

The Pathos of the divine existence in Mesopotamia: Reconstruction of a cycle through text and image

Isabel Gomes de Almeida*

Maria de Fátima Rosa**

RES Antiquitatis 1 (2019): 128-142

Abstract

According to the *Epic of Gilgameš*, the Anunnakki reserved eternal life for themselves, bestowing mortality to Humankind, at the moment of its creation. This distinguished unequivocally the superiority of the first over the latter.

However, Mesopotamian deities showed feelings, sensibilities and behaviors similar to those experienced by their worshippers. Numerous narratives present evidences for this *humanity*, allowing the possibility to analyze the questions deities had to deal with on different stages of their existence. The mirrored effect between the divine and human actors can even be identified in the possibility of divine death, which obviously, was never definite.

Based on the analysis of mythopoetic and iconographic sources, we aim to reconstruct a narrative which displays the Mesopotamian divine *pathos*, exploring the several levels of deities' existential cycle.

Keywords: Mesopotamian Deities; Existential Cycle; literary and iconographic sources.

Date of submission: 3/1/2018

Date of approval: 7/3/2018

* CHAM & Departamento de História, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. E-mail: isalmeida@fcsh.unl.pt.

** CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. E-mail: froso@fcsh.unl.pt.

The *Pathos* of the divine existence in Mesopotamia: Reconstruction of a cycle through text and image¹

Isabel Gomes de Almeida
Maria de Fátima Rosa

For the Mesopotamians, the understanding of the world/cosmos was achieved by creating mythical narratives, where deities played a central role on the phenomenological cause-effect process. The divine figures were responsible for establishing and legitimating a cosmic order, controlling natural phenomena and, therefore, fate². This explanatory exercise resulted on a system of knowledge, which Jean Bottéro characterized as a «philosophy in images» (Bottéro 2004, 54). The *topoi* we identify in the divine actions were displayed both in literary and in iconographic compositions and replicated, to some extent, the events of the human world³. Hence, the mythological narratives served to appease the anxieties felt by Mesopotamians, about the present and the future of their lives.

In simple terms, Mesopotamian deities were understood as an enhanced version of humankind: they were immortal, exhibited a youthful strength, and a profound knowledge of everything. Their **melammu**⁴ granted them a mighty vital force and charisma, which confirmed their transcendental nature. Nevertheless, these extraordinary qualities were not enough to protect the divine beings from problems, and even from deep pain. Like humans, they too had to face conflicts, and cope with loss.

¹ This paper had the support of CHAM (FCSH/NOVA-UAc), through the strategic project sponsored by FCT (UID/HIS/04666/2013).

² We should remember that, for the Mesopotamians, the natural world was impregnated by the presence of divine figures, which led to the construction of a rather theocentric religious system (Bottéro 2004, 55). Since this paper addresses a theme within the field of History of Religions, we should also stress two other main aspects, which have significantly contributed to the nature and identity of the Mesopotamian religious system: it was cumulative and, therefore, deeply connected with the historical processes.

By being cumulative, Mesopotamian religious thought «consists of a recurring pattern of embracing common traditions and introducing new innovations while alleging their antiquity. The sense of tradition brings legitimacy.» (Odisho 2004, 3). At the same time, the events, and possible changes, within the day-to-day life, would contribute to the way the divine world was perceived. Alan Lenzi (2007, 126), for instance, finds a connection between the economic activities of ancestral Eridu and the character and functions of Enki/Ea, its patron god.

So, one can say that a cumulative nature, which integrates the transformation due to the historical processes, produces a quite dynamic religious system with a common identity, which encompasses permanence and change. These characteristics allow for a transversal analysis, which is the case with this paper.

³ For instance, the *topos* of the perfect ruler, which runs through the royal hymnic tradition, is also displayed in mythical narratives, such as *Enūma eliš* or the *Epic of Gilgameš*, where a deity (Marduk) or a semi-divine figure (Gilgameš) present themselves as role-models for earthly rulers.

⁴ According to Emelianov (2007, 1109-1110), **melammu** finds its roots in a Sumerian composite name, **me-lam**, where **me** stands for vital force, and **lam** for fire or flame. Therefore, its etymological meaning points to a notion of a “vital flame”, which would be used as a kind of ornament by the divine beings.

With this paper, we wish to address the *pathos* of the divine existence, in which the *humanity* of the deities was highlighted. By reconstructing their cycle of life, we intend to give some insights regarding the mirrored relation between deities and human beings, thus shedding some light on the Mesopotamian mental framework⁵.

The divine family

Sumerian and Akkadian literary traditions give us clues about the birth of the older deities, who were begot by the deified primordial ocean. In Sumerian accounts, Namma⁶ is defined as «the primeval mother who gave birth to the senior gods» (*ETCSL 1.1.2, 12-23*). As for the Babylonian epic of creation, *Enūma eliš*, it is stated: «When skies above were not yet named, nor earth below pronounced by name, Apsû, the first one, their begetter, and maker Tīāmat, who bore them all, had mixed their waters together (...) then gods were born within them» (Dalley 2000, 233). Though there are some differences between the narratives⁷, the fact is that the senior deities had primeval parents. When they reached adulthood, it was expected for them to procreate as well. The birth of new deities' generations set in motion an endless process of rejuvenation in the pantheon.

