louise m. pryke

gods and heroes of the ancient world

ishtar

ROUTLEDGE

ISHTAR

"Ishtar is, without doubt, one of the most complex and baffling of the many gods of antiquity. Yet Louise Pryke has achieved something quite remarkable here in synthesising the multivalence of the goddess's deeds and personas into a coherent and manageable whole. Full of good sense, yet written with flair, this study of the goddess of all goddesses is an important and infinitely useful contribution to the study of ancient myth and religion. The many sources in translation bring alive the world of Mesopotamian thought and forefront Ishtar as the most supreme of deities."

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Ishtar is the first book dedicated to providing an accessible analysis of the mythology and image of this complex goddess. The polarity of her nature is reflected in her role as goddess of sexual love and war, and has made her difficult to characterise in modern scholarship. By exploring this complexity, *Ishtar* offers insight into Mesopotamian culture and thought, and elucidates a goddess who transcended the limits of gender, divinity and nature. It gives an accessible introduction to the Near Eastern pantheon, while also opening up a pathway for comparison with the later Near Eastern and Mediterranean deities who followed her.

Louise M. Pryke is a lecturer in Macquarie University's Ancient History Department. She holds a PhD in Ancient Near Eastern History from the University of Sydney, where she is a Research Associate.

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Susan Deacy is Principal Lecturer at the University of Roehampton, London. She is especially interested in ancient Greek religion and mythology and ancient Greek gender, sexuality and violence and continues to be intrigued by the question that Simonides thought he would be able to answer within a day: 'What is a god?'. Publications include the co-edited volumes *Rape in Antiquity* (1997) and *Athena in the Classical World* (2001) and the forthcoming monograph *A Traitor to Her Sex? Athena the Trickster*.

ISHTAR

Louise Pryke

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-86073-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-71632-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Utopia Std
by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

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SERIES FOREWORD

It is proper for a person who is beginning any serious discourse and task to begin first with the gods.
(Demosthenes, *Epistula* 1.1)

WHY GODS AND HEROES?

The gods and heroes of antiquity are part of our culture. Many function as sources of creative inspiration for poets, novelists, artists, composers and designers. Greek tragedy's ongoing appeal has ensured a continued familiarity with its protagonists. Even the world of management has used ancient gods as representatives of different styles: Zeus and the 'club' culture for example and Apollo and the 'role' culture (see C. Handy, *The Gods of Management: Who they are, how they work and while they fail*, London 1978). This series is concerned with how and why these figures continue to fascinate. But it has another aim too; namely to explore their strangeness. The familiarity of the subjects risks obscuring a vast difference between their modern and ancient meanings and purposes. With certain exceptions, people today do not worship them, yet to the peoples of the ancient world they were venerated as part of pantheon made up of literally hundreds of divine powers. These ranged from major deities, each of whom might, themselves, be worshipped in specialised guises, to heroes – typically regarded as deceased individuals associated with local communities – to other, though overlapping, forms of beings such as daimones and nymphs. The landscape was dotted with sanctuaries, while natural features such as mountains, trees and rivers could be thought to be inhabited by religious beings. Studying these beings involves finding strategies to comprehend a world where everything could be, in the words of Thales, 'full of gods'.

To get to grips with this world, it is helpful to try to set aside modern preconceptions of the divine, shaped as they are in large part by Christianised concepts of a transcendent, omnipotent, morally upright God. The ancients worshipped numerous beings who looked, behaved and suffered like humans, but who, as immortals, were not confined to the human condition. Far from being omnipotent, each had limited powers: even Zeus, the sovereign of the Greek pantheon, could be envisaged sharing control of the cosmos with his brothers Poseidon and Hades. Moreover, ancient polytheism was open to continual reinterpretation, with the result that we should

not expect to find figures with a uniform essence. Accounts of the pantheon often begin with a list of major gods and some salient function: Hephaistos/Vulcan: craft; Aphrodite/Venus: love; Artemis/Diana: the hunt, and so forth. But few deities are this straightforward. Aphrodite, for example, is more than a goddess of love, key though that function is. She is, for instance, *hetaira* ('courtesan') and *porne* ('prostitute') but other epithets point to such guises as patronage of the community (*pandemos*: 'of all the people') and protection of seafaring (*euploia*, *pontia*, *limenia*).

Recognising this diversity, the series consists not of biographies of each god or hero – though such have been attempted in the past – but of investigations into their varied aspects within the complex systems of ancient polytheism. Its approach is shaped partly in response to two distinctive patterns in previous research. Until the middle of the twentieth century, scholarship largely took the form of studies of individual gods and heroes. Many works presented a detailed appraisal of such issues as each figure's origins, myth, and cult; these include L.R. Farnell's examination of major deities in his *Cults of the Greek States* (five volumes, Oxford, 1896–1909) and A.B. Cook's huge three-volume *Zeus* (Cambridge, 1914–1940). Others applied theoretical developments to the study of gods and heroes, notably (and in the closest existing works to a uniform series), K. Kerényi in his investigations of gods as Jungian archetypes, including *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence* (English tr. London 1963) and *Dionysus: Archetypal Image of the Indestructible Life* (English tr. London 1976).

In contrast, under the influence of the 'Paris School' of J.-P. Vernant and others, the second half of the twentieth century saw a shift away from research into particular gods and heroes towards an investigation of the system of which they formed part. This move was fuelled by a conviction that the study of isolated deities could not do justice to the dynamics of ancient religion. Instead, the pantheon came to be envisaged as a logical and coherent network whose various powers were systematically opposed to one another. In a classic study, for example, Vernant argued that the Greek concept of space was consecrated through an opposition between Hestia (the hearth – fixed space) and Hermes (the messenger and traveller – moveable space) (*Myth and Thought Among the Greeks,* London 1983, pp. 127–75). The gods as individual entities were far from neglected however, as may be exemplified by the studies by Vernant, and his colleague M. Detienne, on specific deities including Artemis, Dionysos and Apollo: for example, Detienne's *Apollon, le couteau en main: une approche expérimentqale du polythéisme grec*, Paris, 1998.

Since the first volumes of *Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World* were published in 2006, the series has been marking out a middle ground between the positions just outlined. While approaching its subjects as unique, if varied, individual entities, the authors pay attention to gods and heroes as powers within a network of religious beings. In the earlier years, most of the volumes were on classical topics – and within this, they dealt chiefly with ancient Greek subjects, particularly Greek deities. Now into its second decade, the series continues to deal with gods – but we are expanding our definition of what a 'god' denotes to include collectivities such as the Muses. We are also beginning to include a greater range of 'heroes', including Achilles and Theseus. Roman subjects will be explored too, starting with Diana. But in the biggest development since the series began, we are now expanding what we mean by the 'ancient world' with the inclusion of Near Eastern topics such as Ishtar.

Each volume presents an authoritative, accessible and fresh account of its subject via three main sections. The introduction brings out what it is about the figure in question that merits particular attention. This is followed by a central section which explores key themes including – to varying degrees – origins, myth, cult, and representations in literature and art. Since the series was launched, post-classical reception has increasingly moved into the mainstream of classical research and teaching. This confirms me in my thinking about the importance of a final, third section exploring the 'afterlife' of each subject. Each volume includes illustrations pertinent to each subject and, where appropriate, time charts, genealogical tables and maps. An annotated bibliography points the reader towards further scholarship.

For convenience, though with reservations, we adopted the masculine terms 'gods' and 'heroes' for the series title – although as the Greek *theos* ('god') could be used of goddesses too, this choice does partly reflect ancient usage. I have always suggested that authors might opt for BC/AD rather than BCE/CE as standard practice in Classics and to bring consistency to the series – however I have never strictly insisted on this. We have gone for Greek spellings of ancient Greek names except for famous Latinised exceptions.

Catherine Bousfield, the editorial assistant until 2004, literally dreamt about the series one night in the early 2000s. Her thoroughness and motivation brought it close to its launch. The former classics editor at Routledge, Richard Stoneman, provided his expertise and support as the series moved through the early stages of commissioning and working with authors. I then had the honour of working with his successor Matt Gibbons during the early years of the series. Amy Davis-Poynter and Lizzi Thomasson have been wonderful colleagues in recent years.

