

Legal Regulations at Ebla – An Overview

Massimo Maiocchi *

Abstract

This article provides an overview of legal practice at Ebla as evidenced by selected chancery texts from the central archive and the adjacent vestibule within the palace complex (ca. 2360–2310 BC). A wealth of information on the primary archaeological settings of the tablets is available, allowing a better understanding of the role of legal materials within the local scribal milieu. International law and local legal procedures are well attested in the form of treaties and casuistic collections of legal provisions. Draft materials alongside well-formed documents suggest a complex intellectual environment in which normative and theoretical texts coexisted as part of a larger, coherent whole.

1 Introduction

Legal practices at Ebla have been studied in the past, thanks to significant contributions from Fronzaroli and Catagnoti in their *ARET* volumes.¹ Catagnoti, in particular, has authored several articles on the subject.² International law received most scholarly attention, triggered by the edition of the famous Ebla-Abarsal treaty.³ In addition, scattered articles have focused on key figures involved in the administration of justice, including the king, the vizier, and the judges.⁴ The primary source of information consists of a group of 52 tablets commonly referred to as ‘chancery texts’. This umbrella term encompasses various textual typologies, such as letters, royal decrees, treaties, political dossiers, etc. Their content is therefore most intimately related to the topic under present inquiry, as they provide substantial insights into legal practices and political affairs within the Ebla royal court. Upon re-evaluating selected material,⁵ it becomes evident that the Ebla archives serve as an excellent case study for exploring legal developments during the third millennium BCE. However, accessing the content of these texts remains

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1 Fronzaroli 2003; Catagnoti/Fronzaroli 2010; 2020.

2 Catagnoti 2003; previously Catagnoti 1997a; 1997b.

3 Sollberger 1980; Picchioni 1981; Pettinato 1986, 353–364; Lambert 1987; Edzard 1992; Milano 1994; Kienast 1988; most recently Altman 2010; Huddleston 2017; Winters 2019, 155–183.

4 On the elusive judges of Ebla see Viganò 1991, 306–310; Archi/Biga/Milano 1988, 264; Catagnoti 2003, 230, 233–234; Sommerfeld 2006.

5 Maiocchi 2023; 2025.

challenging due to the extensive use of naked logographic roots to express Eblaic, paired with a still incomplete understanding of the language.

2 The sources in their archaeological context

Before delving further into our discussion, it is essential to briefly consider the archival context of the legal materials from Ebla, as it affects their overall interpretation. In fact, the Ebla legal evidence is unique in that substantial archaeological information on its primary setting is available. Consequently, we can confidently explore the *Sitz im Leben* of these documents. The texts stem from the so-called Central Archive (L.2769) and the adjacent vestibule (L.2875), located beneath the portico of the so-called audience hall within the very heart of the palace area.⁶ An extensive fire impacted the city, leading to the collapse of the archive room and sealing its content. The wooden shelves lining three sides of the room once held roughly 3,000 or 4,000 tablets,⁷ dating back to the first half of the 24th century BCE. Interestingly, the archive room was not part of the original palace construction. From the architectural point of view, the room is in fact intrusive relative to the portico of the audience hall. Most likely, it was built under king Irkab-Damu, when the vizier was Arrukum, approximately 40 years before Ebla's destruction. Notably, a few chancery documents – prosopographically dated to the period just before the central archive room's construction – were transferred there from their original location, which remains unknown.⁸ Among these texts are the international treaty of Ebla and Abarsal mentioned above, along with the famous letter of Enna-Dagan, king of Mari, and selected administrative records (including annual accounts of livestock, as well as deliveries of textiles and precious metals). This evidence underscores a sustained interest in administration, politics and legal practices spanning roughly four decades. Within the central archive, legal texts don't exist in isolation. Instead, they form part of a larger textual and meta-textual entity. The archive is predominantly composed of administrative texts, but it also contains lexical lists, ritual and literary texts, incantations, a king list, metro-mathematical exercises, chancery documents, etc. As for the latter typology, the documents are organized in two distinct archival dossiers. The first dossier is located on the shelves of North wall, near the upper corner adjacent to the Western wall. The second dossier is situated roughly at the center of the eastern wall. The rationale behind this arrangement is not immediately apparent, but it may be related to chronology. Generally, the texts from the northern wall seem more recent, with many tablets dating back to the final phase of the archive, when Ibbi-Zikir served as vizier. Conversely, the eastern wall group appears to be older, dating back to the viziers Arrukum and Ibrium. However, the publication of new chancery texts