In this first level of divine existence, where procreation and parenthood stood out, we identify a profound mirrored effect between the divine and the human spheres: just like their deities, Mesopotamians longed for progeny, which would allow for a constant renewal and continuity of their household and identity⁸.

On another level, the divine universe seemed to be organized in nuclear families [Fig. 1]⁹, which were interconnected, through the shared bonds that went back to their primeval parents. Accordingly, the pantheon was envisioned as a large clan, where deities had close genealogical ties with each other. Again, we identify a resemblance with the Mesopotamian society, which tried to encompass an urban world, organized mainly in nuclear families, with a semi-nomadic one, structured in macro-families (Sanmartín 1999, 26-31). The

⁵ Our reconstruction will be based both on textual and on iconographical data, since there is an imperative need to use different typologies of sources, in a combined analysis, in order to accomplish an enriched interpretation of the past. Given the wide time span of Mesopotamian History, we were forced to select only a few documents. We decided to choose those which relate to the III and early II millennia BC, a long period in which the identity of this civilization was consolidated, through syncretic processes between the Sumerian and the Semitic backgrounds.

⁶ This deity's early presence in the Mesopotamian religious system is clearly attested by its mention in the Fara deities' lists (c. 2600 BC). Though becoming less important over time, Namma still appears in references dated to the reign of Nabonidus (Krebernik 1986, 176).

⁷ While in the Akkadian composition, the primeval divine ocean is perceived as a pair of deities, reflecting the figures of "father" and "mother", within the Sumerian tradition Namma stood for «a goddess without a spouse, the self-procreating womb, the primal matter, the inherently female and fertilizing waters of the abzu» (Leick 1994, 16).

⁸ Mesopotamians were deeply concerned about progeny, since children meant not only a reinforcement of the labor force within the family, but also the possibility of continuity of the household and the family name. On another level, descendants would perform the cultic activities for their dead ancestors, which would appease their residual existence in the Netherworld (Bottéro 1987, 513-514). For more information about Mesopotamian funerary cults, namely in what concerns the III millennium BC, *vide* Cohen 2005.

⁹ In this impression of a cylinder seal dated to the Early Dynastic Period, we identify two adult anthropomorphic figures, a male and a female, who flank what seems to be a child. Because the figures are depicted enthroned and wearing the horned crown – a symbol for divinity – we can identify them as deities. Plus, they seem to be receiving offerings from a human, in a clear allusion to a cultic moment. This scene might, therefore, be understood as a depiction of a nuclear divine family.

dimorphic characteristic of the Mesopotamian society seemed, thus, to be echoed on the world above.



Fig. 1. Impression of a cylinder seal dated to the Early Dynastic period. Probable depiction of a divine family (image extracted from Amiet 1980, 463 – Sammlung Hahn nr. 53).

Moreover, the Mesopotamian deities' lists seem to be organized by family ties and functions, which leads us to think of family trades within the divine world¹⁰. And again, we find a link with the human society, where it is possible to identify a hereditary logic in the functions or offices occupied by the same family, throughout generations¹¹.

In sum, when we observe the inner organization of the divine sphere we recognize an intense reflection of the logic which structured the world embraced by the Tigris and the Euphrates. And this configuration based on family bonds set the tone for both divine and human actions throughout life.

The teen years¹²

Though divine infancy was not a common topic¹³, the teen years were highly depicted. The adolescent turmoil seemed to impel the young deities to act out, displaying a need for self-discover, and, of course, for testing the limits imposed by the older generations. The

¹⁰ «Ever since the gods acquired their anthropomorphic character, the theologians have engaged in grouping them into generations and families, whereby the rank and function of a given god was determined by his genetic relationship to another god in the pantheon» (Klein 2001, 279).

On another occasion, we analyzed the relationship between Nanna/Sin and their children, Utu/Šamaš, and Inanna/Ištar, where we identified each deity's cosmic function deeply connected, just like a family trade. (Almeida and Rosa 2016)

¹¹ «Usually a son learned his father's trade or profession by observing and helping at an early age. He was able to take over his father's position in due time, as a scribe, an artisan, and so on. (...) Some scribal families can be traced through several generations» (Nemet-Nejat 1998, 150).

¹² Harris (2000, 23) argues that Mesopotamians probably did not acknowledge the adolescent phase as a period in between infancy and adulthood. However, the author agrees there was a distinction between early and mature adulthood. Accordingly, we use "teenager" and "adolescent" as operative terms to refer to the early stage of adulthood.

¹³ The possible exception was the god Damu, a deity connected with healing powers, just like his mother, the goddess Ninisina (also known as Gula). In the composition *Ningišzida's journey to the Netherworld* (ETCSL 1.7.3, 4-10) Damu is referred as a young boy, being the direct translation of his name, «the good child» (Alster 1972, 12).

teenagers' rebellions were but a step into molding the character of the soon-to-be grown up deities, whether in terms of their place within their household or within the divine society.

