

The Mesopotamian domain of the dead and its constraints to divine transcendental power

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ABSTRACT: The Mesopotamian religious system had an explicit theocentric nature, as divine figures were understood as the *raison d'être* for all cosmic aspects and events. Hence, deities were conceived as possessing a transcendental power, which enabled them to control all cosmos and, as such, to freely move between cosmic domains. Yet, their authority and autonomy were not absolute when referring to the Netherworld, the cosmic realm of the dead. The features of this space, which were very particular, seemed to constrain divine figures. Several Sumero-Akkadian mythic compositions clearly show that deities could not act as they pleased in this realm. As such, with this paper, we intend to analyze the specific characteristics and rules of this space, exploring the impact they had on deities and, consequently, on their transcendental power.

Keywords: History of religions, Sumero-Akkadian mythology, Cosmic spaces, Netherworld, Mesopotamian deities

1 THE NETHERWORLD WITHIN THE MESOPOTAMIAN COSMOLOGICAL VISION

The complex polytheist system elaborated in Antiquity by the inhabitants of the “land between the rivers” (modern-day Iraq and Syria) underwent several transformations and adaptations from the 4th until the 1st millennia BCE. These changes stemmed from different socioeconomic and/or political-military contexts, as well as from the input of several cultural matrixes, and even from changes within its ecosystem¹.

Notwithstanding, in the *longue durée*, it is possible to detect some threads of continuity, such as the cosmogonic, theogonic, and anthropogonic conceptions, where divine figures assumed a profound protagonism as responsible for every aspect of cosmic existence. This theocentric nature was continuously nourished by a centrifuge religious feeling (Bottéro, 1998, p. 30) that highlighted the transcendental power of deities, who were present, and oversaw all cosmic domains.

If one considers the famous Warka Vase (c. 3000 BCE, southern Mesopotamia)², it is already possible

to observe a cosmological organization that manifested this theocentric nature: the three main cosmic domains depicted/evoked (subterranean, earthly, and celestial) were marked by the presence and power of deities³, whose perpetual blessing was being conjured.

When one adds the information displayed in Sumero-Akkadian mythic compositions, this cosmological view becomes more elaborated. It is possible to

1. On the different contributions of specific contexts, different cultural matrixes, and/or ecological changes for the continuous (re)elaboration of the Mesopotamian religious system see, for instance, Bottéro and Kramer, 1989; Lenzi, 2007, or, more recently, Silva, 2020.

2. This object, which belongs to the collection of the Iraq National Museum (Baghdad), was one of the pieces looted in April 2003, being recovered some months later. On the object, its iconographic narrative, and its formal aspects see, for instance, the online site Lost Treasures of Iraq, 2003-2008.

3. The iconographic narrative displayed in the Vase presents a ritual procession towards the cultic structure (understood as the earthly abode of deities) with humans offering the products of their labor to the divine. Hence, this procession expresses an interconnection between three main cosmic domains: at the basis, it is displayed an aquatic motif, evoking the subterranean ocean of fresh waters (Sumerian: **abzu**, Akkadian: *apsû*) which allowed for life to flourish within the earthly domain – represented in the middle registers by the elements of flora and fauna, as well as by human beings. At the top, the procession arrives at the cultic structure, evoking the celestial domain, the preferred cosmic space of deities. For a detailed analysis on the symbolic significances of this object and its visual narrative, see Bahrani, 2002 and Suter, 2014.

identify different levels of the celestial domain, being the so-called “heaven of An/Anu,” the highest one⁴. In what concerns the earthly sphere, at least two main areas existed: the steppe/untamed regions and the urban/controlled world. Lastly, the subterranean domains encompassed the ocean of freshwaters and the cosmic realm of the dead (Vanstiphout, 2009, p. 24-25)⁵.