6 Archi 2015; cf. Archi 1986; Matthiae 1986; Archi 1996; 2003.

7 Apparently, the western wall hosted no tablets, but this is not relevant for the discussion.

8 Archi 2015, 80.

in recent years⁹ suggests that the material may not be as neatly organized as previously thought. This observation likely applies to other archival sections as well. A comprehensive understanding of the arrangement will emerge once the find-spots of all textual fragments are available.¹⁰ Evidence within the documents indicates that local scribes frequently interacted with the archival materials, possibly on a daily basis. The Central archive is indeed active, with some sections potentially more active than others. It has been argued that the archive should not be viewed merely as a storage place for tablets. Instead, it should be seen as the tangible result of a local *scriptorium*.¹¹ If this vision is correct, the documents within the archive do not cease to serve their immediate function once they are archived. Rather, they continue to serve as practice or reference texts. They are studied, checked, and copied as part of scribal training, which includes the administrative and legal texts described below.

Recently, Archi demonstrated that the process of producing, selecting, and subsequently discarding unwanted tablets was ongoing at the time of destruction.¹² However, the primary criterion for selecting tablets to be preserved is not clear. For example, several administrative sectors are underrepresented or entirely absent, such as a significant portion of cattle management from the archive's early period.

As for chancery documents as a whole and legal texts in particular, we certainly don't have at hand the full range of texts produced in antiquity. As we shall see, only a portion of the legal material appears well formed in terms of writing, grammar, and overall textual structure. Most of it seems to be the result of juxtaposing primary sources that were later discarded, or draft material exhibiting inconsistencies and aberrant writings. It must be stressed that due to steady progress in the field of Eblaitology in recent years, Ebla chancery material as a whole is now in urgent need of revision, because of cascading effects in the interpretation of the relevant lexicon.¹³ Such a task requires a tremendous effort that is beyond the scope of the present work. Therefore, the reader should be aware that the following discussion is merely a preliminary sketch, and much work remains to be done on the subject.

3 Epigraphic evidence

Within the group of chancery texts, many show a legal flavor. However, nine tablets, in particular, appear to be most closely related to the subject of law and legal regulations, as illustrated in the following table:¹⁴

⁹ Catagnoli/Fronzaroli 2020, which provide the edition of 21 new chancery texts.

¹⁰ On find spots and joins see the discussion in Scarpa 2023.

¹¹ Maiocchi 2024.

¹² Archi 2015.

¹³ See in general Kogan/Krebernik 2021. New interpretations of individual chancery texts, which have broad implications for the entire corpus, are presented in Arkhipov/Kogan 2022; Arkhipov/Kogan/Markina 2023. See also Maiocchi 2023; 2025.

¹⁴ Cf. Huddleston 2017, 99.

Table 1: Selected legal materials from Ebla

Edition	Legal parties	Genre (modern)	Genre (ancient)	Notes
ARET 13, 20	king of Ebla and king of Martu + list of PNs (as representatives ³)	Treaty	dub nidba ₂ i ₃ -ġiš	Eblaic (<i>ap</i> statements)
ARET 13, 21	king of Ebla and king of Dulu	Treaty	dub nidba ₂ i ₃ -ġiš	Eblaic (<i>ap</i> statements)
ARET 13, 5	king of Ebla and king of Abarsal	Treaty	Not stated, but note i ₃ a-e ₃ formula	“Akkadian” (<i>šumma</i> statements)
ARET 13, 18	king of Ebla and king of Armi	Treaty excerpt (school exercise ³)	Not stated, but note nidba ₂ ... i ₃ -ġiš	Eblaic (<i>ap</i> statements)
ARET 13, 6	king of Ebla and Yinḥar-Ḫalab king of Burman	Unclear (treaty excerpt or letter? Probably school exercise; unfinished)	Not stated	Unclear (<i>šumma</i> and <i>ap šumma</i> statements)
ARET 13, 10	king of Mari and Ḫenna-Damu, king of Manuwat	Letter concerning sworn agreements and territorial status quo	<i>en-ma</i>	“Akkadian” (<i>šumma</i> statements)
ARET 16, 30	(king of Ebla and king of Mari)	Treaty	Not stated ³ (fragmentary)	Eblaic (<i>ap</i> statements)
ARET 16, 1	(Ebla)	Collection of legal regulations	Not stated ³ (fragmentary)	Eblaic (<i>ap</i> statements)
ARET 18, 21	(Ebla)	Unclear (collection of legal regulations?)	Not stated ³ (fragmentary)	Unclear (<i>šumma</i> and <i>ap</i> statements)

A more detailed examination to both international law and local legal procedures is in order.

