Semitic language family.

Sample of the Adapted Lyrics (Opening of Song 4, “Hymn to Babylon”)

كالبحر، تمنحُ بابلُ عطاءها،
كبستان مثمر، تزهو بمفاتها،
كموجةٍ، يتدفقُ خيرُها متلاطماً.

(English reference translation:)

Like the sea, Babylon proffers her yield.
Like a garden of fruit, she flourishes in her charms.
Like a wave, her swell brings her bounties rolling in.

4. Treatment of Missing and Damaged Passages

Roughly one third of the original text remains lost owing to physical damage to the tablets. The Division has not invented any content to fill these gaps. Where the published English translation marks a lacuna with “[...]”, the adapted lyrics likewise mark it explicitly with “(...)”, and the musical setting renders these passages as wordless vocalise or silence.

Song 6, “The Damaged Passage”, in particular reflects the loss of roughly the final hundred lines of the original text: its melody is deliberately fragmented and its structure incorporates extended silences. This is a deliberate choice, intended to convey — in musical form — the tablets’ own physical condition as objects that survive incomplete.

5. Production Process

- Source acquisition: the restored English translation was obtained from the open-access paper cited above.
- Adaptation: a table of Akkadian–Arabic cognate correspondences was compiled from comparative Semitic linguistics and used to construct the lyrics.
- Composition and generation: the AI composition service SUNO was used to produce two candidate takes for each of the six songs.
- Selection: waveform-based acoustic analysis was combined with independent listening evaluations by AI to determine the preferred take for each song.

The specific technical methods and analytical parameters used in the selection process pertain to the Division’s internal research infrastructure and are not disclosed in this report. We ask for the reader’s understanding on this point.

6. Structure of the Six Songs

Song	Title	Content
Song 1	Opening Hymn	Invocation and praise addressed to the god Marduk
Song 2	Hymn from the Gods to Marduk	Words of blessing exchanged among the gods
Song 3	Hymn to the Esagila Temple	The grandeur of Esagila, Marduk’s temple
Song 4	Hymn to Babylon	The abundance bestowed by the city of Babylon and the Euphrates
Song 5	Hymn to the Citizens	The justice of Babylon’s people, and reverence shown to women
Song 6	The Damaged Passage	The lost ending — ancient words surviving only as fragments

7. The Standing of This Work

This work is an attempt to give sonic form to words long lost. It is not a scientific reconstruction of the sound of Akkadian, a dead language. Rather, drawing on the linguistic memory preserved in living Semitic languages, it is an artistic interpretation — grounded in scholarship — that imaginatively approaches the resonance this three-thousand-year-old hymn may once have carried. This distinction is restated here for clarity.

The Division extends its deep respect to the research teams at the University of Baghdad and LMU Munich, whose scholarly achievement in restoring the original text made this work possible.

Sources, References, and Related Links

Primary Source

Fadhil, Anmar A. and Jiménez, Enrique (2025).

“Literary Texts from the Sippar Library V: A Hymn in Praise of Babylon and the Babylonians.” Iraq, vol. 86, pp. 21–78.

Full text (Cambridge Core, Open Access): <https://doi.org/10.1017/irq.2024.23>

electronic Babylonian Library (eBL platform): <https://www.ebl.lmu.de/>

Related Press Coverage

An Ancient Hymn to Babylon is Reawakened (The Wild Hunt): <https://wildhunt.org/2025/07/an-ancient-hymn-to-babylon-is-reawakened.html>

Hymn to Babylon discovered (Archaeology News Online Magazine): <https://archaeologymag.com/2025/07/hymn-to-babylon-discovered/>

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Produced by: ACHRAG Sacred Resonance Division | Publication date: 8 August 2026