Deities were able to freely move between these spaces, an ability that thus emphasized their transcendental nature and power⁶. However, when one looks closely at the subterranean space reserved for the dead, the Netherworld, it becomes clear that this domain had specific features that limited deities’ actions.

The literary descriptions of this space are rather explicit of its antithetical nature when compared with the rest of the cosmic domains. For instance, the Akkadian composition known as *Descent of Ištar to the Netherworld* states, in its opening lines⁷:

To Kurnugi, land of [no return]/ Ishtar, daughter of Sin was [determined] to go/ .../ To the house which those who enter cannot leave/On the road where travelling is one way only/To the house of those who enter are deprived of light/Where dust is their food, clay their bread/ They see no light, they dwell in darkness (Dalley, 2000, p. 155).

The Netherworld, as an enclosed and dusty space, was thus envisioned as a hermetic realm, where

light, movement, and human activities were nowhere to be found. This depiction expressed the Mesopotamian conception about death, in which full human existence ceased with the burial of the material component of individuals (Akkadian: *ešemtu*) and the voyage of the immaterial one (Akkadian: *ešemmu*) to the Netherworld, where it would remain in a residual and inactive state, in a somewhat suspended perpetuity (Caramelo, 2008, p. 90)⁸.

If by any chance, the livings neglected the cultic actions of the *ešemmu* (necessary to soothe their desolation within this dreadful space), they could come back to the earthly domain and threaten their lives (Bottéro, 1987, p. 513-14). Nullifying this menace was thus paramount for the maintenance of the cosmic order, which concurred with the idea of the Netherworld as a realm extremely distant from the regions where human populations dwelt.

Consequently, to humans - mortal beings, inferior to deities - the Netherworld was “a land of no return,” in “which those who enter cannot leave,” as stated in the above-referred excerpt. However, one would expect that divine figures, with all their mighty power and immortal nature, had other autonomy upon these restraints. Yet, several mythic compositions clearly show that deities were also obliged to act accordingly to the Netherworld’s rules, which implies that their power and freedom of action were not absolute in every cosmic domain.

4. According to the *Epic of Gilgameš*, it is for this specific celestial space that deities had fled to hide from the devastating impact of the Flood: “Even the gods were afraid of the flood-weapon/ they withdrew; they went up to the heaven of Anu” (Dalley, 1998, p. 113).

5. For a detailed analysis that considers the changes and continuities of the Mesopotamian cosmological vision, and particularly the ones concerning the domain of the dead, see Horowitz, 1998 and Katz, 2003, respectively.

6. For example, Inanna/Ištar undertakes several journeys, with varying purposes: in the Sumerian compositions *Inana and Enki* (ETCSL, 1.3.1), she leaves her city, Uruk, to go to Eridu; in *Inana and Bilulu* (ETCSL, 1.4.4), she travels across the steppe, to perform funeral services to her traditional consort, Dumuzi; and in *Inanna and Šukale-tuda* (ETCSL, 1.3.3), she stops in a garden to rest after a long inspective journey to her earthly domains.

Also described as undertaking an inspection trip, on behalf of the leader of the pantheon, Enlil, is god Enki/Ea, in *Enki and the World Order* (ETCSL, 1.3.1).

Other divine figures who were consistently depicted as moving across cosmic spaces were the *daimōnes*, entities who could be menacing and/or apotropaic, which dwelt in the steppe but who could also enter in urban centers. In the Sumerian composition known as *Dumuzid’s dream* (ETCSL, 1.4.3), this god is chased by the *galla/gallū*, *daimōnes* specifically responsible for taking individuals into the Netherworld.

7. Extremely similar formulae were also used in *Nergal and Ereškigal* (Dalley, 2000, p. 168) to describe the Netherworld, which attests to a persistence in the way this space was idealized.