The young deities expressed their energy and their continuous activity through noise and fuss, thus conflicting with their begetters. The noise/silence binomial was an important subject in Mesopotamian mythology, being recurrently associated with another crucial theme: the tension between chaos and order¹⁴. As far as the relation between older and younger divine beings is concerned, this binomial was used to show the conflict amid the age-specific behaviors of each group. As Harris (1992, 630) stated «the old want to rest by day and sleep by night; the young want to dance and play».

Enūma eliš shows a clear depiction about this topic. After Apsû and Tiāmat had created their progeny, «the gods of that generation would meet together, and disturb Tiāmat, and their clamor reverberated» (Dalley 2000, 233). The uproar of the young ones, though distressing to the elders, could not be controlled¹⁵.

An interesting episode follows this event, which allows us to peek into the dynamics between the primordial couple. Apsû, tired of all this noise, discussed with his consort what they could do to get some peace and rest. His solution was rather drastic – he proposed to destroy their progeny. Furiously, Tiāmat denied such possibility: «How could we allow what we ourselves created to perish? Even though their ways are so grievous, we should bear it patiently» (Dalley 2000, 234). The well-known Mesopotamian personification of the chaotic forces, displays here a protective and even permissive¹⁶ behavior towards their children, echoing the maternal role of married women within human households¹⁷.

Likewise, it is possible to identify a tension between father and mother, which is interesting since by law the *pater familias* had full authority over his wife and children (Sanmartín 1999, 27-28). However, Tiāmat's disagreement forced Apsû to find other ways to make sure his will would be carried out. The discussion between the primeval parents might allude to the marital problems couples had to face throughout their marriage.

Nevertheless, the uproar of the younger deities in *Enūma eliš* was the trigger to an intense episode of parricide¹⁸, and further ahead, the same frenzy acts precipitated the cosmic battle, between the old and the new generations¹⁹, which resulted in the victory of the latter. Both episodes allude to a generation clash, where the frenetic youngsters acted out,

¹⁴ When Utnapištim narrates the diluvial event to the mythical king of Uruk in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* it is underlined the uproar of the tempest which was followed by silence, when the waters held back (Dalley 2000, 113). As it is well known, the diluvium was understood as the return to the primeval chaotic stage and the times that followed it as a new orderly period.

¹⁵ «Apsû could not quell their noise, and Tiāmat became mute before them» (Dalley 2000, 233).

¹⁶ «However grievous their behavior to her, however bad their ways, she would indulge them» (Dalley 2000, 233).

¹⁷ The main purpose for the Mesopotamian women was to get married and to bear children. Consequently, they acted in a protective way towards themselves, while pregnant, and towards the children after they were born. Nemet-Nejat (1999, 88, 92-93) speaks about different types of prenatal cares and also the period of nursing, which took 2 to 3 years. However, both parents were deeply connected with their children. Harris (2000, 11-15) evokes several examples of affection between parents and children, such as the singing of lullabies to calm down the crying babies or the play time with their parents or even grandparents.

¹⁸ We must remember that to protect himself and his siblings from their father's rage, Ea kills Apsû. About this topic, *vide* Jacobsen 1976, 186 and ff.

¹⁹ When Marduk plays with the four winds Anu gave him, he «made the flood-wave and stirred up Tiāmat. Tiāmat was stirred up, and heaved restlessly day and night» (Dalley 2000, 236).

provoking the elders by means of their juvenile energy and enthusiasm, which in time turned into a more intense confrontation. On their part, the senior deities «have shifted from a mode of “active mastery” to one of “passive mastery”, from “aggressive, competitive behavior” to “apathy and immobility”» (Harris 1993, 112). Similarly, we can identify the same transitional process, on the other way around, that is, the teen deities becoming more relevant, or active amongst their society, signalled the final moments of their coming of age process.

Yet extremely difficult and dramatic, this divine generation clash evoked the natural replacement of leadership within human family/society, where the new adults, eventually, ought to take the place of the elder, in what concerned the leading tasks.

On another level, the *topos* of love can also contribute to the depiction of the frenetic enthusiasm associated with the juvenile deities. Inanna and Dumuzi's love cycle appears as one of the most fertile *corpus* to analyze this topic, since it displays vivid images of the two young lovers' behaviors²⁰.

Inanna and Dumuzi were deeply enamored with each other²¹, showing the natural excitement of the first love. However, there were rules to be obeyed, which were surveilled by Inanna's family members. Utu, the brother, seemed to perform the role of the *pater familias*, making sure the courtship protocol was being followed²². Ningal, the mother of the goddess, took up the role of chaperon, supervising the visits paid by Dumuzi to his lover²³.

Within human society, marriages were arranged between the male members of each family, normally the fathers or, in their absence, the older sons. The agreement stipulated the dowry of the bride and the offerings the groom should present to his soon-to-be-wife (Nemet-Nejat 1998, 133-135). The meetings between the betrothed couple were highly controlled by their families, just like in the case of Inanna and Dumuzi.

Still, the two divine lovers tried to bend these rules, and successfully met alone on several occasions. It was a time for them to experience and discover their bodies, engaging in the sexual act [Fig. 2]²⁴. They would give in to their desire for one another, taking time in their

²⁰ Lapinkivi (2004, 29) identifies more than fifty poems/songs which belong to this cycle. Given the limited space, we chose to analyze only 5 compositions.