Susan Deacy, Roehampton University, January 2017

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

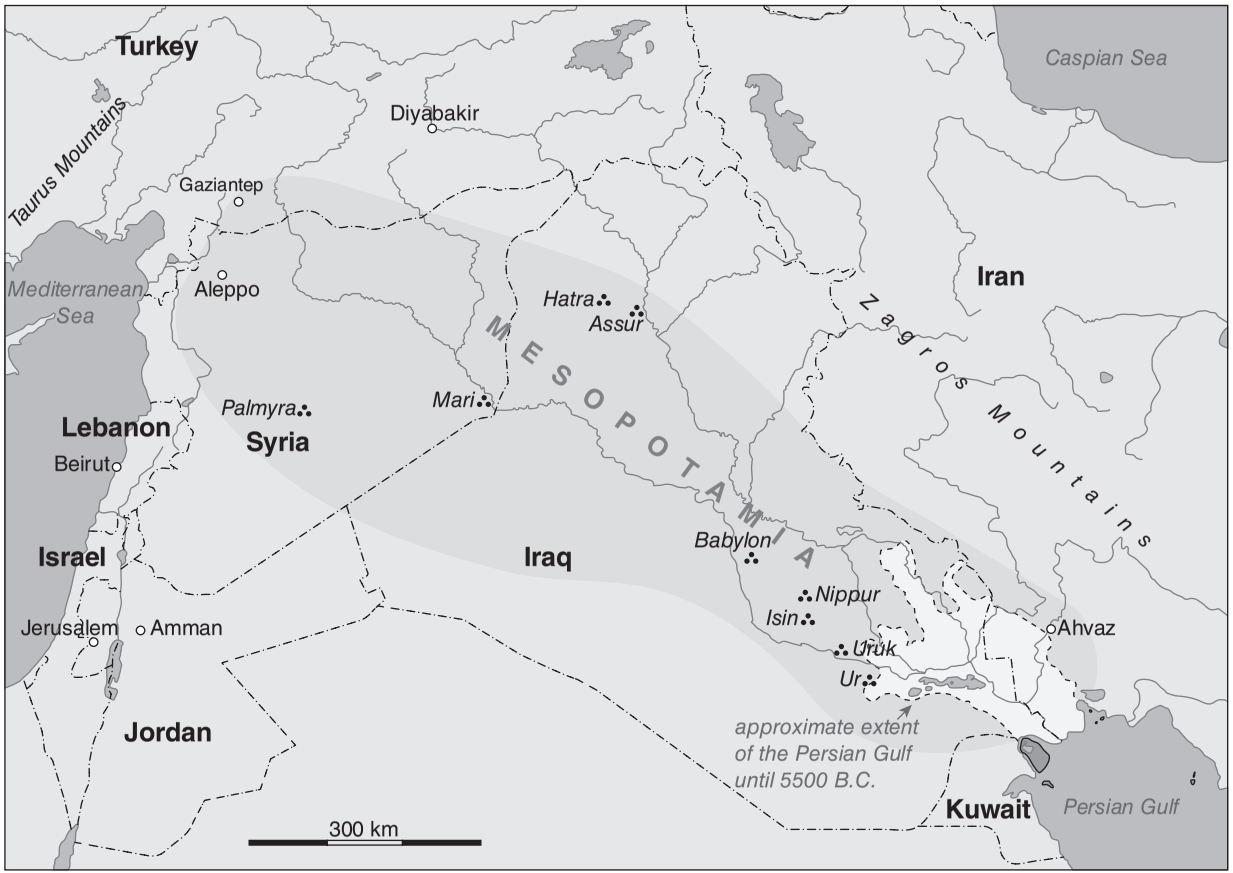
Ishtar considers how social connections are at the heart of the goddess' image in the ancient world – the support and assistance of friends, family, and colleagues has proved to hold similar significance in the writing of this book. Several of my colleagues have been instrumental in the development of this project. In particular, the friendship and oracle-like wisdom (in a positive sense!) of Julia Kindt has been indispensable, and I am also grateful for the insights of Eric Csapo, Alastair Blanshard and Maxine Lewis. Tamara Neal and Anne Rogerson have provided great support and enthusiasm, as well as being most generous with their time and expertise. My former PhD thesis supervisors, Ian Young and Noel Weeks, have provided wonderful guidance in this project, for which I am most grateful. Noel introduced me to Ishtar as an undergraduate, an introduction which has been greatly influential in the direction of my academic development.

My dear friend and former student Marija Elektra Rodriguez has given her time and impressive range of capabilities at several stages of the manuscript's development; her good humour and support have made the whole process more enjoyable. I am grateful for the help of my friends Samantha Grosser, Tom Kennedy, Natalie Mylonas, Brennan Nicholson and Zachary Phillips, and for the generous assistance of Dieter Beck.

Several scholars have lent their valuable advice; I very much appreciate the thoughts and guidance of Tzvi Abusch, JoAnn Scurlock, Heather McKay, Rush Rhem and Zainab Bahrani. Stephanie Budin provided insights and useful criticism at several stages of the writing process, and I am very thankful for her generosity with her knowledge and time. I would like to thank the Series Editor, Susan Deacy, as well as Amy Davis-Poynter, for their enthusiasm and support in extending the Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World Series into the Ancient Near East. I would like to note my appreciation for the guidance of Elizabeth Thomasson. I am grateful for the advice provided by Ishtar's anonymous reviewers.

My friends and students at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University have provided encouragement throughout the writing of this book. Finally, I thank my parents, my family and my loved ones, who fill my heart with joy.

FIGURES



Map of Ancient Mesopotamia. (Map from Wikicommons: By Goran tek-en [CC BY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)]

WHY ISHTAR?

INTRODUCTION

Ishtar (Sumerian Inanna), goddess of love and war, is the most prominent and enduring deity of the Mesopotamian pantheon. This is the earliest deity for which we have written evidence, and thus stands at the very beginning of the tradition of powerful goddesses in the ancient world, such as Hathor, Hera and Astarte. The influence of this deity had a significant impact on the images and cults of many later goddesses, including the famous Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite. The study of Ishtar provides an important early female archetype which can be used as a point of comparison for later myths from a wide variety of cultures. When considered in the context of ancient Mesopotamian society, her study illuminates the religious and cultural values of the Ancient Near East as the 'cradle of civilisation' – an area currently facing political upheaval, but with a rich and transformative influence on world history.

Love is central to the image of Ishtar. Her potent connection to erotic love is seen in love magic and poetry, but there is much more to Ishtar than her sexuality. The goddess has intimate loving relationships with her divine family, and love connects her to the historical Mesopotamian king in a unique way. The goddess' affections were deemed to protect those she cares for, binding together families, communities and empires in a powerful bond that perseveres even beyond death. Indeed, Ishtar's remarkable capacity for social networking is one of the most constant aspects of her image, making the reconsideration of this deity particularly topical for the modern day. Ishtar's passion is connected to the provision of blessings and the promotion of wealth and agricultural abundance, yet she is also a formidable enemy, capable of creating destruction and chaos on a global scale.

As well as being the goddess of love par excellence, Ishtar is also a warrior deity. The powerful voice of the goddess is used to sing songs of joy, give blessings, and to create intimate relationships with those around her – but also for cursing her enemies, performing lamentations and giving a terrifying war-cry on the battlefield. As the 'Queen of Heaven and Earth', the goddess is closely involved in the establishment and maintenance of heavenly and earthly order. She exercises the power of the cosmic *ME* (pronounced 'may'), the fundamental qualities of the universe which are difficult to precisely define, yet crucial for its functioning and regulation.

The study of Ishtar provides a valuable entry point for a close investigation of the myths and culture of the Ancient Near East. Narratives involving Ishtar cover a wide range of mythic territory, and reflect many primary concerns of life: sex, love, justice,

family, community, death and conflict. Ishtar's at times strained relationships with other key gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon, such as Anu (the god of heaven) and Ea (the god of wisdom), provide a focused perspective from which to approach their analysis. Ishtar's interactions with other deities reveal her mythic character – including a superior ability for building supportive social networks to enhance her own power.

The continued violence and social upheaval in the modern Middle East has created a cultural heritage crisis for the 'cradle of civilisation'. While past historical conflicts in the Middle East have also involved looting, vandalism, and the deplorable destruction of people, places and property, the global community has only recently begun to more broadly appreciate the tremendous cultural cost associated with armed conflict in the region. Ongoing problems with conflict, instability and loss make the present day a crucially important time to bring the ancient literature of Mesopotamia to a wider modern audience.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The effort to broaden the access to ancient Mesopotamian texts is not a novel endeavour – in recent history, a great deal of scholarly effort has been invested in this cause, with significant results. Since the mid-1990s, the accessibility of translations and transliterations of Mesopotamian literature has improved, with the potential to significantly expand interdisciplinary analyses in this area. Access to evidence is particularly improved by the availability of online sources (some of which are regularly updated, where funding allows) containing text editions, English language translations, and some bibliography, notably the *Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative* (CDLI), the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL), and the *Melammu* Project.

In this book, Sumerian text translations are sourced from the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL). The ETCSL project began in 1997, and came to completion in 2006. Through creating an easily accessible online repository of Sumerian literature, the project addressed three significant issues, with the latter two of these issues also holding relevance for the purposes of this book.

First, while there is great deal of literature available from ancient Mesopotamia, very little of it has been published satisfactorily in modern editions, or even edited at all. ETCSL aimed to meet the need for a systematically and coherently organised corpus of literature, and one that was universally accessible. Second, the editors of ETCSL recognised the immense potential for Sumerian literature to inform on many other ancient civilisations, due to the 'rich stream of survivals' that flow from Mesopotamian sources into Indian, Arabic, Greek and Roman tradition, and through them to European tradition (ETCSL: Publication History, http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/edition2/general.php). Finally, the editors appreciated the genuine, growing interest in ancient literature from the public, who also benefit from the ability to interact more directly with ancient texts from the world's earliest civilisations.

Throughout this book, when using evidence from ETCSL, I provide the name of the text as it appears in the collection, along with catalogue numbers, so the reader may more easily locate the sources. For clarity, I am generally using English transliterations

throughout the book (for example, 'Ishtar' rather than 'Ištar'), although I retain the transliteration style of quoted translations. This means that in quotations of evidence, there will at times be spelling variances, such as giving the name of the deity as 'Inana' instead of 'Inanna' – a result of the varied styles of transliteration used by different scholars. The use of translations from ETCSL allows for easy access to the transliterated texts as well as bibliography on the quoted materials. However, conventions surrounding Sumerian translation and transliteration have continued to develop in the years since the ETCSL website was updated, and the reader should be aware of the dynamic state of the field. An example of this can be seen in Westenholz and Zsolnay (2016), where the (mis)use of the sign lu_2 in the ETCSL corpus is discussed. While ETCSL generally translates this sign as 'man', Westenholz and Zsolnay make a convincing case for interpreting it as 'person'.

In many ways, this is a watershed moment for the study of the Ancient Near East. Mesopotamia's cultural heritage has been damaged by modern-day warfare and upheaval, yet conversely, literary evidence for ancient Mesopotamia is becoming more and more widely accessible to new audiences which continue to broaden and grow. The issues are related – as the area of study is threatened, and parts of its heritage are lost, there is a renewed commitment to exploring and preserving the rich cultural legacy of ancient Mesopotamia. Presenting the unique historical record of the ancient Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians to broader modern-day audiences is an important part of conserving their cultural heritage for future generations.

ISHTAR: A COMPLICATED DEITY

Capturing a comprehensive picture of the world's first goddess of love requires the consideration of how to deal with the stimulating complexity of Ishtar's character. Ishtar is frequently presented inhabiting the extremes of life: she is associated with celebrations and mourning, laughing and crying, mercy and vengeance, love and conflict – even vitality and death. Subjects of intense complexity often result in rich scholarship. Yet somehow, for Ishtar, this has generally not been the case. The mixture of divine qualities possessed by Ishtar has traditionally made her difficult to quantify in modern scholarship (Harris, 1991: 262), and has raised the question of whether the defining aspects of the goddess can be clearly elucidated. For the legendary scholar of the Ancient Near East, Thorkild Jacobsen, Ishtar was 'all women and of infinite variety' (1976: 143).