2 DIVINE MARRIAGE(S) IN THE NETHERWORLD

Throughout the 2nd millennium BCE, the realm of the dead became ruled by a divine couple, as the traditional queen of the Netherworld, goddess Ereškigal, remarried god Nergal⁹. The events that led him to become her second consort are depicted in

8. In this sense, the notion of temporality within this cosmic space was also very peculiar. Though the idea of “nothing” was unconceivable for the Mesopotamian mental framework, the fact is that if there was no action, there could be no time. In this regard, some parallels can be drawn with the temporal conception of the cosmos primeval existence, as depicted in the first lines of the Babylonian epic of creation, known as *Enūma eliš* (Dalley, 2000, p. 228-277). About these temporal conceptions, see Rubio 2013 and Katz, 2013. For a more detailed analysis of the Mesopotamian perception of time, especially within the Amorite matrix see Rosa, 2015.

9. It seems that Nergal rose to prominence as ruler of this cosmic domain still in the final centuries of the 3rd millennium BCE, as attested by a reference in a literary composition dated to the Ur III period (c. 2150-2004 BCE): “To Nergal, the Enlil of the nether world,” (ETCSL, 2.4.1.1, l. 88).

the Akkadian composition known as *Nergal and Ereškigal* (Dalley, 2000, p. 163-181)

The narrative begins with An/Anu sending his vizier to the Netherworld to invite Ereškigal to attend a divine banquet. The message delivered to the queen of the dead is rather interesting:

Anu your father sent me/ to say 'It is impossible for you to go up/ (...) / And it is impossible for us to go down/ (...) / Let your messenger come/ and take from the table, let him accept a present for you (Dalley, 2000, p. 165-166).

This impossibility of divine travels to/from the Netherworld can be explained by this space's unattractive nature, marked by death. As for Ereškigal, her role as queen of this domain might have forced her continued presence on her throne. Still, it was common for other divine figures to leave their cosmic realms, especially when a divine assembly took place. For instance, Enki/Ea, who dwelt in the *abzu/apsû* as its ruler, constantly traveled to the heavenly domains to take part in divine encounters¹⁰.

On the other hand, the assertive tone of the formulae used in *Nergal and Ereškigal* to describe this divine inability to travel to/from the Netherworld seems to suggest that there were (superior?) rules that bound and constraint deities' actions. In fact, it was Namtar, Ereškigal's vizier, who represented the queen in the divine banquet. As Karen Sonik (2012, p. 386) pointed out, the liminal nature of this type of deities (viziers and messengers) could enable them to bend the strict cosmic boundaries and rules¹¹.

While on the heavenly domains, Namtar felt offended by Nergal, who did not pay the necessary respects to the envoy of the queen of the dead. This protocolar *faux pas* constituted the main motif for his voyage to the Netherworld, as Nergal's visit was intended to make amends with Ereškigal. Ever-wise, Enki/Ea assisted him on this journey, giving him specific instructions on how to act during his stay on that space:

From the moment thy bring a chair to you/ do not go to it, do not sit upon it/ (When) the baker brings you bread, do not go to it, do not sit upon it/(When) the butcher brings you meat, do not go to it, do not sit upon it/(when) the brewer brings you beer, do not go to it, do not sit upon it/ (...) / (When) she (Ereškigal has been to the bath/ (...) / Allowing you to glimpse her body) You must not [do that which] men and women [do] (Dalley, 2000, p. 168).

10. For instance, in the Akkadian composition known as *Atrahasis* (Dalley, 2000, p. 1-38), Enki/Ea attends the various divine assemblies that took place throughout the narrative.

11. In fact, not only Ereškigal vizier, Namtar, attends the divine banquet, as Nergal, further ahead on the composition, is able to escape the Netherworld, by making its gate-keeper believe he was acting as Ereškigal's messenger (Sonik, 2012, p. 386).

Curiously, similar advice was given to characters of other compositions who also traveled to the Netherworld¹². In all these cases, the instructions consisted of not engaging in any activity typical of the living, which underlines the above-mentioned antithetical nature of this cosmic space.