3.1 International law

By the mid-24th century BCE, the kingdom of Ebla emerges as a prominent power within an intricate network of regional political entities. The geographical scope delineated by the Ebla texts spans in fact a vast area, encompassing Anatolia, the Levant, Mesopotamia and Iran.¹⁵ It is therefore not surprising that the local archives address international matters, including dossiers concerned with geo-political developments, dynastic marriages, as well as formalized alliances. The technical term for treaty, dub nidba₂ i₃-ġiš, literally translates to “tablet of the oil offering”, with reference to the ceremony that sealed the binding agreement. With-

¹⁵ Milano 1995; Bonechi 2016; Winters 2019, 13–16; Steinkeller 2021. The possible identification of the term for Egypt in the Ebla text remains controversial, but this is not relevant for the present discussion. See Biga 2023, *contra* Archi 2022 with previous references.

in the Ebla archives, only two tablets are formally labelled as “treaties”, namely *ARET* 13, 20 (Ebla and Martu) and *ARET* 13, 21 (Ebla and Dulu). Two additional texts, namely the treaty of Ebla and Abarsal (*ARET* 13, 5) and of Ebla and Armi (*ARET* 13, 18), do not explicitly state their textual genre, but they do include the idiomatic expression $i_3 a-e_3$, literally meaning “to let the oil go away” (or similar), which is understood as “to break the oath”. Two other texts do not provide any indication of their potential status as treaties: the treaty of Ebla and Burman (*ARET* 13, 6) is probably to be considered a school exercise, while the treaty of Mari and Manuwat (*ARET* 13, 10) takes the form of a letter. From this cursory overview, it appears that the Ebla legal tradition is not a monolithic entity, especially when it comes to classify the available evidence within pre-conceived textual typologies.

The documents indeed exhibit a remarkable degree of variation in terms of phraseology, orthography, and grammar. A multitude of variables contribute to this diversity, including the dating of individual tablets, the provenance of individual texts and/or the scribe who authored them – with some chancery documents potentially originating from Mari,¹⁶ the scribal proficiency in legal matters, and the length, nature, and purpose of the documents, among others. These factors play a pivotal role in bestowing individual texts with their unique character. As a shared feature, all tablets in our list contain one or more legal regulations, which often take the form of conditional sentences. However, the actual structure varies significantly within the corpus: some texts introduce the protasis with the Akkadian term *šumma* “if”,¹⁷ others feature instead Eblaic *ap*, or even an in-between form “*ap šumma*”, while others do not mark the protasis at all – a factor that complicates the analysis (see examples below).¹⁸ As for the apodosis, it is occasionally introduced by *wa*, especially if the protasis contains *ap*, but such patterns necessitate further study beyond the scope of this contribution. Let us consider some examples here:

[1] Treaty of Ebla and Mari (*ARET* 16, 30) obv. vi 10–14 (= § 16):

š u-ra / 1 i g i / 1 l u₂ / 10 k u₃:bar₆ / TAR

“(Shall a man) strike the eye (of another) man, the judgement²¹⁹ is 10 shekels of silver”

16 Establishing a reliable list of “Mariote” features in Ebla texts is not an easy task. While copying a foreign text, Ebla scribes could in fact modify it to align with local standards and conventions (Kogan/Krebernik 2021, 667–668 with note 10). It goes without saying that such a practice adds complexity to the analysis. The most transparent example of a chancery text originating from outside the Ebla scribal milieu is the famous Enna-Dagan’s letter (*ARET* 13, 4, see most recently Winters 2019, 30–66). The Ebla archives certainly include tablets of southern Mesopotamian origin, such as monolingual lexical lists, incantations, as well as literary compositions.

17 In some texts *su-ma* may be an Akkadogram, but this requires more study.

18 On *ap* see Fronzaroli 1981; Maiocchi 2025; cf. also Cohen 2007.

19 Reading and meaning of TAR remain difficult. For a possible connection with *di ku₅* “to judge” see the comments in Catagnoti/Fronzaroli 2010, 193 (tentatively accepted here).