Ishtar's many facets are integral to her image, and this diversity is a defining feature of her identity (Bahrani, 2001: 148–50). Thus, it is the objective of this analysis to embrace the goddess' complexity, rather than to diffuse it. While attempting to come to grips with the goddess' mixed qualities, we encounter the added question of coherence. If we view Ishtar as 'all women and of infinite variety', do we risk diminishing the distinctiveness which may have originally defined her?

Any study which examines Ishtar must accept her complicated nature, yet this complexity should not be mistaken for a lack of coherence in the image of the goddess. The presence of repeated motifs and themes in literary and material sources for

Ishtar allows us a clearer view on the at times blurred image of the goddess. Ishtar's frequent associations with love and community, even within the contexts of battle and death, suggest that the disparate aspects of the goddess' nature are not randomly aligned. The thematic approach employed in this study provides a methodological focus with which to give some order to our analysis – if not to our divine subject.

The thematic approach used here involves focusing on those areas more commonly associated with the goddess. This thematic analysis combines an overview fitting to an introductory work, with a more nuanced and detailed exploration of the subject. Throughout we are guided by the emphases present in the ancient evidence, as well as those themes that have been the focus of scholarship. While the thematic approach to methodology utilised here is not without challenges, the risks connected with this approach are reduced by maintaining a continued focus on the contexts of the evidence.

The complexities which arise from the diversity of Ishtar's image make her seem a more 'human' character than many other deities. We ourselves are not generally constant in nature in all situations and at all times, and the recognition of a similar variability in the world's first attested goddess can only add a sense of accessibility to the study of this ancient deity. Ishtar is a passionate, emotional and ambitious deity, capable of showing great loyalty and tenderness. Ishtar is frequently vengeful, yet also merciful, a quality noted in hymns to the goddess. Her sexuality, along with her gender, encompasses similar diversity; Ishtar's ability to incorporate varying sexual roles and qualities gives further depth to her characterisation in the ancient evidence, a subject considered in Chapter 2.

The goddess' wide variety of traits and qualities, some of which appear contradictory, have provoked the suggestion among modern scholars that Inanna, the Sumerian face of Semitic Ishtar, is a conflation of several divine figures. Inanna's attestation predates that of Ishtar, and the deity's name is derived from *nin-an-na*, meaning 'Lady of Heaven'. The enigmatic quality of the goddess, particularly in terms of her appearance in modern scholarship, is apparent from the very outset of this study – the origins and potential meanings of the names 'Inanna' and 'Ishtar' are bound in controversy (see Westenholtz, 2009: 345).

While it is indeed likely that the Mesopotamian goddess 'Ishtar' is the result of a fusion of a number of Sumerian and Semitic goddesses, this does not fully explain the diversity of her image – Sumerian Inanna can be shown to be associated with social conflict, and Semitic Ishtar is the subject of love poetry. The eclectic nature of Ishtar should not be considered as evidence of a conflated identity, as it cannot be assumed that the ancient Mesopotamians could not have conceived of a goddess with such extremes of personality. Further, the alignment of love and battle in the image of the deity is not evidence of a lack of consistency. Indeed, both divine aspects are united in Ishtar's special relationship with the Mesopotamian king, considered in Chapter 4.

Ishtar, Inanna and Syncretisms

In this book, I tend to use the name 'Inanna' when discussing Sumerian-language evidence, and the Babylonian name 'Ishtar' more generally. Although the two goddesses

should not be considered entirely synonymous with one another, the similarities between Ishtar and Inanna are sufficiently significant to allow them to be analysed jointly (see Harris, 1991: 161–2; Vanstiphout, 1984; and Abusch, 1999 for an overview of the problem, bibliography and possible solutions).

The thematic method of analysis used in this book is intended to lessen any problems that may arise from studying the goddesses Inanna and Ishtar in a single volume. The themes considered in the following chapters have been chosen in part for their relevance to the images of both deities, although the emphasis on the evidence from Sumerian myth does tip the balance in Inanna's favour. As the earlier goddess, it seems fitting for Inanna's myths to provide the foundation for this study.

The goddess called 'Ishtar' in this volume had a diverse image in ancient Mesopotamia. As noted by Westenholz, all Mesopotamian deities were involved in a continuous process of 'reinterpretation and syncretism, mutation and fossilization, fusion and fission' (2013: 29). One of Ishtar's many attributes is that of a citadel goddess; she first appears as the patron deity of the southern city of Uruk, the first Mesopotamian urban centre, in the late fourth millennium BCE. 'Ishtar' was worshipped in Assyria as Ishtar of Nineveh, Ishtar of Arbela and Ishtar of Babylon, to name just a few of her incarnations. Local cults are thought to have involved greater emphases on different aspects of the goddess, with some scholars arguing that these geographic 'surnames' may indicate entirely separate deities (Allen, 2015). In Hittite sources, Ishtar's local epithets numbered more than twenty variations, with Beckman noting that the relationship between so many Ishtar-figures is 'difficult to untangle' (1998: 4). Later in antiquity, Ishtar's image contributed to the identity of the Phoenician goddess, Astarte, and she is also, at times, equated with the Elamite mother goddess, Pinikir (1999: 25).

The ancient evidence is not explicit in revealing how the various types of 'Ishtar' may have been related to one another, and relations between these divinities most likely changed over time. In light of the potential for the diversity of Ishtar figures to create confusion (as noted by Beckman), the focus of this study is on the image of 'Ishtar', primarily as she appears in Mesopotamian narrative literature, such as myths and epics.

The ability of narrative to shape characterisation is significant for providing a sense of how deities may have been perceived in the ancient world. Mythological tropes relating to Ishtar can be seen in a wide variety of ancient evidence, including material culture, hymns, royal inscriptions and magical texts, suggesting that the mythopoeic image of the goddess informed her broader image. Of course, different genres of Mesopotamian literature reflect varied purposes and agendas. The approach in this book of focusing primarily on narratives and themes means perhaps privileging the anthropomorphic form of the deity (although it is uncertain to what extent 'non-narrative' literature such as ritual texts involve fictional or narrative elements) – an outcome which may negatively impact attempts to provide a balanced overview of her complex appearance in the ancient evidence. At the same time, it is the view here that any attempt to build a fully representative view of Ishtar in the ancient world would be undermined by the difficulties raised by the available evidence, and the academic

'hangover' from the once influential historiographical treatments of the deity, with these issues considered further in the following pages.

With these challenges in mind, this volume aims to use 'fruitful generalisations' (Hundley, 2013: 69) to provide an overview of the goddess, and to offer a useful foundation for future studies. The goddess 'Ishtar', who provides the focus for this book, shows complexity and variety in different geographical locations, periods and even genres, but while her image certainly exhibits fluidity over time and space, there is also a sense of coherence provided by her connection to love and strong social ties. While acknowledging the limitations of the sources, this study aims to facilitate further discussion and engagement with the complexities and challenges involved in modern attempts to understand one of the world's most ancient deities.

MESOPOTAMIA

Evidence for Ishtar comes from Mesopotamia, an area of the Ancient Near East generally considered to be placed geographically between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The name 'Mesopotamia' has Greek origins, meaning 'land between the rivers' (Leick, 2010: xiii). Although there is much debate about Mesopotamia's exact territorial extent, its area is considered to roughly correspond with modern-day Iraq, Kuwait and parts of Syria, Iran and Turkey. Mesopotamia was home to many of the world's first great empires, including the Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian Empires.

Even the briefest survey of the evidence used to uncover the Mesopotamian goddess of love must begin by acknowledging that the ancient sources for Ishtar, while extensive, are fragmentary, incomplete and difficult to contextualise. The problematic nature of the evidence for Ishtar is surprising when considered in light of the goddess' status, and her enduring influence in the ancient world. However, the difficulties with the evidence can be considered largely (although not exclusively) the result of the goddess' antiquity. Ishtar comes from a very early time; as noted above, her cult is attested at Uruk as early as the late fourth millennium BCE.

The developments in writing, agriculture, the wheel and astronomy in ancient Mesopotamia have earned it the epithet 'the cradle of civilisation'. In the words of the famous Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer, 'history begins at Sumer'. From its emergence in Sumer, Mesopotamian history covers a vast timespan. The Sumerians are the first known group to have populated Mesopotamia. Along with the later Akkadians (a term that includes the Assyrians and Babylonians), they dominated the history of the region for over 3000 years. Modern historical accounts of Mesopotamia frequently draw to a close at the end of the Neo-Babylonian period in 539 BCE.

Evidence for Mesopotamian religion predates the invention of writing in Sumer (around 3300 BCE), with Neolithic evidence including grave goods and cult chambers (Foster, 2007). Scholars have explored the presence of Neolithic figurines in the forms of corpulent women, men, animals, and at times, hybrid creatures. Statuettes of women with exaggerated breasts, buttocks and thighs have been discovered in all regions of ancient Mesopotamia (Kozlowski and Aurenche, 2005: 209–232), and the

Figure 0.1 Mesopotamian sculpture, ca. 2000 BCE. Terracotta, height 13.7 cm. Courtesy of LACMA.

overstated female sexual characteristics of these figures suggests an emphasis on fertility (Foster, 2007: 165).

Mesopotamian Religion – A Moving Target?

Religion was a central and dynamic aspect of ancient Mesopotamian life, culture, and identity, during all periods. Religious ideas, imagery and meaning permeated every aspect of daily life, and this embedded quality creates difficulties in terms of providing sure parameters in which to situate any academic discourse. 'Religion' as such is notoriously hard to define, as Geertz (1999) and others have shown. Providing a definition of 'Mesopotamian religion' is similarly problematic, for several reasons, which are briefly noted here.

First, a definition for Mesopotamian religion must be sufficiently specific to be useful, while also fluid enough to encompass 3000 years of history. This history is situated across a vast (and frequently shifting) geographical area, and involves significant cultural changes and diversity (notable cultural groups during this vast expanse of time include the Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians – all of whom worshipped Ishtar, among other deities). While we are fortunate to have a great deal of data available, the amount of material is overwhelming, and the study and understanding of Mesopotamian religion is transforming rapidly. There is little scholarly

consensus on key issues such as the nature of Mesopotamian deities, the order (and even number) of the pantheon (or pantheons), or the roles of rituals in religious cult. This lack of consensus reflects the fragmentary nature of the evidence, as well as the difficulties in a lack of clear context, necessary for drawing solid conclusions. In addition to being incomplete, fragmentary and hard to contextualise, the evidence at hand is unbalanced in terms of reflecting the religious practices of the elite social classes over the general population. Additionally, for modern Westerners, there are conceptual difficulties involved in understanding an ancient, foreign religion (Oppenheim, 1977).