²¹ «My dearest, my dearest, my dearest, my darling, my honey of her own mother, my sappy vine, my honey-sweet, my honey-mouthed of her mother!» (ETCSL 4.08.02, 1-3)

²² In one of the poems, the action revolves around a dialogue between Utu and Inanna, who is extremely excited with the proximity of her wedding, and poses several questions regarding the subject. To each and every one, Utu kindly reinsures the maiden that everything is prepared for her to meet and marry her lover (ETCSL 4.08.01).

²³ One of Inanna and Dumuzi's love songs depicts Ningal opening the door of her house in order for the groom to meet his fiancée, in what we can consider a legitimate meeting of the pair (ETCSL 4.08.29, segment B 11-23). On another occasion, Dumuzi presents himself at Ningal's gate, and Inanna, in a rush of excitement and, eager to meet him, desperately asks for someone to warn her mother so that she can finally embrace him (ETCSL 4.08.08, segment B 1-13)

²⁴ It is not common to find depictions of naked deities in Mesopotamian iconography. Asher-Greeve and Sweeney (2006, 126, 129) allude to the hypothesis that it could be considered disrespectful to depict deities without their garments. These were not only adornments but also symbols of power, and therefore, a deity could be considered vulnerable while naked. Still, the authors identify an exception in Old Babylonian terracotta reliefs, just like the one evoked here. Even if there is no certainty if the pair corresponds to a divine or a human couple, the scene evokes the love-making between Inanna and Dumuzi.

love-making²⁵. However, the pair was also depicted quarrelling, and even showing jealous and possessive feelings towards one another, something typical of a juvenile love²⁶.

Interestingly, though displaying a rather reckless behavior when running out to these meetings, Inanna seemed preoccupied at some point with the possible repercussions of her absence. She was anxious and addressed Dumuzi with this problem, who replied:

«"Let me teach you, let me teach you! Inana, let me teach you the lies of women: "My girlfriend was dancing with me in the square. She ran around playfully with me, banging the drum. She sang her sweet songs for me. I passed the day there with her in pleasure and delight." Offer this as a lie to your own mother. As for us, let me make love with you by moonlight! » *ETCSL* (4.08.08, segment A 13-22)



Fig. 2. Terracotta plaque dated to the Isin/Larsa or Old Babylonian period. It depicts a couple performing a sexual act, probably connected with the Inanna and Dumuzi's love cycle (image extracted from Black and Green 1992, 157).

²⁵ «When my sweet precious, my heart, had lain down too, each of them in turn kissing with the tongue, each in turn, then my brother of the beautiful eyes did it fifty times to her, exhaustedly waiting for her, as she trembled underneath him, dumbly silent for him. My dear precious passed the time with my brother laying his hands on her hips» (*ETCSL* 4.08.04, 12-18).

²⁶ « "Young woman, don't provoke a quarrel! Inana, let us talk it over!"» (*ETCSL* 4.08.09, 7-24); « You shall take an oath for me that you will not touch another» (*ETCSL* 4.08.02, 13-16)

Caramelo identified here the complicity of lovers, who orchestrated not only plans to meet but also lies to present to those who guarded the reputation of the damsel (Caramelo 2008, 127). Together, the two lovers defied the rules of pre-matrimonial encounters, reinforcing their bonds, and their love.

Although human behaviors towards love and sexuality admit a certain level of standardized aspects, the fact is that the union between these two deities presented itself as exceptional, since they never had to deal with the actual responsibilities of a human marriage. At one point of their courtship, Dumuzi stated that he would never bind Inanna to domestic tasks, such as weaving²⁷. On the other hand, the goddess never got pregnant, maintaining her freedom from maternal tasks. So, in a certain way, this love affair was an idealization of the sexual initiation (Cooper 1997, 95). But does it diminish the *humanity* showed by these deities, who expressed their love, so enthusiastically? We do not think so. Inanna and Dumuzi's love cycle expressed the defiant attitude of teens when facing rules that only seemed to exist in order to constrict their freedom and their will. And maybe this was one of the reasons why this cycle was so famous.

According to what we observed in both situations, the teen years reflected a period where deities enthusiastically provoked, experimented, and acted out. By testing the established rules, they underwent the coming of age process.

Adulthood

When deities became adults, however, the youthful lyric fervor seemed to fade away and gave place to concerns, related to more substantial matters. Though the limits continued to be tested, the consequences were heavier, since the clashes and confrontations had to do with thicker questions: hierarchy and power, both within society and family.

Just like in the human world, hierarchy among the divine universe was visible in the division of labor. According to the *Epic of Atra-Hasis*: «the Anunnaki of the sky made the Igigi bear the workload. The gods had to dig out canals, had to clear channels» (Dalley 2000, 9). The hardness of being a working adult is underlined by the use of expressions such as «bear the workload»²⁸. So, it seems that the Igigi had to do all the work [Fig. 3]²⁹, while the Anunnakki enjoyed the products of this labor.

²⁷ «"I have not carried you off to be my slave girl! (...) "My bride, you should not weave cloth for me! You should not spin yarn for me! You should not comb out goat's wool for me! You should not warp threads for me!"» (*ETCSL 4.08.29*, segment C 9-13)

²⁸ In fact, the same idea was presented on the initial verses of the composition, where it is emphasized that «work was too hard / trouble too much». This repetition underlines the burden the Igigi had in their daily duties.