[2] Treaty of Ebla and Abarsal (*ARET* 13, 5) rev. vii 8–16:

iti *i-si* / *su-ma* / *ib-la*^{ki} / *a-bar-SAL*₄^{ki} / *šu šu-ra* / *ug₇* / *du-tum* /
50 *udu:nita* / *hi-na-sum*

“(In) the month of Isi, if (a man of) Ebla kills (a man of) Abarsal (in a) brawl, he shall give 50 rams as *blood money*²⁰”

[3] Collection of legal regulations (*ARET* 16, 1)²¹ obv. iv 2–22:

1 NA-*SEI I* *ma* / 1 NA-*SEI I* / *ug₇* / *wa* / *du₁₁-ga* / *ugula ka₂* /
si-in / *en* / *wa* / KA.UNKEN / *ka₂* / [...] / *mu-[x]* / *ze₂-S[U₃]* /
ugula ka₂ / *ap* / *dumu-nita* / *ug₇* / *ki* / *a-mu-SU₃* / *inim ġar*

“Shall a man kill another man, the gate supervisor shall report (it) to the king, then *the gate* will assemble, the gate supervisor ... ; if (his) son (later?) dies(?), his father shall claim (back) the landholding.”

Given the diverse nature of the available evidence, differences in procedural aspects are expected. On the contrary, stylistic and lexicographic differences are perhaps more surprising. Remarkably, well-formed documents coexist with draft and excerpt texts. An example of the latter category is the above-mentioned *ARET* 13, 6. The text is written on a relatively small tablet, recording several regulations concerning Ebla and Burman. It is noteworthy that the name of the foreign king is explicitly stated – an uncommon feature in the extant treaty materials. The document is clearly unfinished: the last readable textual box contains the word *šumma*, followed by an erased case. The final column is blank. These facts suggest that the document may have been a scribal exercise. The apparent goal was to familiarize the scribe with legal terminology and formulations. This impression is further reinforced by the frequent use of phonetic forms, as opposed to logographic ones. This could potentially be a result of dictation, or an integral part of the exercise, although this remains speculative.

Conversely, the treaties of Ebla and Abarsal (*ARET* 13, 5), as well as that of Ebla and Mari (*ARET* 16, 30) serve as examples of formulaic texts structured in rigid logical blocks. The former is perhaps the most complex chancery document of all. Its structure is schematically represented in the following table:

20 On *du-tum* as blood money see Fronzaroli 2002; 2003, 60.

21 On this text see the comments below 3.2.

Table 2: Text structure of ARET 13, 5

Textual unit	§	Content	Notes
Introduction	1–19	List of all cities and territories that are in the hands of Ebla and Abarsal respectively	
Legal prov. (1)	20–24	Insults against the gods, the king, or the country	
	27	Regulations for caravans travelling abroad	
Statement (1)	28	“If you speak, the king of Ebla will listen; if you don’t, you have failed the oath”	Statement (1) likely refers to §§ 20–27
Legal prov. (2)	29	Water provisions for travelers	+ Counterfactual conditional
	30–31	Regulations on dead oxen	+ Counterfactual conditional
	32	Issues with purchases	+ Counterfactual conditional
	33–34	Issues with revenues	+ Counterfactual conditional
Statement (2)	36	“Thus says the king of Ebla to Abarsal”	
Legal prov. (3)	37	Travel restrictions (to Ebla via Abarsal)	+ Counterfactual conditional
Statement (2)	38	“Thus says the king of Ebla to Abarsal”	+ Counterfactual conditional
Legal prov. (4)	39	Travel permissions (to Ebla via Abarsal from allied countries)	Special cases of regulations in § 37
	40–41	Evil rumors	+ Counterfactual conditional
	42–45	River trade	
	46	Cultic provisions	+ Counterfactual conditional
	47–50	Murder and physical injuries(?)	
	51–52	Slave(?) redemption	
	53–54	Oxen and sheep	
	55–56	Hospitality customs	+ Counterfactual conditional
	57	Murder (Abarsal only)	Special cases for regulations in § 47
	58–59	Hospitality(?)	
	59	Theft	
	60–63	Illicit sexual intercourse	
	1’	Unclear	

Textual unit	§	Content	Notes
Statement (2)	2'	"Thus says the king of Ebla to Abarsal"	
Legal prov. (5)	3'–4'	Illicit acquisition of property of dead travelers	
End	5'	Curse formula	