The ancient sources tell us what it was believed the gods did (primarily myths and epics), what the gods were like (primarily myths, epics and hymns) and what humans were expected to do with respect to the gods (primarily rituals). Generally, the sources do not offer a description of inner religious feelings, and attempts to infer feelings from the evidence risks the anachronistic imposition of modern notions. Therefore, for the purposes of this book, ancient Mesopotamian religion may be defined as a combination of what ancient Mesopotamians said about the gods, including their relationship to humans, and what humans did in response. This admittedly simple and utilitarian definition is aimed towards giving some focus to this study. It is made in the awareness that Mesopotamian religion is an area where scholarly interpretations are rapidly transitioning, and with the further knowledge that any attempt at a systematic account of Mesopotamian religion must, for the reasons previously outlined, remain incomplete (Böck, 2015).

The Mesopotamian 'god'

One area of Mesopotamian religion where there is a remarkably high degree of scholarly consensus – if only in a negative sense – is around the definition of the term 'god'. The generally held view is that scholarly ambitions to provide a comprehensive definition for the meaning of the word 'god' in the field of Mesopotamian religion are destined to end in frustration. While Mesopotamian deities were once considered to be dominantly anthropomorphic, recent work has demonstrated that 'gods' in Mesopotamia could be identified with natural phenomena, take astral forms, or be non-anthropomorphic and non-animate (for an overview of the challenge presented in answering the question 'what is a god?' in Mesopotamian religion, and some possible approaches, see Porter, 2011). Additionally, the range of ways to be 'divine' in ancient Mesopotamia shows fluidity between texts, genres and periods.

In his discussion of Sumerian deities, Vanstiphout has presented a useful collection of qualities and powers often associated with divinity in Mesopotamian religion. These include omnipresence, immortality, omniscience, omnipotence and guardianship or responsibility (2009). These divine properties assist in defining Mesopotamian divinity, but to attempt to clarify further risks reaching beyond the scope of the evidence. Indeed, the question of where humanity ends and divinity begins is a theme that formed the basis of many ancient Mesopotamian epics, such as *Adapa and the South Wind*, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. While these works of literature rather raise the issues than provide clear answers, the capacity for immortality, and the inhabitation

of a dominant status in cosmic hierarchy, are frequently expressed divine qualities across a variety of written and material sources. It is the view here that hierarchy and status are particularly important for understanding Mesopotamian divinity. For this point, it is especially useful to note the work of Gradel (2002) on divinity in Roman religion (originally applied to Ancient Near Eastern religion by Pongratz-Leisten, 2011: 5–6), who considers the human–deity divide to be an issue involving distinctions in status rather than a distinction in nature.

Concepts around status are all the more important when considered in relation to Ishtar; one of the deity's most prominent features in ancient literature is her ability to enact swift changes of status. Ishtar also possessed a special competence in presiding over occasions involving changes to social status, such as marriage, and in myth she is presented as keenly focused on improving her own position in the divine hierarchy.

The Mesopotamian Pantheon

In Mesopotamian conceptions of the divine world, the major Mesopotamian deities consisted of 'a constellation of aspects that may be treated (semi-)independently or as an [sic] unity depending on the context' (Hundley, 2013: 69). The conceptual structure which allowed these divinities to be compared, segregated or viewed jointly was the pantheon. Like the ancient Greeks of the Classical period, the ancient Mesopotamians were polytheistic in their worship, and like the ancient Greeks, the deities that filled their pantheons showed variation at different periods and locations. Moreover, different cities and geographical locations had their own pantheons, which changed over time, and these panthea reflected different spheres of religious experience (Rubio, 2011: 92). Old Babylonian copies of scribal lists show the Mesopotamian scribes listing divine names, interrelating and ranking divinities in a scheme that was connected to the cosmic and social status of the divinities (Jacobsen and Pettinato, 2005: 5951). As well as being the subject of 'god lists', the mythological pantheon is known from literary compositions. City deities and the royal pantheon were represented in official cult documents, such as royal inscriptions (Rubio, 2011: 92). So, although it is clear that there was no one 'pantheon' of Mesopotamian religion, in this book for the sake of clarity (and to avoid linguistic tangles), I will continue to use the singular word 'pantheon' when discussing the framework of Mesopotamian deities that formed a crucial element of Mesopotamian religion.

Although different divinities held more or less prominence in the pantheon of ancient Mesopotamia over time, for the purposes of this book it is useful to introduce the reader to some of the most significant deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon. The overall scheme of 'the pantheon' very generally involved a group of 'great gods': these were the most powerful deities, involved in deciding the fate of the world, and ruling over the earth and the cosmos. This list of Mesopotamian 'great gods' follows the work of Hrůša (2015): Anu (Sumerian An), the god of heaven; Enlil, king of the gods; Ea (Sumerian Enki), the god of fresh water and wisdom; Sin (Sumerian Nanna), the god of the moon; Shamash (Sumerian Utu), the god of the sun and justice; Adad, the god of the storm; Ishtar (Sumerian Inanna), goddess of love and war; Ninurta

(warrior deity); Nergal, god of pestilence and war; Nabu (Sumerian Nisaba), the god of scribal art; Marduk, the god of the city and Babylonian empire; and Assur, god of the city and Assyrian empire.

Divine Subdivisions

In addition to the 'great gods', many other types of divinities were present in Mesopotamian religion. Indeed, there are over 3000 names of divinities recorded in written sources from Mesopotamian sources, with most of these names occurring very rarely. A common distinction between deities is the *Igigi* gods and the *Anunnaki* gods, although the fluidity in the usage of these terms in Mesopotamian sources precludes tidy definitions of their meaning. From the thirteenth century BCE, the term *Igigi* can be a collective name for the heavenly deities, while the gods of the underworld are the *Annunaki*; previously, both terms could be a collective designation for deities, heavenly or otherwise (Hrůša, 2015: 25). As an example of a different usage for this terminology, Leick points out that in the Mesopotamian Flood narrative, the *Igigi* gods are described as burdened with work by the *Annunaki* (1991: 85). Further, Foster notes the usage of the term *Annuna* (or *Annunaki* here) as referring to the greater ruling deities, and the *Igigi* being lesser ruling deities (2007: 174).

The function and development of the Mesopotamian pantheon has been succinctly elucidated by Hundley:

> The Mesopotamians seemed to view their pantheon as a holistic ordering of the world, with a specific deity assigned to the areas of the cosmos they deemed important, from nature to culture or government. Whether in nature or society, the placement of divine beings in charge of specific areas of the cosmos reveals the ancient Mesopotamian attempt to understand and in some sense control the meaningful world around them.
>
> (2013: 79)

As Hundley has noted, the pantheon provided a framework for the ancient Mesopotamian to order, and even influence, the heavenly and earthly spheres of the ancient world. This framework incorporated elements of the natural and civilised worlds, alongside the esoteric, and these elements could be positive, negative or ambivalent. The pantheon held a central and significant position in Mesopotamian religion – the connections binding together deities also provided structure for connecting elements of the natural and civilised worlds, and importantly, provided pathways through which 'those elements that were dangerous, necessary, and beyond their control' (Hundley, 2013: 79) could be accessed and influenced. It makes sense, then, for the pantheon to show differentiation during different periods and locations, as it was a meaningful construction reflecting human perspectives of the natural and supernatural worlds.

The relationships between the various Mesopotamian deities is a frequent subject of emphasis in Mesopotamian literature. The close family bonds of many deities is often noted in a wide range of ancient texts, such as cult documents, myths, hymns and epics – although the order and emphases of these connections shows variation. The astral aspects of the bonds between deities, and indeed, the astral

aspects of the deities themselves, is a complex yet swiftly evolving field of study (see Rochberg, 2009).

Ishtar and the Pantheon

Not all 'great gods' were equal. During the early second millennium BCE, three great gods, Anu, Enlil and Ea exercised the greatest power in the cosmos, while later on, national deities such as Assur and Marduk came to dominate the other gods (Foster, 2007: 174). While Ishtar was generally not listed among these most dominant of great gods, she has a special place in the pantheon. Ishtar's unique competence in the areas of love and social connectedness gives her particular significance in the pantheon, with its focus on tracing natural bonds and familial or spousal ties between deities. Ishtar's place in the pantheon is considered in greater detail in Chapter 3, but it is worth noting that, perhaps more than any other Mesopotamian deity, Ishtar's characterisation in myth shows her to possess a talent for a kind of 'social mobility' – she proves adept at enhancing her own power through her influence with other deities.

THE EVIDENCE FOR ISHTAR

Mesopotamian myths involving Ishtar were written in cuneiform script, which is considered to be the world's oldest form of writing (although there is some competition from Egyptian sources). Cuneiform is composed of wedge-shaped characters and was written

Figure 0.2 Economic Document from the Temple of Ishtar in Uruk. Courtesy of Walters Art Museum.

on clay tablets – the name 'cuneiform' comes from Latin, meaning 'wedge-shaped.' The earliest (readable) cuneiform writings are in Sumerian, long believed to be a linguistic orphan with no relation to any known language (Cunningham, 2013: 118; Leith, 2005: 3375). By the middle of the third millennium BCE, the Sumerian language was beginning to be eclipsed by Akkadian, a Semitic language which is an early cognate of Hebrew.

Unlike other ancient writing media, such as the papyri or leather scrolls crucial to the analysis of the Classical world, cuneiform tablets survive in great abundance. Hundreds of thousands of clay tablets containing cuneiform writing have been recovered from ruined Mesopotamian cities, and together with archaeological discoveries, have provided the main sources of evidence on the Mesopotamian culture. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the cuneiform system of writing on shaping world culture; for over three millennia, cuneiform was the primary language of communication throughout the Ancient Near East, extending to parts of the Mediterranean (Radner and Robson, 2011: xxvii–xxix). Despite its dominance in antiquity, the usage of cuneiform ceased entirely between the first and third centuries BCE. The disappearance of cuneiform accompanied, and likely facilitated, the loss of the awareness of Mesopotamian cultural traditions from the ancient and modern worlds.