²⁹ In this image, we can identify, on the left side, a deity pushing a plow, which is then pulled by a lion. Certainly this scene represents the actions necessary to turn the ground into a fertile field, which would allow it to become an inhabitable space. Note how the field is filled with symbols depicting agricultural and pastoralist features, for instance, animals, their fences, and the watery element.



Fig. 3. Impression of a cylinder seal dated to the Akkadian period. The image depicts the deities performing their daily duties (image extracted from Collon 1987, 146 – Erlenmeyer Collection 599).

The stress and depression caused by the accumulation of toil, every day and night, caused an insurrection among the divine workers. The Igigi gathered in front of Enlil's gate, the traditional head of the pantheon, and went on strike, in what may be considered as one of the first depictions of collective claims³⁰. The rebellious and defiant disposition of teens was evoked once more, but now to act against a social hierarchy and order, which was considered unbearable.

The Anunnakki were forced to react, since the possibility of a civil war was imminent, which would only bring chaos into the cosmos. Moreover, it was imperative that the labor was carried out. Enki, the wisest deity, offered a solution: humankind should be created, so that «man bear the load of the gods» (Dalley 2000, 13-14).

Although the gods were freed from their heavy duties, the fact is hierarchy was still maintained, since the greater deities had their personal divine helpers, who acted as their ministers or viziers. At the bottom of the cosmic social pyramid, humans had the mission to serve all deities, within the earthly sphere. Still, deities were perceived in close association with their “new” workers, since they were involved and oversaw every aspect of the natural world [Fig. 4]³¹. Far from abandoning the activities of the world into the hands of human actors, deities were always the force that drove and dominated the cosmos.

Hence, the pains of the Igigi, though resembling the work related difficulties humans had in their lives, had an appeasing effect in humans in what concerned the outcome of their insurrection. On the one hand, it was emphasized the imperative need for hierarchy (divine and human) to maintain order; on the other hand, it defined the subordinated place of Mesopotamians within the larger cosmic picture. Consequently, work and hierarchy were justified as unavoidable features of existence, since without them it would be impossible for the cosmos to maintain its natural course.

³⁰ «(The gods) set fire to their tools, put aside their spades for fire. (...) When they reached the gate of warrior Ellil's dwelling, it was night» (Dalley 2000, 10).

³¹ In this impression, we identify a divine figure, on the left side, holding a sort of measuring object, which allowed for humans to work with clay. Simultaneously, the deity is supervising these tasks, which represent the deep involvement of deities in the human daily actions.

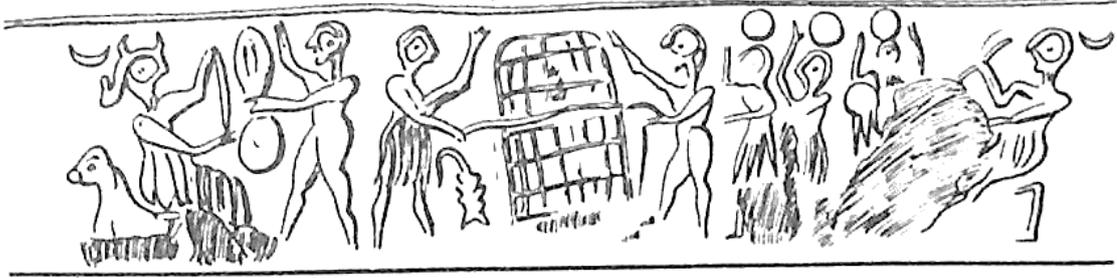


Fig. 4. Impression of a cylinder seal dated to the Early Dynastic period. A deity supervises human labor. (image extracted from Amiet 1980, 477 – Asmar 32.437).

A final aspect about this rebellion and its outcome should be stressed: the sacrificial death of a deity in order to create Humankind³². This act established the *alliance* between deities and humans, where the latter felt obliged to gratify the first, since they shared a close bond³³. The divine death in this episode, a rather extraordinary event, must be comprehended as a means to preserve the cosmic harmony. Without it, the strike would have no end and the suspension of labor could be permanent. Thus, preservation of the cosmos demanded a divine sacrifice, which, at the same time, offered awareness about the possible vulnerability of deities.

On another level, the battle between deities was also depicted in several cylinder seals [Figs. 5 and 6³⁴]. The systematic presence of this topic, both in literature and iconography, might refer to the unstable and fragile cohesion forged in the divine realm, which echoed the well-known persistent military problems experienced in the land between the rivers.

As far as family problems are concerned, we should focus on the rivalry between siblings, namely the one exposed in the text *Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld* (ETCSL 1.4.1). This composition narrates the adventurous journey of the goddess to Ereškigal's domain, the kingdom of the dead. Inanna, being already Queen of Heaven and Earth, aspired for more power within the cosmos, showing an unreasonable ambition³⁵. This led to a confrontation between sisters, since Inanna planned to usurp Ereškigal's throne [Fig. 7]³⁶.