The text is in fact very difficult to understand. A thorough analysis would require more space, but one notes its apparent redundancy and weak internal structure. For instance, the counterfactual conditional clause, which takes the form "If you don't do such-and-such, you will break the oath" is very frequent, especially in the central portion of the text. However, it does not seem to be a systemic feature. The same applies to the statement "Thus says the king of Ebla to Abarsal", which appears to be distributed almost randomly within the text. Furthermore, certain topics resurface more than once: travel permissions are addressed in §37, but special cases are appended in §39, after the king's speech formula; murder is discussed in §47, but special cases pertaining solely to Abarsal are introduced in §57. Let us consider the following example:

[4] Treaty of Ebla and Abarsal (ARET 13, 5) rev. ii 8–iv 4:
 en / ib-la^{ki} / 'a₅-na / a-bar-SAL₄^{ki} / ba-li / 'a₅-na / KALAM-TIM / ma-na-ma /
 nu-kas₄-kas₄ / an-da-[ma] / [kas₄-kas₄] / i₃ a-e₃ / an-na-ma / du₁₁-ga /
 kas₄-kas₄ / en-ma / en / ib-la^{ki} / 'a₅-na / a-bar-SAL₄^{ki} / kak-mi-um^{ki} / ba-
 zu-wa-an^{ki} / NI-ra-ar^{ki} / in-i / šeš-šeš / 2 ud / 3 ud / me-na-^{ma} / ['a₅-
 na] / [KALAM-TIM] / kas₄-kas₄ / 'a₃-na-sa / nu-kas₄-kas₄ / i₃ a-e₃
 "Thus (says) the king of Ebla to Abarsal: You shall not allow anyone to travel to (my) country without my permission. If you do allow (anyone) to travel, you will be unfaithful to the oath'. But if I say so, they shall travel (to my country). Thus (says) the king of Ebla to Abarsal: Shall the lands of Kakmium, Hassuwan, (and) Nlrrar turn into my allies, (after) two (or) three days you shall let whatever (goods) travel to my country. If you don't let, you will be unfaithful to the oath."

The mention of specific toponyms here is undoubtedly dictated by the actual geopolitical situation. However, the formulation is not general in nature (i.e. it does not concern allies *tout court*). This fact may suggest the sentence in [4] is taken straight out of diplomatic correspondence – now lost – tied to specific events. Similar considerations apply to other textual segments as well. The overall impression is that of a juxtaposition of blocks copied from different sources. As for the ductus of ARET 16, 5, it appears highly calligraphic – perhaps the finest example of a piece of writing within the Ebla archives.²² This fact suggests that the sources might

22 As already noted by Winters 2019, 167 with note 409.

have been incorporated as is, without significant effort to harmonize the content into a coherent whole. The dual nature of this document –almost rough content versus careful execution– could be explained by considerations of both legal and sacred nature. On the one hand, the scribe may have been unwilling to alter the original binding agreement(s). On the other hand, the sworn statements were undoubtedly performed in front of the gods, who served as ultimate guarantors. Any deviation from the original might have been perceived as potentially fraudulent, therefore prompting divine intervention.

3.2 Local legal procedures: further remarks on *ARET 16, 1* and *ARET 18, 21*

Going back to Table 1, the last two items listed there – namely *ARET 16, 1* and *ARET 18, 21* – require further comments. Their status as texts containing legal provisions is in fact not firmly established. A comprehensive analysis of these challenging texts lies beyond the scope of the present contribution. For brevity, the following analysis is limited to macroscopic features and selected points of interest, which suffice to draw certain conclusions. Both documents are exceedingly difficult to understand due to their archaic nature. As a shared feature, the text appears structured in segments with an impersonal character, employing lexicon typically associated with legal matters. P. Fronzaroli, the editor of these texts, understood them as a collection of exemplary administrative episodes involving unnamed individuals facing various issues (such as field management, murder, inheritance, etc.).²³ Drawing on parallels from later law collections (such as the *Laws of Hammurapi*, the *Middle Assyrian Laws*, etc.), it is however possible to understand the content of *ARET 16, 1* in terms of well-formed legal regulations, arranged in casuistic forms. The same interpretation may apply to most of *ARET 18, 21*. This new perspective suggests that law collections as a genre are likely attested well before the *Laws of Ur-Namma*.²⁴ This is not surprising, given that institutional regulations of legal nature existed at least from the Late Uruk period onward. Evidence from the so-called ancient Kudurru inscriptions supports this view, and urbanization during the late Early Dynastic period is certainly mature enough to produce such documents.²⁵ However, caution is necessary when comparing these texts to later law collections.