Prior to this widespread cultural amnesia, the cuneiform script had a powerful influence on the artistic and scientific development of the ancient world. Yet Assyriology (a general term for the academic discipline devoted to the study of Mesopotamia) is a relatively new field, being just over 150 years old. Many of the lesser known myths involving Inanna have been published in the last fifty years or so, and it was only as recently as 1983, with the publication of *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth* (Wolkstein and Kramer) that the goddess became more widely known to non-specialists. There is, however, a silver lining to the goddess' near-anonymity in the modern world. Scholarship devoted to later deities often faces the challenge of needing to 'defamiliarise' the divine subject; many Classical deities are so well known in the modern world that their more recent manifestations in popular culture have a tendency to eclipse the image of the ancient deity. With Ishtar, there is no such issue – to the Mesopotamians, she was among the most revered of deities, but to most modern-day audiences, she is almost entirely a stranger.

The literary texts that form the basis for this analysis comprise a small percentage of surviving cuneiform texts, with the majority of extant written works reflecting administrative and business purposes in composition. While the Akkadian and Sumerian texts used in this study both utilise the cuneiform script, they are linguistically distinct and probably chronologically also, as Sumerian seems to have been disappearing, as a spoken language, as Akkadian was becoming more common. While Sumerian is linguistically isolated, Akkadian is related to other Semitic languages. The two main dialects of Akkadian were Assyrian (from northern Mesopotamia) and Babylonian (from Southern Mesopotamia), but literary texts were written in an artificial literary dialect, which differs from everyday texts such as letters, and spoken dialects. This means there is virtually no possibility of dating Akkadian literature on linguistic grounds. Modern knowledge of Sumerian is insufficient for certain dating on the basis of language used, and most Sumerian literature that has survived to the present day is in the form of copies from the Old Babylonian period.

Further, while Akkadian and Sumerian were separate languages, they exerted influence on one another. Sumerian influences are present in the style, content, format and vocabulary of Akkadian literature, and Sumerian literature composed after the end of the third millennium BCE was likely written by authors from an Akkadian-speaking background (see Foster, 2013).

The authorship of cuneiform literary works is an area where modern understanding is limited. Cuneiform texts that have survived to the modern day are frequently later copies (possibly produced during a process of canonisation, see Hallo, 2010: 14–17). In terms of dating, as texts were copied and re-copied, we may know from a discovered example that a text existed at least from a certain time, and yet be very uncertain when it was first written (or by whom, or for what purpose). Later 'editions' of the texts are the products of Mesopotamian scribal schools, known to have played a significant role in the survival and development of Mesopotamian culture.

Most Sumerian literature was transmitted without naming an author, and for those compositions where authorship is ascribed, theological or legendary figures are often listed as the author responsible for their creation (Black, 1998: 43) – making us wary about accepting claims of authorship. There are some significant exceptions to this trend, such as the historical figure, Enheduanna, considered on p. 16. Literacy in Mesopotamia was once considered to be the preserve of a small, elite group of male scribes; however, recent scholarship has shown that many women as well as men from different societal backgrounds could read and write in Mesopotamia – although 'literacy' involved a variety of levels of engagement with writing (Veldhuis, 2011). During the Old Babylonian Period, cuneiform writing showed several fundamental stylistic changes, and new genres were developed. The skill of writing moved outside of the main institutions of the city, into the hands of citizens, as well as into private homes. While the awareness of a more varied group of literate Mesopotamians increases the pool of possible authors for cuneiform literature, it is still worthwhile to note the important role of scribal schools and temple personnel in the development of these texts.

The ancient context and audience of cuneiform literature is a further area of scholarship where very little is known. The texts themselves rarely comment on these issues, and so the contents and style of literature heavily influence the perception of how genres of literature functioned in ancient Mesopotamian society. The presence of cuneiform literature in the curriculum of scribal schools means they might be encountered by a literate person in his or her education. Aside from schooling, the knowledge of which members of society were exposed to literary texts is limited. The labelling of many hymns with the names of accompanying instrumentation indicates these compositions were performed, but the circumstances of the performance remain obscure. Royal praise poetry (considered further in Chapter 4) is the clear exception, as these compositions address named rulers, and are considered to have been produced for a royal audience.

The uncertainty surrounding the production and consumption of cuneiform literature is perhaps unsurprising considering the antiquity of the sources, and the still developing understanding of ancient Mesopotamian culture in the modern day. As the awareness of Mesopotamian history continues to grow, it is likely that a better sense of context for cuneiform literature will emerge. With all the challenges raised

by the uncertainty over the dating, authorship and audience of Mesopotamian literature, it is the content of the texts which is the best guide for interpreting their possible meanings. In this book, the image of the deity is considered predominately through the evidence provided by literary sources, in awareness of the limitations arising from the questions over authorship, audience and context.

ENHEDUANNA AND ANCIENT LITERATURE

The earliest poems to Inanna were written by Enheduanna – the world's first individually identified poet and author. Enheduanna (ca. 2300 BCE) was a high priestess to the Sumerian moon god, Nanna, at his temple at Ur, whose written works are known from Old Babylonian and Neo-Sumerian copies (George, 1992: 3). She was also the daughter of Sargon of Akkad ('Sargon the Great'), who was the first ruler to unite northern and southern Mesopotamia. The sources for Enheduanna's life and career are historical, literary and archaeological: she commissioned the alabaster relief, the Disk of Enheduanna, which is inscribed with her dedication.

Figure 0.3 The Disk of Enheduanna. Disk of white calcite; on one side is a scene of sacrifice, on the other an inscription of Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon of Akkad. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, item no. B16665.

The Disk shows the priestess in the company of three male attendants, pouring a libation at an altar (Westenholz, 1989). The figure of the priestess on the disk is drawn with precision, and her countenance has been preserved. While the inscription on the reverse of the disk is fragmentary, it gives Enheduanna's name, and appears to describe the action of the image, where the poet is performing a religious dedication for the deity, Inanna of Ur.

The famous *Exaltation of Inanna* was written by Enheduanna, in addition to a collection of forty-two temple hymns (Westenholz 1989; Hallo and van Dijk, 1968). The cycle of temple hymns celebrates numerous deities (including Inanna) and their sacred homes, and the hymns conclude with an assertion of the work's originality and its authorship:

> The compiler of the tablets was En-hedu-ana. My king, something has been created that no one has created before.
>
> (The temple hymns, ETCSL 4.80.1)

Enheduanna was a powerful and influential figure in her own time. Her abilities and literary achievements were recognised in ancient Mesopotamia long after the time of her writing; her compositions formed part of the curriculum in scribal schools. Yet, in a similar fashion to the goddess she praised so heartily, Enheduanna is almost entirely unknown in the modern day, and her achievements have been largely overlooked. Indeed, the authority of Enheduanna as a religious official of high rank, and as the author of early literary compositions is not unanimously accepted in the field of Assyriology (see for example, Civil, 1980: 229; and Black, 2002: 2–4), perhaps at times due to her gender (Bahrani, 2001: 116). Although the authorship of cuneiform texts is a complicated subject, the historical record clearly identifies Enheduanna as filling the roles of priestess, princess and poet, and there seems no correspondingly persuasive cause to cast doubt on these sources. The consistent manner of the attribution of authorship to Enheduanna, by Old Babylonian copyists, is considered by Westenholz to be an 'eloquent testimony' to Enheduanna's 'unique literary distinction' (Westenholz and Sallaberger 1999: 76–77). Westenholz and Sallaberger note further that while some alterations may have been made to later copies of the poet's work, the substance of the compositions is undoubtedly authentically her own (1999: 76).

A remarkably clear and coherent image of Inanna appears in the works of Enheduanna, despite a passage of time spanning over 4000 years. The goddess of love is praised in the poet's compositions for her beauty, her ferocity and her powerful voice, as well as for the close bonds she shares with her fellow deities, and her ability to wield the divine powers of the *ME*:

> Praise be to the destroyer of foreign lands, endowed with divine powers by An, to my lady enveloped in beauty, to Inana!
>
> (Inana B, ETCSL 4.07.2)

Enheduanna's personal connection to her divine subject is shown in the autobiographical elements of her poetry, such as the poet's struggles against a usurper

(Foster, 2015: 207). In the *Exaltation of Inanna* (also known as *Inana B*) Enheduanna credits the goddess for answering her prayers and defeating her enemies; this composition emphasises the goddess' ferocity and rage, and the unlimited scope of her influence. The poet also speaks of her sense of inferiority in attempting to clearly encapsulate the many cosmic powers of the deity in writing – a feeling which may find empathy among modern writers on the subject! The poet's description of her sense of awe at the greatness of her divine subject could perhaps be viewed as the first known example of the historiographical tradition of the 'apologia', from a named author.

Contrasts and divine comparisons are used by the poet to describe the diverse aspects of the goddess' character. Enheduanna also illustrates Inanna's capacity for bringing about swift changes in status and fortunes – a divine ability the poet writes of having experienced first-hand. Enheduanna's compositions further reflect the important role played by Inanna's anthropomorphic moods in her actions. The goddess' rage is presented as a powerful force, capable of causing destruction for her enemies and 'foreign lands', but the poet also describes her own attempts to calm the goddess' mood through prayer, song and ritual (*Inana B*, ETCSL, 4.07.2), and also through appeals to other deities, to assist in calming Inanna's heart (*Inana C*, ETCSL 4.07.3). Even in light of these efforts, and the goddess' eventual appeasement and 'delight' (ETCSL 4.07.2), the poet acknowledges the difficulty of any attempts to placate the goddess' anger.

For a female author to stand at the beginning of written traditions in world history is perhaps at odds with the early western canonical tradition, where male authors tended to dominate (Binkley, 2004: 47). Scribal traditions in the ancient world are frequently considered an area of male authority, yet the connection between women, writing and wisdom in Mesopotamia has very early origins. The Sumerian grain goddess Nisaba is the earliest deity to be connected with the protection of the art of writing (Michalowski, 2001: 577–588), and the goddess consequently became known as the transmitter of wisdom. Groneberg reasons that the close connection of writing and wisdom may have developed through the cultural acceptance of writing as a precise manual craft, one which was honoured at the time as an intellectual skill (2007: 327). Royal women and priestesses in early Mesopotamia appear to have had a significant role in writing and composition, a connection evident in the poetry of Enheduanna. Of course, influential female authors can also be seen in Classical literature; an interesting parallel to Enheduanna is provided by the Greek poet, Sappho, who wrote over 1500 years later. Like Sappho, Enheduanna's compositions focused on a love goddess.