Though Nergal managed to resist all the other offerings, he was seduced by Ereškigal, and as lovers, they spent the next six days and nights together. Before the completion of the seventh day, however, Nergal left her bed and, consequently, the Netherworld, returning to the celestial realm.

The fact that this abandonment occurred before the seventh day was complete is quite interesting, given the symbolic meaning of a complete cycle that the number seven had in Mesopotamia¹³. From this perspective, it seems that Nergal was conscient that if he completed the cycle (in this case, of sexual intercourse), his union with Ereškigal (and thus with the Netherworld) would be consummated, making it impossible for him to leave this realm.

Ereškigal's reaction to his departure was strong: first, she was overcome by sadness¹⁴ and then by rage. Addressing her vizier, she vehemently

12. In the *Gilgameš Epic*, the famous Urukian hero instructed his companion, Enkidu, as follows: "[You must not put on] a clean garment/ For they will recognize that you are a stranger/ You must not be anointed with perfumed oil from a ointment jar/ For they will gather around you at the smell of it/ (...) / You must not kiss the wife you love/ (...) / You must not kiss the son you love (...) / For the Earth's outcry will seize you" (Dalley, 2000, p. 121). As Enkidu did not follow this advice, he became imprisoned there.

Moreover, on the Sumerian composition that describes the journey of Inanna to this cosmic domain, the creatures that Enki shaped to rescue the goddess were told: "'They will offer you a river full of water – don't accept it / They will offer you a field with its grain – don't accept it'" (*ETCSL*, 1.4.1., ls. 246-247).

13. In several compositions the number seven appears with this significance. In the *Epic of Gilgameš*, Šamhat, priestess of Ištar, spends seven nights of lovemaking with Enkidu, which results in a deep and irrevocable change in his wild nature. When the cycle is complete, Enkidu is civilized and thus ready to live amongst humans (Dalley, 2000, p. 55-56). Later, in the same epic, Gilgameš lists six lovers of Ištar who met a sad end after their relationship with the goddess. The Urukian hero thus argues that should he had accepted her sexual proposal, as her seventh lover, he would also meet a similar nefarious fate (Dalley, 2000, p. 78-79). Also, in the Sumerian and Akkadian compositions known as *Descent of Inanna/Ištar to the Netherworld*, the goddess is obliged to pass seven gates, which not only underlines the complete hermetic characteristic of this domain, but also manifests a cycle she must go through, to arrive to Ereškigal's presence. (*ETCSL*, 1.4.1, ls 129-163; Dalley, 2000, p. 156-157).

14. "Her tears flowed down her cheeks/ 'Erra [that is Nergal] the lover of my delight... / I did not have enough delight with him before he left" (Dalley, 2000, p. 172).

instructed him to deliver the following message to gods An/Anu, Enlil, and Enki/Ea:

Send that god to us and let him spend the night with me as my lover/ (...) if you do not send that god to us/ According to the rites of Erkalla [that is the Netherworld] and the great Earth/ I shall raise up the dead and they will eat the living/ I shall make the dead outnumber the living! (Dalley, 2000, p. 173).

Faced with this threat, Nergal was sent again to the Netherworld, and, this time, the sexual intercourse was completed. Thus, on the seventh day, their marriage was finally consummated, and, with the blessing of An/Anu, Nergal became king of this domain. From then on, just like his divine spouse, Nergal was intrinsically connected with the Netherworld, abiding by its rules.

This narrative made us revisit the question about the identity of Ereškigal's first husband, a figure shrouded in mystery, given that in textual records, he is only referred to by his epithet, Gugal-ana. Plus, in *Inana's descent to the nether world (ETCSL, 1.4.1)*, it is even stated that he died¹⁵.

Katz (2003, p. 441) suggests that this first consort was Enlil, whose functions as leader of the Mesopotamian divine universe, role this god assumed during the 3rd millennium BCE, were incompatible with a marriage to the queen of the dead.