23 Fronzaroli describes the content of *ARET 16, 1* as follows: “In conclusione il documento può essere considerato come una raccolta di episodi esemplificativi di comportamenti dell’amministrazione (e anche di comportamenti fraudolenti ai quali i funzionari avrebbero dovuto porre attenzione), molto vicina per la sua spersonalizzazione alle raccolte di leggi più tarde” (Catagonti/Fronzaroli 2010, 11). As for *ARET 18, 21*, Fronzaroli states that “Nei limiti della conservazione molto frammentaria, questo testo sembra costituito da una raccolta di episodi esemplari, senza che sia possibile stabilirne l’origine.” (Catagonti/Fronzaroli 2020, 103).

24 On the *Laws of Ur-Namma*, see most recently Wilcke 2014 with previous literature and the contribution by Manuel Molina in this volume.

25 See remarks in Westbrook 2003, 1. See also Wilcke 2007, 18–21 on legal evidence from the Late Uruk and Early Dynastic periods.

While some parallels exist, unexpected deviations also occur. Additionally, comparing the content of these two texts to local royal decrees presents interpretative challenges. Likewise, comparing them to later court records remains difficult due to inherent complexities in interpreting Ebla material. The issue here is both philological and methodological in nature, as it is hard to establish how reliable a candidate parallel is, and in case of multiple possible interpretations, what parallel should be given priority. Let us consider for instance the following textual sections:²⁶

[5] Collection of legal regulations (*ARET* 16, 1) obv. iv 23–vi 5:

1 NA-SE / I -ma / al₆ / 1 dam-SU3 / 1 NA-SE / I / šu-du₈ / [w]a / keš₂-da-SU3 / wa / e₃-SU3 / bar-²a₃-ti-iš / 1 uru^{ki} / wa / maškim-e-[gi₄-SU3[?]] / [...] / [...] / [...] / [...] / [...] / [...] -ma / ug₇ / 2 ug₇ / ap / su-wa-ma / ti-la / wa / 2 ti-¹la¹ / ap / ¹ug₇¹ / ba-li / dug₃ / wa / ug₇ / ug₇-SU3 / 1 dam

“(Shall) a man hold (or capture/seize etc.) another man upon his woman (or wife): he shall bind them and he shall take them out in the middle of the town and he shall send(?) [them?] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...] [...] he (= the husband) shall kill both of them. If (instead) he allows (her) to live, then both of them shall live; (but) if he kills (him) without mercy, then he shall also kill her, the woman.”²⁷

[6] Collection of legal regulations (*ARET* 16, 1) obv. vii 9–ix 13:

1 dumu-mi₂ / 1 NA-SE / I / 1 NA-SE / I / niĝ₂-kar / in / ki / niĝ₂-kar / ¹dam¹-SU3 / ħi-mu-DU / ug₇-ma / 1 dam / ki-SU3 / 1

²⁶ As a special convention, transliteration distinguishes between numerals written with cuneiform signs, which appear in italics, and numerals written in curviform, which appear in Roman type. On the use of cuneiform versus curviform numerals in Early Dynastic sources see most recently Gori 2024, 133–134, 160–161, 200, 207.

²⁷ See the discussion in Maiocchi 2025. Parallels in *Middle Assyrian Laws* A § 15 “If a man should seize another man upon his wife and they prove the charges against him and find him guilty, they shall kill both of them; there is no liability for him (= husband). If he should seize him and bring him either before the king or the judges, and they prove the charges against him and find him guilty – if the woman’s husband kills his wife, then he shall also kill the man; if he cuts off his wife’s nose, he shall turn the man into a eunuch and they shall lacerate his entire face; but if [he wishes to release] his wife, he shall [release] the man” (Roth 1997). A similar treatment for the two lovers, which are either to be both spared or both killed, is found in the *Laws of Hammurapi* § 129: “If a man’s wife should be seized lying with another male, they shall bind them and cast them into the water; if the wife’s master allows his wife to live, then the king shall allow his subject (i.e. the other male) to live” (Roth 1995; 1997). Further variations of the same practice are attested in *Hittite Laws* § 198: “If he (= the husband) brings them to the palace gate and says: ‘Let my wife not be put to death’, and spares his wife, he must also spare the lover” (Hoffner 1997). The theme of binding the lover to the bed is found also in a court record from Nippur, namely IM 28051 (thanks go to Sophie Démare-Lafont for pointing this out to me, see her comments in Lafont 1999, 308–309, 494–495). Previous interpretation in *ARET* 16, 1 obv. iv 17–vi 5 (= §§ 10–14, Catagnoti/Fronzaroli 2010, 3–4).