In modern times, the two most well-known written works featuring Ishtar are the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the myth of *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* describes the adventures of the world' first literary hero, a legendary king named Gilgamesh who in many ways can be considered a male counterpart of Ishtar. In *Inanna's Descent*, Ishtar journeys to the underworld, where she is killed, before being revived with the help of other deities. These two works are arguably the most prominent extant works of Mesopotamian literature, alongside the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*, and the Babylonian Flood narrative, *Atra-Hasis*. In addition to these sources, we also have hymns to the goddess, royal inscriptions, lamentations, law codes, proverbs, poetry and several additional myths, such as the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda.*

ISHTAR AND IMAGERY

Beyond the written sources, the imagery of the goddess is a dominant motif of grave goods, as noted by Barrett (2007). It is most likely in connection with the afterlife, and particularly her journey to the underworld, that the deity is depicted in the famous Burney relief, considered in detail in Chapter 6.

In some of Ishtar's portraiture we see her accompanied by her emblematic animal, the lion, and she may carry weapons. Sumerian Inanna in particular is often represented with a lion, or standing on top of a lion. She frequently appears in iconography in her celestial aspect, as an eight-pointed star, and is also associated in visual sources with rosettes. The star and the quiver are the most frequently seen symbols relating to Ishtar (Ornan, 2009: 96). Ishtar's star is often depicted alongside a sun-disk and a crescent-shaped moon symbol, representing her brother, the solar deity Shamash (Sumerian Utu), and her father, the moon deity Sin (Sumerian Nanna). Connections between deities and heavenly bodies are seen from the earliest stages of Mesopotamian civilisation (Rochberg, 2004). Ishtar's association with the astral emblem of an eight-pointed star is found on cylinder seals from the Early Dynastic period, and remains closely linked to the deity through thousands of years of Mesopotamian history, up to the Neo-Babylonian period (Rochberg, 2004).

In anthropomorphic form, Ishtar's artistic representation commonly involves presenting her as wearing necklaces (including a collar or choker), bracelets, earrings and a crossed halter across her breasts (Bahrani, 2001: 155–156). In erotic plaques, Inanna is often paired with her consort, Dumuzi, in bed scenes (Assante, 2002).

The goddess is at times presented alongside scorpion imagery, such as on Babylonian cylinder seals. This artistic connection to scorpions can also be seen in

Figure 0.4 The Warka Vase. Alamy Stock Photo.

literary sources, where Inanna battles a giant scorpion in a Sumerian myth depicting her usurpation of the god of heaven, An (Pryke, 2016). Ishtar may be pictured alongside the Mesopotamian king, and she is shown taking part in religious rituals or ceremonies. This type of scene is famously shown on the Warka Vase, a carved alabaster vessel discovered in Inanna's temple complex in Uruk. The vase shows the goddess standing at the doorway of the temple, receiving a procession, and is one of the oldest known examples of narrative relief sculpture, dating around 3000 BCE.

The Warka Vase is divided into four registers of carvings. The lower registers feature plants, animals, and male figures carrying baskets – signifying the abundance that is associated with the worship of Inanna (Winter, 2010: 209). On the top tier, the goddess herself stands at the doorway of the temple, in front of two reed bundles that are functioning as doorposts, and are frequently employed symbols of the goddess. Inanna is receiving the procession, presented continuously in the lower tiers, enhancing the sense of fecundity and abundance presented on the Vase. The Warka Vase was badly damaged in 2003, when it was wrenched from its display case in the midst of the looting and ransacking of the National Museum of Iraq that occurred during the US-led invasion. The broken Vase was returned months later, and along with the Warka Mask it was returned to display in 2015, when the Museum reopened after a twelve-year closure.

The large number of literary and material sources of evidence for Ishtar, accompanied by the frequent lack of a clear historical context for these sources, combine to further increase the diversity of the goddess' image, and the complexity and depth embedded in this field of study. It must be acknowledged that the varied sources for the goddess will reflect the different purposes, audiences and conventions for each media, and it is difficult to evaluate with any certainty which sources might have played more dominant roles in shaping the goddess' image in antiquity. Further, while the historical context of Mesopotamian literary traditions and religious customs must be considered of great value to the analysis of the evidence, our modern appreciation for and understanding of this context is still in its early days.

ISHTAR AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects involved in the study of Ishtar is the difficulty presented by navigating the hugely distorting sea of scholarship that has been built around her in the last 100 years or so. Ishtar, a deeply complex ancient deity, has sometimes been reduced to a kind of caricature figure, cast (and indeed, miscast) as a fickle sexpot, particularly in older scholarship. This historiographical problem has obscured the goddess' image, and created serious obstacles to scholarly efforts to explore her significance in the ancient world.

There are several strands of this historiographical tradition, summarised here. First, there is the historiographical myth of sacred prostitution. Then, there is the question of sacred marriage, and finally there is the Dying and Rising god theory, which is related to the Myth and Ritual school of historiography.

Temple prostitution can be defined as a cultic activity involving the exchange of sexual favours for material gains which are wholly or partly donated to the temple of a deity (Budin, 2008: 3). This religious custom was once considered to be a wide-ranging practice in antiquity by historical scholars. In the Ancient Near East, the deity most commonly associated with this 'custom' is Ishtar, or perhaps Astarte. In Greece, the practice has been historiographically linked to Aphrodite. The ritual itself was believed to involve unmarried women, who would visit the temple of a goddess, one considered to have links to fertility; the women would then prostitute themselves to strangers. The money from this prostitution would be dedicated to the goddess, who in turn would reward the women with blessings of fertility, to ensure a large family. Ishtar's purported role in this ritual was discussed in the second edition of Frazer's influential study of myth, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (1922: 304):

> Thus at Babylon every woman, whether rich or poor, had once in her life to submit to the embraces of a stranger at the temple of Mylitta, that is, of Ishtar, or Astarte, and to dedicate to the goddess the wages earned by this sanctified harlotry. The sacred precinct was crowded with women waiting to observe the custom.

Frazer's contribution was influential for establishing temple prostitution as an historical certitude in the minds of scholars. The linking of Ishtar to sacred prostitution, however, was not a new concept, with Frazer following along a path initiated in antiquity. The distortion of the goddess' image, through the lens of cult practices related to sexual rituals, is a trend that stretches all the way back to ancient Greek historians. Temple prostitution in Babylon was first described by the 'father of history', Herodotus (*The Histories* 1.199).

Herodotus names 'Mylitta' as the focus of rituals of temple prostitution – a goddess now thought to be Mullissu, a wife of the Assyrian deity Ashur (Dalley, 1979: 177). In the early twentieth century, Ishtar was identified by Frazer and contemporaneous scholars as the subject of the passage from Herodotus, while being viewed of as kind of an 'everygoddess' of love, fertility and motherhood. Ishtar's connection to the 'dark and immoral' (Langdon, 1914: 73) practice described in *The Histories* is thought to result from the tendency to 'Orientalise' the Ancient Near East, meaning that the religions of Mesopotamia and Egypt were viewed through an exoticising cultural lens as a fantastical 'other'. The trend to wholly accept Herodotus' account of temple prostitution has been reversed in more recent years, with many scholars, such as Frymer-Kensky (1992: 200) dismissing Herodotus's account as resulting from his own cultural prejudice (for a thorough analysis of this issue, see Beard and Henderson, 1997).

Although it was once widely accepted in scholarship that the practice of temple prostitution originated in the Ancient Near East, there are no known texts from Ancient Near Eastern sources which reference this ritual (Budin, 2008: 3). Instead, the mythic institution of sacred prostitution in the Ancient Near East is first attested at a much later period in history, and from a different culture. Along with the evidence provided by Herodotus, the 'custom' was noted in the works of Strabo and Pliny, as well as other later writers. The argument to reject the traditional acceptance of sacred prostitution has been well elucidated by Budin. In her recent volume on

the myth of sacred prostitution, Budin that there is no definitive evidence for temple prostitution in the Ancient Near Eastern sources, and it appears likely that reference to the practice occurring in the Ancient Near East by later writers result from cultural prejudices (2008: 3–4).

Budin notes that the later accounts of temple prostitution in the Ancient Near East suffer from having been heavily influenced by one another (2008). This means that what may appear at first glance to be agreement in the ancient sources can be viewed instead as a reflection of the historical writers' need to reference pre-existing accounts of sacred prostitution, due to the lack of evidence. Budin is also careful to distinguish between 'temple prostitution' and sacred sex, a term denoting specific categories of sexual intercourse in sacred contexts.

Budin's comprehensive treatment of the historical evidence (or the lack of evidence, at times) gives credence to her stance that temple prostitution in antiquity is an historiographical myth. The distortion of important aspects of Ishtar's cult, such as her connection to intimacy and abundance, in accounts of sacred prostitution perhaps lends further weight to the modern assertion that cultural prejudices led to the myth's development. The argument against sacred prostitution as an historical practice has been widely (but not universally) accepted in modern scholarship (see, for an interesting opposing view, with detailed bibliography, Cooper, 2013: 49–58). It is clear that temple prostitution has – at the very least – been wildly exaggerated in ancient and modern historical works, both in terms of its influence and importance in antiquity.

The scholarly preoccupation with sacred marriage has clouded Ishtar's modern image. Sacred marriage can be very broadly defined as a marital union where one or both spouses are 'divine.' There is good evidence for a divine marriage between Mesopotamian kings and Ishtar, but the literary nature of this evidence makes it very difficult to ascertain whether this marriage may have involved an enacted ritual (the consummation of the union, frequently referred to, somewhat misleadingly, as 'sacred marriage'). If so, it seems likely that such a ritual was from an early period (no later than Old Babylonian) and involved a very small number of rulers.