³² «Ilawela, a god who had intelligence, they slaughtered in their assembly. Nintu mixed clay with his flesh and blood» (Dalley 2000, 15) In *Enūma eliš*, the sacrificed god was Qingu, the leader of Tīamat's army (Dalley 2000, 161)

³³ «l'Homme devait avoir en lui quelque chose de divin (*ilu*) et quelque chose tenant du *tēmu*, grâce à la présence originelle, en sa substance même, de la "chair" d'une divinité». «le *tēmu* (...) est aussi indispensable aux hommes, pour accomplir au mieux leur tâche native de producteurs et transformateurs des biens utiles, qu'il l'était à leurs prédécesseurs divins en cette même entreprise » (Bottéro 1982, 28)

³⁴ Figure 6 is a probable depiction of Utu/Šamaš, on the left. He is holding another deity by his waist, who seems weakened, with a lifeless body. The meaning of this image is multiple: it might be a duel between two divine enemies, but it might also be a depiction of the confrontation between the various aspects of the solar god (Collon 1987, 178). If that is the case, we can be facing the end of the solar journey manifested by the sunset, which is defeated by the rising sun at dawn.

³⁵ An extreme ambition is one of Inanna's traits, which she displays in several narratives. For example, in *Inanna and Enki* (ETCSL 131), the goddess went to visit the patron god of wisdom, guardian of the cosmic divine principles – the *me* – and decided to get hold of them.

³⁶ In this seal impression we find a rather interesting scene, which probably confirms the event depicted in the mythic composition mentioned above (Amiet 1980, 176). In the textual narrative, we are told that Inanna's entrance in the Netherworld is only allowed if she despoils herself of all her garments, which meant power, as we could see. While passing through the seven gates of this domain, Inanna strips herself, reaching the throne's



Fig. 5. Cylinder seal impression dated to the Early Dynastic period. Depiction of a battle between deities. (image extracted from Amiet 1980,469 – Collection Moore, nr. 37).



Fig. 6. Impression of a cylinder seal dated to the Akkadian period. Probable depiction of the god Šamaš, on the left side. (image extracted from Collon 1987, 179 – Ur(PG/514; v.9026)).



Fig. 7. Impression of a cylinder seal, dated to the Early Dynastic period. Probable depiction of the confrontation between Inanna and Ereškigal (image extracted from Amiet 1980, 469).

As Katz (2003, 403) stated: «Inanna's attempt to steal the **me** of the netherworld, which were assigned to Ereškigal by the great gods (...) is not merely an offense against Ereškigal,

room deprived of her natural power (*ETCSL 1.4.1*, 144-164). The impression seems to allude to this meeting, since the deity facing the enthroned goddess has no symbols or garments of power, such as the headdress, the jewels, or the rod and ring, symbol for sovereignty *par excellence*.

but also a violation of the world order, and, therefore, an offense against the great gods who determine the world order». For those reasons, Inanna was punished by the Anunnakki and sentenced to dead (*ETCSL 1.4.1*, 164-172)³⁷.

This episode, which is related to the main topic of leadership and its legitimate holder, was echoed in the human world. On a first level, and since the protagonists were two divine monarchs, the problem of royal usurpation is addressed. As we know, the Mesopotamian king was chosen by deities to rule in their name, thus making the act of usurpation a severe violation of the divine decree³⁸. To some extent, the failed attempt of Inanna to usurp her sister's throne, and her consequent death, reflected the consequences of such an act in the human world. On another level, it addresses the problem of succession within families (royal or not). Since primogeniture was not a strict rule in Mesopotamia, it could lead to problems between siblings while disputing their inheritance (whether a crown or the family estate)³⁹.

Adulthood was also a time to deal with disenchantment regarding the matters of the heart. The once joyful love experienced by Inanna and Dumuzi was replaced by darker and dramatic feelings. Because Dumuzi was not showing any signs of grief for her recent death, Inanna, extremely disappointed and enraged by her lover's indifference, handed him over to the **galla daemones**, who took him to the Netherworld (*ETCSL 1.4.1*, 354-358)⁴⁰. Though deeply hyperbolized, in her violent reaction, Inanna evokes the natural resentment of a woman when faced with her partner's negligent behavior.

However, in another composition, which originally might have been independent from *Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld*⁴¹, Dumuzi's death seemed to be his fate, without any intervention of the goddess (*ETCSL 1.4.3*). After learning through a divinatory dream that he was about to be seized by the **galla daemones**, Dumuzi was driven to tears, terrified with

³⁷ Curiously, Inanna was not the only high-ranked deity to be subjected to a trial. On the later composition traditionally known as *Marduk's ordeal*, the Babylon patron god is depicted as captive and subjected to a difficult trial. The poem alludes to his arrest at the «house on the edge of the *hursan*» because of his «sin» (Frymer-Kensky 1984, 136). Though the interpretation of this composition is far from being consensual, the allusion to Marduk's sin combined with Inanna's behavior in the Netherworld showed that deities were not free from fault or misfortune and were capable of committing offenses like humans.

About the possibility of *hursan* being the place where Marduk was held captive and its relation with the Netherworld, *vide* Frymer-Kensky 1984, 138-139.