dumu-nita-SU3 / inim ġar / wa / bar-ʾa3-ti / šeš-šeš-SU3 / uz[u]-
 SU3 / inim ġar / ap / nu ġal2 / 1 dumu-nita / 1 dam / ki / ʾsi1-in /
 BAD-SU3 / gi4 / gu4-gu4 / udu-udu / lu2 ku-li / niġ2-kar / a-mu /
 1 dumu-mi2 / šu-du8 / di-ku / 2 di-ku / di-ku / wa / i-sa-gur / 1
 NA-SE11 / ʾ1 gu41-3 / [(xʾ)] ʾd1a3-da / i3-na-sum / ap / en / si-in / SI /
 GIŠGAL-SU3 / ap / ki-SU3 / SA.Z[Ax] ʾki1 / inim ġar

“Shall a man (forcibly) drag away the daughter of (another) man, he shall hand over his wife in the (very) spot (where) he dragged (her) away, and shall (his) wife (later?) die, her son may claim her *landholding*, and then within his brothers he may *claim his meat*. If however there is no son-of-a-wife, the *landholding* shall revert to its owner; the father shall drag away oxen (and) sheep of the “best man”; he (= the distrainer) shall hold the daughter; the judge will give a second judgement and (the judgement) says ‘the man shall give a three year old ox [(...)] (to) Hadda’. If however the king ... then(!?) the palace shall claim her landholding.”²⁸

[7] Collection of legal regulations (ARET 16, 1) obv. ix 14–x 11:

1 nu-zuḥ / 1 e2 / 1 NA-SE1 / / nu-zuḥ / wa / ug7-SU3 / BAD e2 /
 gu4-gu4-SU3 / udu-udu-SU3 / BAD e2 / šu-du8 / ap / ti-la / nu-
 zuḥ / si-in / SI / en / ħi-mu-DU-SU3 / ap / ki / nu-zuḥ / 1 dumu-
 nita-SU3 / inim ġar

“Shall a thief steal (something in) the house of another man, the owner of the house shall kill him/her. Then the owner of the house shall seize his/her oxen and sheep. But if he makes the thief live, he shall bring him/her to the ... of the king, then(?) his/her son shall claim the landholding of the thief.”²⁹

In addition to addressing murder and abduction, ARET 16, 1 deals with regulations concerning barley and sesame, fornication/adultery, theft, loss of animals, an unclear topic, and the purchase of animals. Both ARET 16, 1 and ARET 18, 21

28 See Maiocchi 2023. Parallel in *Middle Assyrian Laws* A §55, although the formulation there is richer in details: “If a man forcibly seizes and rapes a maiden who is residing in her father’s house, [...] who is not betrothed(?), whose [womb(?)] is not opened, who is not married, and against whose father’s house there is no outstanding claim whether within the city or in the countryside, or at night whether in the main thoroughfare, or in a granary, or during the city festival — the father of the maiden shall take the wife of the fornicator of the maiden and hand her over to be raped; he shall not return her to her husband, but he shall take (and keep?) her; the father shall give his daughter who is the victim of fornication into the protection of the household of her fornicator. If he (the fornicator) has no wife, the fornicator shall give “triple” the silver as the value of the maiden to her father; her fornicator shall marry her; he shall not reject(?) her. If the father does not desire it so, he shall receive “triple” silver for the maiden, and he shall give his daughter in marriage to whomever he chooses”.

29 The editor of the text offers a different segmentation and interpretation, which rests on the understanding of obv. x 11 *et passim* as {1} nu inim “non vi fu un ordine”. The sequence is to be read 1 nu-zuḥ, which undoubtedly means “thief”, requiring no emendation.