The concept of a potential ritual enactment divine marriage between Ishtar (or a representative, either in human form or a statue) and a Mesopotamian king is one that has captured scholarly attention like few other aspects of the goddess' image. Despite the skimpy evidence, an overwhelming amount of scholarship has been directed towards uncovering possible traces of a 'sacred marriage ritual', despite the uncertainty over whether one existed at all. The importance of the relationship between Ishtar and the king means that this historiographical trend should be viewed as less distorting than the theory of cult prostitution, but it is a further example of the imbalanced emphasis on Ishtar's sexuality in modern scholarship. When considering the connection between the goddess and the king in Chapter 4, we see that this relationship involves a great variety of complex imagery. While spousal and sexual imagery is undeniably a highly significant part of the divine bond between Ishtar and the king, there are other features of this union, such as maternal symbolism and the maintenance of cosmic order, that must be viewed as significant for illuminating the complex connection between goddess and king in a more balanced light.

The diversity of 'Ishtar' in the ancient world is, as noted above, reflected in the deity's many syncretisms. In modern-day scholarship, the prevailing academic emphasis has shifted towards considering the distinctiveness of divinities at different times, places, and across different genres of ancient evidence. This modern approach runs contrary to the once dominant historiographical traditions of the Dying and Rising god theory, and the Myth and Ritual school of mythology. The Dying and Rising god theory held that the ancient cultures of Egypt and Western Asia celebrated a mostly consubstantial rite, one that represented the yearly decay and revival of vegetation. These rites were believed by scholars to vary only in the names of the deities involved, and in some minor details. While not a major god of the Mesopotamian pantheon, Dumuzi/Tammuz is an important figure in historiographical discussions of Ancient Near Eastern religion, due to the enormous influence of the Dying and Rising school. In Frazerian theory, Osiris in Egypt, Tammuz in Babylon, Attis of Phrygia and Adonis in Phoenicia and Greece were viewed as local versions of one myth, with these deities thought to hold essentially one nature.

The collection of varied practices from widespread cultures into one generalised pattern was further considered by Hooke's Myth and Ritual school of thought, which viewed myths and rituals as inseparable from one another in certain ancient societies. While it was acknowledged that the religions of Egypt, Babylon and Canaan varied in many aspects, they were considered in this theory to each be defined as 'ritual religions', with certain fundamental characteristics in common.

Both historiographical schools and their influences are considered in greater detail in the final chapter of this book, but it is worth noting that the mixture of ideas related to the Dying and Rising god school of thought proved immensely influential – so much so that the theory still presents obstacles for analysing the relationship of Inanna and her lover, Dumuzi, in the present day. For a long time, the Dying and Rising view overshadowed the exploration of the distinctive elements of the union between Inanna and Dumuzi. Despite the theory's eventual rejection by the academic community, this view – even when discussed in negative terms – provides a kind of latent historiographical sub-text for modern considerations of the many deities that were once believed to be involved in the Frazerian pattern. The eventual scholarly rejection of the Dying and Rising god theory has in turn created a further layer of historiographical bias in modern analyses of Ishtar. Concepts that were foundational in these once prominent theories, including sacred marriage, sacred kingship, fertility and cult prostitution, now carry an intense scholarly stigma, due to the shifting trends in the perception of the ancient evidence.

Ishtar's modern image has been frequently obscured through the influence of historiographical biases. As noted above, the goddess' sexuality has dominated her historical image, especially in regard to her claimed association with sacred prostitution. The association of the sacred prostitution theory with the goddess in scholarly works has led to a distorted emphasis on the economic value of Ishtar's sexual competency, in the place of considering its worth in deeper and more symbolic terms.

This book shifts the balance away from these historiographical traditions, towards the purpose of providing a more complex image of the world's first goddess of love.

Rather than focusing exhaustively on sexuality, Ishtar's broader connections to love and social connectedness are explored in detail, along with the deity's role in maintaining universal order, the use of her voice, and her connections to death and vengeance. Through broadening the perspective on the goddess in this book, the path for future studies will ideally become more clear.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEMES OF THIS BOOK

We start from a brief overview of Ishtar's family relations; this is followed by an exploration of Inanna/Ishtar's life as a young married (or soon to be married) woman. Chapter 1 explores the love poetry between Inanna and her bridegroom, Dumuzi, the young shepherd deity. The explicitly sexual aspects of the love poetry have often been the focus of scholarly analyses, but 'love' in this corpus of literature is not purely physical. Instead, 'love' in poetry describing the courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi should be viewed as part of an overarching thematic concern with emotional closeness. Inanna's experience of love is presented joyously in the Inanna–Dumuzi corpus of love poetry. The bond between the goddess and her lover is expressed through descriptions of agricultural imagery and the provision of gifts. Despite the blissful beginnings of the pair's union, the love story of Inanna and Dumuzi is not destined to end in prolonged marital fulfilment; their divine union ends abruptly, with his death. The goddess' continued love for Dumuzi following his premature death is expressed in the genre of lamentations.

'Love' in Sumerian love poetry is shared by the divine lovers, but importantly, the loving bonds between the members of a family is also a common and significant theme of the texts. Inanna is assisted by her brother, Utu (Semitic Shamash), and has a close relationship with her mother. The use of verbal communication illuminates the emphasis on social closeness within the love poetry. The importance of intimate familial ties is a central element of the genre, placing the transitional event of marriage into a sure social context.

Chapter 2 extends the analysis of love and intimacy to the closely related themes of sexuality and gender. Sexuality was of central importance to Mesopotamian religion and life, making it a fitting area of competence for the most celebrated Mesopotamian deity. For the Mesopotamians, sexual desire was considered a divine force, ensuring the continuity of creation (Leick, 2008: 119). As the divine embodiment of libido, Ishtar's sexuality can at times be expressed bluntly, yet there is more to the goddess' sex life than the physical expression of love. Emotional closeness and communication are central to presentations of the goddess' sexuality, along with imagery of joyous abundance. The emphasis on pleasure and intimacy, rather than pure sex, in texts related to the goddess has been largely overlooked in modern scholarship – an important oversight which this study will begin to redress.

Ishtar's association with erotic love has arguably been the aspect of her image which has proved most enduring, both in terms of how the goddess was perceived by later audiences, and in her powerful shaping influence on the conceptions of later deities. The lingering focus on Ishtar's sexuality has often distorted her modern image.

Her associations with cultic cross-dressing, prostitution and incantations against impotency (not all at the same time) give scope to the wide range of sexual practices linked to the goddess. Yet, even amongst this diversity, there are clear boundaries to the goddess' links with sexuality. The rape of the goddess in the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* shows that not all sexual experiences related to Inanna are presented positively.

The remarkable complexity of Ishtar's character is further expressed in her diversified associations with the deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon, which are considered in detail in Chapter 3. Ishtar has, at times, a competitive relationship with her fellow deities, yet she often calls on other gods for assistance in times of need, and is supremely competent in building supportive social networks. The apparent dichotomy of Ishtar's divine relationships is in evidence in the myth of her descent to the underworld, arguably her most famous mythic representation. Despite its position as one of the most famous of all Mesopotamian myths, many aspects of *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld* are poorly understood. What causes Ishtar to travel to the realm of her sister, Ereshkigal? How should the literary tradition of this myth be interpreted in light of a potentially alternate tradition preserved in love poems, canonical lamentations and the sacred marriage texts? In this chapter, we see that Ishtar's visit to the underworld should be understood as connected to her competence with love, social bonds, and appropriate mourning behaviours.

The origins of Ishtar's association with the *ME*, the sacred and fundamental institutions of the universe, are considered through the analysis of the myth of *Inanna and Enki*. Ishtar tricks Ea (Sumerian Enki), the Mesopotamian god of crafts and wisdom, into giving her the *ME*, yet it is Ea who comes to her aid when she is trapped in the underworld. The contrast of Ishtar's curiosity and Ea's wisdom creates a unique dynamic between the two deities. The ambitious nature of the goddess contributes to many of her clashes with other deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon, yet her forceful nature does not preclude her from experiencing nurturing, close relations, such as with her brother Utu. Whether in conflict or harmony with other deities, Ishtar routinely uses her divine personal and professional bonds to increase her competencies and influence – social connectedness is at the very heart of her power.

From exploring Ishtar's relationships with her divine associates, in Chapter 4 we move to considering Ishtar's connection with human rulers. Chapter 4 explores the theme of kingship, showing that Ishtar's relationship with kingship unites the goddess' primary associations with love and battle. Ishtar's connection to the king stands apart from her other relationships; this union involves several unique dynamics, with the goddess conceptualised as the king's divine spouse. The poetic motif of divine marriage is of great significance for understanding the unique manner in which the Mesopotamians conceptualised the relationship of their king with the gods (Hill, Jones, and Morales 2013: 158, 170). Relations between the Mesopotamian kings and Ishtar are, perhaps unsurprisingly, complex, and complicated even further by the unhappy fate of her husband in several Mesopotamian myths.

Chapter 4 also explores how Ishtar's power is conveyed in terms of military strength in the male-dominated field of battle. Her primary identification as a goddess of love and war means that the goddess is intimately associated with libido and

blood lust: both powerful and primal natural forces that hold a significant capacity for causing destruction and chaos. The war-like aspect of Ishtar's image is an essential part of her identity, with many hymns depicting her radiance in combat. Ishtar's role as a warrior deity is a central element in her special connection to Mesopotamian kings. Her protective love for human rulers is at times expressed in maternal terms. This maternal, protective aspect of the goddess' image is of fundamental importance for understanding the subtleties of the relationship between the goddess and monarch.

In Chapter 5 we move from earthly royalty to considering Ishtar's relationship with the legendary kings of Mesopotamian epic, including Gilgamesh: the world's first literary hero. The *Gilgamesh Epic* recounts the hero's legendary journeys, and the adventures it describes have significantly influenced a variety of Greek myths, including the Labours of Herakles and Homer's *Odyssey*. Ishtar and Gilgamesh are one of those couples who, on paper, look like a good match. She is the beauteous goddess of love, and, as mentioned above, the citadel goddess of Uruk. He is the city of Uruk's promiscuous young king. Yet, as we will see, despite some initial attraction on Ishtar's side, the meeting of Ishtar and Gilgamesh in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* leads to conflict, death and destruction.