³⁸ When a ruler ascended to the throne through a «dubious» process, he would make great efforts to justify it. Take the case of Sargon of Akkad, for instance: «according to written sources, these gods [An, Enlil, and Ištar] had decided on the dethronement of the [previous] king. "Not Sargon but the gods are the agents of change" was the ideological message. Sargon did not plan the rebellion; he just benefited from it and at the same time fulfilled the will of the gods» (Heinz 2007, 70)

³⁹ Within Mesopotamian families, the eldest son was traditionally favored in the division of the patrimony (Nemet-Nejat 1998, 147-148). However, the estate could also be divided in equal shares by all the sons (Harris 2000, 69). As for royal succession, there are several cases of rivalry amongst the royal princes, throughout Mesopotamian political history. The case of Sennacherib, who seems to have been a victim of a plot planned by his offspring illustrates our point.

⁴⁰ After Inanna's death sentence by the Anunnakki, Enki engendered a plan to rescue the goddess. However, she could only be released if she found someone who would take her place in the Netherworld. Accompanied by the vigilant **galla daemones**, Inanna searched for candidates, but everyone she met (Ninšubur, Šara, and Lulal) was deeply grieving her disappearance. According to the funerary rites, they were using filthy clothes and were sat on dust, action which appeased her heart. Dumuzi, however, was found dressed in fine garments and sat on a throne, as if nothing happened. (*ETCSL 1.4.1*, 306-353).

⁴¹ (Sladek 1974, 51)

the prospect of his own death (*ETCSL 1.4.3*, 1-14). The once audacious and juvenile Dumuzi grew up to epitomize the dread of adults when facing their mortality.

Family ties played a special part in the course of action. Geštinanna, his loyal sister, advised Dumuzi to run and hide from the **galla**, and, when the *daemones* asked her for the god's whereabouts, she stayed mute (*ETCSL 1.4.3*, 110-150). On the contrary, one unidentified friend of Dumuzi, who knew his hiding spot, had no problems in betraying the run-away deity, telling the *daemones* where he was. In another composition, this episode is resumed with an emphasis in Geštinanna's action: tortured by the **galla**, the loyal sister said nothing, bearing in silence all the pain the *daemones* inflicted upon her (*ETCSL 1.4.1.1*, 57-64). The two siblings' suffering implied a shared notion of their fate⁴². Moreover, through the reliable actions of Geštinanna, the family ties were praised as the true loyal ones, when compared to the actions and character displayed by Dumuzi's friend.

Terrified and on the run, Dumuzi started praying for his brother-in-law. In three different occasions, Utu intervened and helped him escaped from the *daemones* (*ETCSL 1.4.3*, 165-180, 192-205, 227-244). Again, the stress lied in family ties, with a member of the macro-family showing the solidarity between households.

Despite all those efforts, the unfortunate Dumuzi was eventually arrested by the *daemones*, and his dreadful dream was consummated [Fig. 8]. Again, his family members, namely the feminine ones, were evoked to grieve and to pay the necessary funerary rites. Inanna, the long-time fiancée, Geštinanna, his devoted sister, and Duttur, his loving mother, together, mourned their beloved Dumuzi. (*ETCSL 1.4.4*, 137-173).



Fig. 8 Impression of a cylinder seal dated to the Early Dynastic period, depicting the god Dumuzi in chains. (image extracted from Collon 1987, 179 – BM 123279).

The family once challenged was now the source of aid, protection and care. Again, the resemblances with the human world are striking. Both deities and humans were set to look for themselves within the family, for this was the construct which allowed for identity in Mesopotamia.

⁴² We should also stress that in the Akkadian version of the journey of Inanna/Ištar to the Netherworld, Geštinanna (referred to as Belet-šeri) offered herself to substitute Dumuzi, in that domain (Dalley, 2000, 160).

Final remarks

The divine existence⁴³ we reconstructed above depicts an emotive path, which would kindle empathy of the human audience. The similarities of feelings expressed by deities and humans, who faced the same kind of questions throughout their lives, blurred the profound abyss between the transcendent immortal beings, and their worshippers. By highlighting the idea of *humanity* as inherent to divine nature, the divine *pathos* would be recognizable and appropriated by humans, who would consequently appease their anxieties.

Divine life was, therefore, human life elevated to the conscience of a numinous existence. And the mirrored effect between the two worlds deepened the already intimate relation between deities and humans.

Abbreviations

ETCSL – *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*

JAOS – *Journal of the American Oriental Society*

ZA- *Zeitschrift für Assyriologi*

References

- Almeida, Isabel, and Maria de Fátima Rosa. 2016. "The Moon watching over Sun and Venus: Revisiting the attributes and functions of Nanna/Sîn in Mesopotamia." Paper presented at the 62nd *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia PA, July 15.
- Alster, Bendt. 1972. *Dumuzi's Dream- aspects of oral poetry in a Sumerian myth*. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag.
- Amiet, Pierre. 1980. *La glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*. Paris: Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique.
- Asher-Greve, Julia, and Deborah Sweeney. 2006. «On Nakedness, Nudity, and Gender in Egyptian and Mesopotamian Art». In *Images and Gender: Contributions to the Hermeneutics of Reading Ancient Art*, edited by S. Schroer, 125-176. Fribourg/Göttingen: Vendoheck&Ruprecht.
- Black, Jeremy, and Anthony Green. 1992. *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia. An Illustrated Dictionary*. London: British Museum Press.
- Bottéro, Jean. 1982. "La création de l'homme et sa nature dans le poème d'Atrahasis". In *Societies and Languages of the Ancient Near East: studies in honour of I.M. Diakonoff*, edited by M. A. Dandamayev, I. Gershevitch, H. Klengel, G. Komoróczy, M. T. Larsen, and J. N. Postgate, 24-32. Warminster: Aris and Phillips.
- _____. 1987. *Mésopotamie- L'écriture, la raison et les dieux*. Paris : Éditions Gallimard.