are fragmentary, complicating their analysis. More in detail, the very beginning of *ARET* 16, 1 (one or perhaps two textual cases) is broken away, with scattered sections throughout the body and most of the final column also broken or entirely missing. Conversely, the beginning of *ARET* 18, 21 is preserved up to the middle of the first column, but significant breaks occur in both the obverse and reverse, particularly at the end. Despite their poor condition, it is evident that the extant portions of the tablets do not allow for a prologue-epilogue structure that would frame the content within a clear ideological framework. While it is not entirely ruled out that the missing parts at the end of both *ARET* 16, 1 and *ARET* 18, 21 may have originally included a colophon identifying the text as provisions of the king, this remains speculative. *ARET* 18, 21 is in fact most challenging. The tablet is one of the largest within the chancery document group.³⁰ Selected portions of the text appear to use terminology found in *ARET* 16, 1 and *ARET* 13, 5 as well.³¹ This fact, along with the segmentation into protasis and apodosis blocks, the absence of personal names, and the overall archival context, strongly suggests that *ARET* 18, 21 falls between *ARET* 16, 1 and *ARET* 13, 5 in terms of textual typology. However, a proper understanding of it remains problematic.³²

4 Conclusions

The paper showed that the Ebla legal evidence is highly diverse and complex. Accordingly, it is crucial to evaluate the documents with textual criticism in mind and on a case-by-case basis to avoid unwarranted generalizations. Methodological issues in establishing reliable parallels, along with inherent philological problems, suggest caution in comparative analysis, especially when it comes to study possible variations in individual legal cases.

Despite these limitations, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the nature of the texts and their function within their primary archival and social settings. Some texts, such as the treaty of Ebla and Abarsal, provide substantial ev-

30 As Catagnoti/Fronzaroli 2020, 103 remark, the tablet originally had 26 columns on both sides, each having 22 textual cases.

31 A provisional and by no means complete list of the shared terminology include: 2 di-ku₅ “second judge/judgment”, a-mu-SU₃ “his father”, BAD “owner” (written BAD e₂ in *ARET* 16, 1), dumu-mi₂ “daughter”, dumu-nita “son”, GIŠ-sur_x “oath”, ki “landholding”, KI:LAM₇ “market”, ku₂ “to have the usufruct” (possibly to be read in im ġar “to claim”), NA-SE₁₁ “man”, niġ₂-sa₁₀ “to purchase”, šeš-SU₃ “his brother”, šu-du₈ “to seize”, ti-la “to live” (likely in the sense of “to make someone live”), uġ₇ “to die” (likely in the sense of “to have someone killed”), u₂zu “meat” (likely in the sense of “movable assets within the inheritance share”). Peculiar to *ARET* 16, 21 is the term al-bu₁₅ “to harvest” (Catagnoti/Fronzaroli 2020, 25, 103, 105). See also provisional remarks in Catagnoti/Fronzaroli 2020, 103, stressing possible connections at the level of terminology between *ARET* 18, 21 and other chancery documents, namely *ARET* 7, 152, *ARET* 13, 12, *ARET* 16, 28, and *ARET* 16, 27. The entire matter clearly deserves further study.

32 As a mere guess, the text may concern marriage regulations, including agreements and procedures preceding the actual wedding (note the mention of niġ₂-mu-sa₂ in reduplicated form in v i 3), with details on bride price, usufruct on landholding, and inheritance.

idence on international law. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that we are missing a piece of the puzzle. Are such texts final? Is the Ebla chancery at odds in producing a coherent document of substantial length? Is coherence even relevant to ancient scribes? On a different note, some texts clearly have the character of draft material, such as the treaty of Ebla and Burman. This does not imply that their content is a mere invention of the local scribal milieu, but rather that we should bear in mind their nature for the purpose of historical reconstruction. Regardless of these issues, the collections of legal regulations provide more theoretical reflections, which seem to have already matured by the mid-third millennium BCE. This is evident from the internal structure of such texts, arranged in casuistic formulations, as well as from the adopted phraseology. As for the role played by legal documents within the chancery document group, and more generally within the rest of the archive, it seems likely that legal sources also served the purpose of scribal education. Notably, several chancery documents address local situations that closely resemble those in legal collections: murder, theft, physical injuries, marriage, inheritance issues, ownership rights, penalties, residence permits, etc.³³ Therefore, the legal texts presented here would serve as an excellent means for scribe to acquire the knowledge necessary to write down these texts. From this perspective, a more nuanced interpretation of the Ebla legal material may be put forward, as many documents seem to live somewhere between theory and praxis, between scribal education and normative texts.

Text editions

ARET 7

See Archi 1988.

ARET 13

See Fronzaroli 2003.

ARET 16

See Catagnoli/Fronzaroli 2010.

ARET 18

See Catagnoli/Fronzaroli 2020.

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33 Maiocchi 2025.

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