Interestingly, the possibility of a remote connection between Enlil and the space of the dead seems to be echoed in several literary references. In the Sumerian tale *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, for instance, it is stated that Enlil offered this cosmic realm to Ereškigal¹⁶. Could this be a wedding gift? Furthermore, in the magic and exorcism series known as *Udughul*, Enlil and Ereškigal appear referenced as Namtar's parents¹⁷.

Moreover, in the Sumerian composition *Enlil and Ninlil (ETCSL, 1.2.1)*, the pantheon leader was able to travel to the Netherworld without suffering any consequences, which contradicts the impossibility of celestial deities visiting that space, stated in *Nergal and Ereškigal*, as we have already mentioned. Additionally, Enlil consummates a sexual act with goddess Ninlil in the Netherworld¹⁸, thus acting contrary to the

instructions on how to behave in the space of the dead to avoid being imprisoned there. Finally, in the same composition, Enlil is identified by the epithet "great mountain,"¹⁹ the very same epithet used in other textual records to evoke the father of Ninazu, whose traditional mother was Ereškigal (Katz, 2003, p. 421)²⁰.

The name of Enlil's temple at Nippur, E-kur, also suggests an ancient association with the Netherworld, given that the Sumerian term **kur** was one of the words used to designate the cosmic domain of the dead (Katz, 2003, p. 442). Hence, Katz's hypothesis seems very plausible. The previous marriage of Ereškigal with Enlil was not compatible with his leadership of the pantheon, especially, we might add, because it would impose on Enlil strong constraints on his freedom of movement and, consequently, on his power.

3 THE CAPTIVITY OF THE "QUEEN OF HEAVEN AND EARTH"

Probably, the most famous divine imprisonment in the Netherworld was (and still is) that of the goddess Inanna/Ištar, one of the main deities of the Mesopotamian divine universe, diachronically. Her voyage, captivity, and release from Ereškigal's domain are described in two mythic compositions, one written in Sumerian, and one in Akkadian, known as *Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld (ETCSL, 1.4.1)* and *Descent of Ištar to the Netherworld* (Dalley, 2000, p. 155-162)²¹.

Both accounts depict similar events: the goddess decided to usurp her sister's throne, a desire that made her descend to the realm of the dead. As usurpation was a capital crime in Mesopotamia²², Inanna/

chamber/ He had intercourse with her there, he kissed her there/ At this one intercourse, at this one kissing he poured into her womb the seed of Ninazu/ the king who stretches measuring lines over the fields" (*ETCSL, 1.2.1, ls. 113-116*).

19. This epithet appears three times on this composition (*ETCSL, 1.2.1, 17, 25 and 154*).

20. The fact that in *Enlil and Ninlil* it is this goddess who assumes the maternity of Ninazu might be explained as an attempt to distance Enlil from Ereškigal and the Netherworld. Moreover, and as underlined by Katz (2003, p. 441, n. 213), Ninlil's name is a female form of Enlil which adding to her one-dimensionality can point to some artificiality in her character. Maybe, we might add, Ninlil's creation (and motherhood of Ninazu) was another strategy to mask a previous connection between Enlil and the queen of the dead.

21. It is worth noticing that the Sumerian narrative is lengthier and thus more detailed than the Akkadian one. For a comparative analysis between both compositions see, for instance, Almeida 2009 and 2012.

22. For the Mesopotamian political-religious framework, monarchs were understood as directly chosen by divine figures to rule the earthly domain on their behalf. Hence,

15. When asked by the Netherworld gatekeeper the motive for her presence there, "Holy Inana answered him/ 'Because Lord Gud-gal-ana, the husband of my elder sister / holy Ereškigala, has died/ In order to have his funeral rites observed/ She offers generous libations at his wake – that is the reason'." (*ETCSL, 1.4.1, ls. 85-89*).