⁴³ The deities' cycle of life was also visible in the cult of divine statues. In Mesopotamia, the statue of a divine being was born, that is, it was fabricated and subjected to the mouth-opening ritual, and sometimes could die or even be resurrected (by the process of repair). About this subject, *vide* Hurowitz 2003.

- _____. 2004. *Au commencement étaient les dieux*. Paris: Hachette Littératures.
- Caramelo, Francisco. 2008. "Erotismo e Sexualidade na Mesopotâmia: 'Quem se deitará naquele linho comigo?'" In *A Sexualidade no Mundo Antigo*, coordinated by José Augusto Ramos, Maria do Céu Fialho e Nuno Simões Rodrigues, 119-138. Porto: Clássica- Artes Gráficas.
- Cohen, Andrew. 2005. *Death Ritual, Ideology, and the development of early Mesopotamian Kingship – Toward a new understanding of Iraq's Royal Cemetery of Ur*. Leiden/Boston : Brill/Styx.
- Collon, Dominique. 1987. *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East*. London: British Museum Publications.
- Cooper, Jerrold S. 1997. "Gendered Sexuality in Sumerian Love Poetry". In *Sumerian Gods and their representations*, edited by I.L. Finkel, and M.J. Geller, 85-97. Groningen: Styx Publications
- Dalley, Stephanie. 2000. *Myths from Mesopotamia. Creation, the flood, Gilgamesh and others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Emelianov, Vladimir. 2007. "On the early history of melammu". In *Language in the ancient Near East - Proceedings of the 53e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, vol. 1, edited by L. Kogan, N. Koslova, S. Loesov, and S. Tischenko, 1109-119. Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford. 2006. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*. Accessed October 15. <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>
- Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. 1984. "The Tribulations of Marduk: The So-called «Marduk Ordeal Text»". In *Studies in Literature from the Ancient Near East: dedicated to Samuel Noah Kramer by members of the American Oriental Society*, edited by Jack M. Sasson, 131-141. New Haven CT: American Oriental Society.
- Harris, Rivkah. 1992. "The Conflict of Generations in Ancient Mesopotamian Myths." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34/4: 621-635.
- _____. 1993. "Gendered old age in *Enuma Elish*". In *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, edited by M. E. Cohen, D. C. Snell, and D. B. Weisberg, 111-115. Bethesda MD: CDL Press.
- _____. 2000. *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh epic and other ancient Literature*. Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press.
- Heinz, Marlies. 2007. «Sargon of Akkad: rebel and usurper in Kish». In *Representations of Political Power – Case histories from times of change and dissolving order in the Ancient Near East*, edited by M. Heinz, and Marian H. Feldman. Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Hurowitz, Victor A. 2003. "The Mesopotamian God Image, From Womb to Tomb." *JAOS* 123/1: 147-157.
- Jacobsen, Thorkild. 1976. *The treasures of darkness: a history of Mesopotamian religion*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- Katz, Dina. 2003. *The image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*. Bethesda MD: CDL Press.
- Klein, Jacob. 2001. "The genealogy of Nanna/Suen and its historical background". In *Historiography in the cuneiform world - Proceedings of the XLVe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, edited by Tzvi Abusch, P.-A. Beaulieu, J. Huehnergard, P. Machinist, P. Steinkeller, W.W. Hallo, and I. Winter, 279-301. Bethesda MD: CDL Press.
- Krebernik, Manfred. 1986. "Die Götterlisten aus Fāra." *ZA* 76: 161-204.

- Lapinkivi, Pirjo. 2004. *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage Rite - in the light of comparative evidence*. Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project & Institute for Asian and African Studies-University of Helsinki.
- Leick, Gwendolyn. 1994. *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamia Literature*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Lenzi, Alan. 2007. "Dead Religion and Contemporary Perspectives: Commending Mesopotamian Data to the Religious Studies Classroom". *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 19: 121-133.
- Nemet-Nejat, Karen Rhea. 1998. *Daily life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Westport CT/London: Greenwood Press.
- _____. 1999. «Women in Ancient Mesopotamia». In *Women's roles in Ancient Civilizations – a reference guide*, edited by Bella Vivante, 85-114. Westport CT: Greenwood Press.
- Odisho, Anobel Youjana. 2004. *The Akitu Festival in Mesopotamia- the expression of royal ideology through Religion, Ritual and Architecture*. PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley.
- Sanmartín, Joanquín. 1999. *Códigos legales de tradición babilónica*. Barcelona: Trotta- Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona.
- Sladek, William R. 1974. *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*. PhD Diss., The Johns Hopkins University.