16. "When Enlil had taken the earth for himself/ When the nether world had been given to Ereškigala as a gift" (*ETCSL, 1.8.1.4, ls. 12-13*).

17. "Namtar, beloved son of Enlil, [offspring of Erškigal," *Udughul V3* (Jiménez, 2015).

18. The sexual act between these deities is described as taking place on the Id-kura, the river of the Netherworld: "Enlil, as the man of the Id-kura, got her to lie down in the

Ištar became captive, which forced Enki/Ea to send help to free her. Yet, as the cosmic rules of this space dictated, a replacement figure was needed, a role that fell on her traditional divine consort, Dumuzi/Tammuz, and his sister, Geštinanna/Belet-šeri. As Sonik (2012, p. 287-289) demonstrated, these divine figures also had a liminal nature, which allowed them to travel to/from the Netherworld. Hence, from then on, this pair of siblings would take turns in this domain, and cosmic order was thus maintained.

The main plot of both narratives explicitly underlines the constraints that this cosmic space imposed on deities. Even the almighty “Queen of Heaven and Earth” was taken prisoner there, and her release constituted a complex task²³.

For the present argument, it is important to examine some passages of these narratives. First, and focusing on the Akkadian composition, it is interesting to note Ištar’s attitude upon arriving at the gates of this space. When questioned by the gatekeeper, she violently shouted out a cosmic threat, very similar to the one her sister made when demanding Nergal’s return:

‘Here, gatekeeper, open your gate for me/ Open your gate for me to come in!/If you do not open the gate for me to come in/ I shall smash the door and shatter the bolt/ I shall smash the doorpost and overturn the doors/ I shall raise up the dead and they shall eat the living/ The dead shall outnumber the living!’ (Dalley, 2000, p. 155).

Curiously, this aggressive tone seems to have faded when the gatekeeper, following Ereškigal’s orders, stripped off her garments as she passed each of the seven gates of the Netherworld²⁴. Inanna/Ištar, despite

always asking for the reason for such an act, seemed to comply with the answer – those were the rites of queen Ereškigal. Moreover, when instructing the gatekeeper, the queen of the dead herself stated: “Treat her according to the ancient rites” (Dalley, 2000, p. 156).

In the Sumerian narrative, this episode presents more thought-provoking details since the gatekeeper’s response clearly stated that Inanna should obey the rules of the Netherworld:

When she entered the first gate, the turban, headgear for the open country, was removed from her head/What is this?/“Be silent, Inana, a divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled/ Inana, you must not open your mouth against the rites of the underworld. (ETCSL, 1.4.1., ls. 130-133).

Later, when Inanna’s imprisonment prompted her vizier to seek the help of Enlil and Nanna/Sîn, both equally replied:

Inana craved the great heaven and she craved the great below as well/ The divine powers of the underworld are divine powers which should not be craved/ for whoever gets them must remain in the underworld/ Who, having got to that place, could then expect to come up again? (ETCSL, 1.4.1., ls. 191-194 and ls. 205-208).

More than the condemning tone about the goddess’ ambition, what is curious is that the gods’ refusal to help her seems to be linked to their powerlessness in the face of the rules of the Netherworld.

Hence, the task fell to Enki, who had to resort to his infinite wisdom to devise a bulletproof plan: out of clay, he fashioned creatures²⁵, whose liminal nature (as the viziers and messengers in *Nergal and Ereškigal*, and as the divine sibling in *Descent of Inana to the netherworld*) would enable them to travel safely to the Netherworld and free the goddess.

Nevertheless, as we have already mentioned, this salvific action was not complete, for a substitute was needed to take the goddess’ place in that domain. The Sumerian narrative describes how the Anuna/Anunnaki, considered here as a group of divine judges²⁶, intervened:

But as Inana was about to ascend from the underworld the Anuna seized her/ ‘Who has ever ascended from the underworld/has ascended unscathed from the underworld?/ If Inana is to ascend from the underworld,/let her provide a substitute for herself. (ETCSL, 1.4.1., ls. 285-289).

Their rhetorical question underlines, once again, how it was impossible for individuals (human and divine) to leave “the land of no return” unscathed.

usurpation assumed an unparalleled gravity, as it represented an action against the divine choice. In the same sense, Inanna/Ištar defied cosmic regulations by desiring a realm that had been assigned to her sister. (Almeida 2015, p. 298). As Katz (2003, p. 403) emphasized: “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, but also a violation of the world order, and, therefore, an offense against the great gods who determine the world order”.

23. As pointed out by several authors (for instance, Wolkestein, 1983; Harris, 1991; Abush, 1995; Evers, 1995; Selz, 2000 or Almeida, 2009) the polysemic nature of these mythic accounts would turn them into explanations on Venus’s disappearance from the heavenly dome (given that this planet was understood as the astral manifestation of the goddess), which would also concur for the natural cycles of fertility, and/or to highlight Inanna/Ištar’s personality, as a defying character, whose ambition knew no limits. As discussed elsewhere, the *Descent of Inanna/Ištar to the Netherworld* can also be seen as extremely fertile compositions to analyze the (re)construction processes that marked this divine figure (Almeida, 2015, p.265-302).

24. “Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the great crown on my head? / Go in, my lady, such are the rites of the Mistress of Earth”

25. These creatures are the *kurgarra* and the *galaturra*, in the Sumerian narrative, and Ašûšû-namir, on the Akkadian one. On the character of the first, see Peled, 2014.

26. On the different identities that this group of deities could assume, see Black & Green, 1998, p.34 and AMGG, 2011.

4 FINAL REMARKS

Far away, deeply enclosed, covered by dust, and surrounded by darkness, the Netherworld was intensely frightening to humans. Its hostile character assumed itself as natural, given that it was the Mesopotamian cosmic space reserved for the dead. But, unlike humans, deities had a mighty power and an immortal nature, which could lead us to think that they were immune to these constraints.

However, as analyzed in the Sumero-Akkadian mythic compositions evoked above, the characteristics of this space also had an impact on divine action. First, it seems that deities could not freely travel into this realm as they did when ascending to the heavens, descending to the subterranean ocean, or traversing the terrestrial regions. In fact, it either seems that it was impossible (forbidden?) for divine figures to travel to/from the Netherworld, or those who were able to do so had a particular liminal nature and/or had to resort to complex schemes and tricks. Secondly, even the deities who ruled this space were limited in their liberty of movement. Ereškigal could not leave her throne, a restriction Nergal had to accept for himself because of their marriage.

Finally, it is quite interesting that the explicit or implicit line of reasoning repeatedly used for such constraints was that these were the rules/rites of the Netherworld (and/or of its queen). Moreover, when this answer was given, the deities seemed to comply with it placidly, even ever-defiant Inanna/Ištar.

The mystery and secrecy of these rules can be explained by the indecipherable nature of the Netherworld, given that death was (and still is) the ultimate enigma of human existence. Still, it is strange that profoundly wise figures, such as the Mesopotamian deities, did not question or defy them.

Kramer and Bottéro (1987, p. 59; 1998, p.30) preferred to qualify this religious system as tending to be transcendent, a position many authors follow. In his turn, Jacobsen (1976, p. 5-7) underlined its immanence. The above analysis allows us to point to a reconciliation of these two qualifications - as Saggs (1978, p. 187) has long suggested - namely, in what concerns the nature of its divine figures.

In fact, the Netherworld, with its features and mysterious rules, imposed deep restrictions on the divine power, which force us to question the existence of an absolute notion of transcendence. If it is discernible in mythic literature that Mesopotamian deities had a transcendental power, it is also true that sometimes, as an integral part of the cosmos, deities had to comply with rules and decrees that appeared to be superior to them.

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