The negative interaction between Gilgamesh and Ishtar is at odds with her positive relationships with other legendary Mesopotamian kings, and also with the more convivial relationship between Gilgamesh and Inanna, seen in the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the netherworld.* Ishtar's connections to kingship and love provide a crucial context for Gilgamesh's rejection of her in the *Epic*, and form an important reference point for measuring Gilgamesh's success as king.

Chapter 6 explores the theme of revenge and retribution in many of the myths surrounding Ishtar, and the link between the goddess and death in Mesopotamian thought. Although for modern audiences the connection of a goddess of love and sex with death may be unexpected, sex, especially in its relation to fertility, was often placed in a contrasting relationship with death in the ancient world. Additionally, the theme of love is intertwined with the goddess' connection to death; through her involvement in appropriate mourning behaviours (such as lamentations), the goddess' continuing care for the dead person was thought to assist in their journey in the Mesopotamian afterlife.

It seems natural for a warrior goddess to have strong associations with rage, vengeance and combativeness, yet the vengeful nature of Ishtar has received little scholarly attention to date. The exploration of Ishtar's connection to vengeance is overdue, considering the often close association of women with revenge in both ancient and modern narratives. Women and vengeance proved a popular combination in the myths of the Classical world, where powerful women such as Electra, Clytemnestra and Medea brought terrible consequences on those who they perceived as having wronged them, and this theme has continued to fascinate audiences to the present day. The concept of vengeance as a particularly female attribute is encapsulated by the often misquoted line from Congreve's *The Mourning Bride*:

> Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.

Ishtar's revenge should be viewed as an extension of her close connection to the dispensation of justice, and the maintenance of universal order. In Chapter 6, a pattern to Ishtar's behaviour when faced with conflict is explored – first, she becomes angry, and then she seeks revenge, often with the aid of an accomplice. This pattern is essential to the narrative structure of the Sumerian myths *Inanna and Shukaletuda* and *Inanna and Ebih*, as well as Tablet VI of the Standard Babylonian version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

'Reception and Influence', the book's final chapter, explores the evidence that, for a goddess who has been largely lost to the modern world, Ishtar's influence has a surprisingly far reach, both in the ancient world and today. The legacy of Ishtar can be found in her influence on the Phoenician goddess Astarte, and the most famous goddess of love, Aphrodite. Ishtar was widely known throughout the ancient world, and aspects of the goddess can be found in numerous ancient religions throughout the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean. For example, the Hittite goddess Shawushka (a later form of Hurrian goddess of love and war) can be identified with Ishtar of Nineveh, who was viewed by the Hittites as primarily related to sorcery (Beckman, 1998: 1). The adoption, mutation and rejection of parts of the image of the goddess in syncretisms of Ishtar/Inanna demonstrates the rich interplay between ancient religious cultures, as well as Ishtar's lasting impact on religious thought. Ishtar provides an important early female archetype which can be used as a point of comparison for later myths from a wide variety of cultures.

At the end of the final chapter, we consider how the goddess has been received in modern popular culture. Ishtar's wide range of abilities has resulted in a similarly broad collection of representations in music, film and television, especially in the genres of science fiction and fantasy. The obscurity of the goddess in the present day means that she is perhaps best represented in works of science fiction and fantasy – genres whose audiences are often particularly well versed in the mythology of the ancient world.

RE-INTRODUCING ISHTAR

Ishtar was the most popular deity in ancient Mesopotamia, and her influence in the ancient world was significant. These two features of the goddess make her study integral to gaining a clearer understanding of how concepts of divine femininity were conceived in antiquity. As an analysis of the first of many powerful female deities, this study provides thematic foundations for the further exploration of the goddess Ishtar's image, and for considering her influence on the later Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean deities who followed in her wake. A further aim is to encourage a greater flow of thought between scholars from a variety of backgrounds, each with something distinct to offer, but with much to gain from the continued broadening of the scholarly debate – following in the at times collaborative traditions of the original ancient authors of myth and epic.

In this introduction, we have seen that the modern understanding of ancient Mesopotamian religion and culture is in the process of swift transformation.

The analysis of Ishtar, and the exploration of Mesopotamian religion in the broader academic community, are mutually informative and connected pursuits. Ishtar, as a topic of study, has significant untapped potential for informing modern discourses on ancient religion, mythology, gender, and culture, and is particularly relevant for study as the modern awareness of the incredible influence of Mesopotamian culture on later traditions becomes more widely known. This potential, as we have seen, has been obscured through the domination of historiographical biases, particularly relating to the sexuality of the deity. Through exploring themes such as Ishtar's competence in strengthening social ties, the following chapters work to provide greater balance and depth in the modern image of the deity, more reflective of the splendidly complicated nature of the ancient evidence.

KEY THEMES

1
LOVE AND INTIMACY

Inanna and Ishtar are the Sumerian and Akkadian faces of a primary Mesopotamian deity, known for having strong associations with sexuality, love and beauty. Among the many defining features of this Mesopotamian goddess, the literary theme most integral to her image is love. Ishtar is a goddess depicted with strong, anthropomorphic emotions; she experiences happiness, sadness, anger – but especially love. The goddess' association with love takes many forms; her name is invoked in ancient love magic as well as in spells to forestall impotence, and the goddess herself is widely presented as the object of many varying types of love. Ishtar's love, and her identity in the ancient world, is inextricably linked to the emotions of joy and fulfilment, as can be seen in hymns of praise from the Old Babylonian period:

> She is the joyous one, clad in loveliness,
> She is adorned with allure, appeal, charm,
> Ishtar is the joyous one, clad in loveliness.
>
> (*Praise Hymn to Ishtar* II.1,[1] Foster, 2005: 85)

The goddess' association with love and happiness is frequently expressed in textual evidence using imagery of agricultural abundance, wealth and the provision of gifts. Ishtar's joy brings blessings and increased prosperity for the community, and she displays a special competence for promoting close social ties – an ability she most frequently uses for her own benefit. The connection between Inanna and the promise of blessings of abundance, especially in terms of domesticated animals and plants, is extensively evidenced from the earliest visual sources, such as cult objects from Inanna's temple at Uruk (Winter, 2010: 199–217).

The focus of this chapter is the romantic love between Inanna and her consort. Inanna's romantic partner is the shepherd king, Dumuzi, whose rustic charms delight the young goddess. We consider how the divine lovers appear in Sumerian love poetry, as well as how the loss of love is expressed through lamentations and mourning.

The love story between Inanna and Dumuzi (Semitic Ishtar and Tammuz) is a fitting place to begin to explore Ishtar's identity in ancient Mesopotamian literature as the relationship between these two deities holds a unique and significant position in Ishtar's characterisations through a diverse array of periods and genres. Inanna and Dumuzi are paired in love magic and ritual texts, works of Mesopotamian epic, hymns and prayers, as well as in royal inscriptions and poetry, which makes the relationship

one of the most common motifs associated with the goddess. This motif of the divine lovers binds together the elements of the goddess' image that are considered here to be most significant: her connections to love and social connectedness, her relationship with kingship and cosmic justice, her powerful voice and the ability to span extremes, including the extremes of life and death.

The consideration of love poetry depicting the courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi at the start of this book's main section also provides an early emphasis on the goddess' connection to all kinds of love, and on her significant influence during times of changes in status, such as marriage or death. Beginning with a chapter considering love and intimacy, rather than sexuality, reflects the aim here to redress the historiographical imbalance in Ishtar's image – an imbalance that has overly privileged the goddess' sexuality, to the preclusion of her other important features.

Of course, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the courtship between Inanna and Dumuzi is not presented with an emphasis on sexuality in the ancient evidence – the love poetry *is* highly sexual in nature, and the goddess' sexuality is central to her image (a theme considered in detail in Chapter 3). Much productive work has been done on considering the eroticism of texts depicting the courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi (see Leick, 2003), and the sexual imagery of Sumerian love poetry is considered later. Yet there is more to the love poetry than physical intimacy, and the more subtly romantic aspects of the literature have not received the scholarly attention they deserve.

Sexuality in the love poetry of Inanna forms an important element in an overarching thematic concern with intimacy, both in terms of physical and emotional closeness. While many parts of the goddess' body are carefully described in love poetry, it is the goddess' heart, more than any other organ, which is the dominant physical locus for her love. Further emotional closeness between the goddess and her lover is created through speech. This chapter explores the emotional intimacy of the goddess' love, along with its physical side.

Further, the literary courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi involves a wider exploration of the theme of love than might be provided by focusing exclusively on intimate bonds between the lovers. 'Love' in Sumerian love poetry is not purely sexual, the loving (and mostly non-sexual) relations between family members is also thematically significant. The importance of close relational ties is a central element of the 'genre', placing the transitional event of marriage into a clear social context. Marriage brings changes to relationships and status and involves the potential for community upheaval. The potential for friction between community members, as new relational ties are formed, is subtly referenced in love poetry. The genre's emphasis on communication, gift-giving and joy highlights the significance of maintaining family and community bonds during challenging transitional times.

Exploring the romantic love, courtship and marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi holds significance for understanding a frequently referenced trope of the goddess in myth, magic, literature and royal rhetoric. To analyse the theme of love and intimacy as it applies to Inanna/Ishtar in a thorough manner, the depiction of this theme in a variety of literature, such as hymns, love poetry, songs, myths and proverbs, many from varying contexts and time periods, is considered. In considering different 'genres' of Mesopotamian literature, we must first acknowledge that the division of Mesopotamian

literary works is something of an artificial process, more representative of modern literary theory and scholarship than a reflection of any ancient ordering of texts (Rubio, 2009: 22–25). Grouping the evidence thematically in this way should by no means be understood to impose an artificial sense of coherence on the theme of romantic and family love. While the approach here may not fully replicate the complexity of the various materials and their possible meanings, the intention is to provide the reader with an overview of the theme of love, intimacy, and marriage, and to give a sense of the special significance of this aspect of the goddess' image in ancient times.

CUNEIFORM LITERATURE AND CONTEXT

A sure chronology of Sumerian literature is not currently available (or perhaps, at all possible, see Hallo, 2010: 57). Understanding the ancient context of the texts considered in this book is an important and swiftly developing field of study.

The various myths involving Inanna and Dumuzi are often treated in modern scholarship as closely related, but it is hard to know whether this treatment is in line with the Sumerian view, due to the difficulty of accurately placing the myths into a

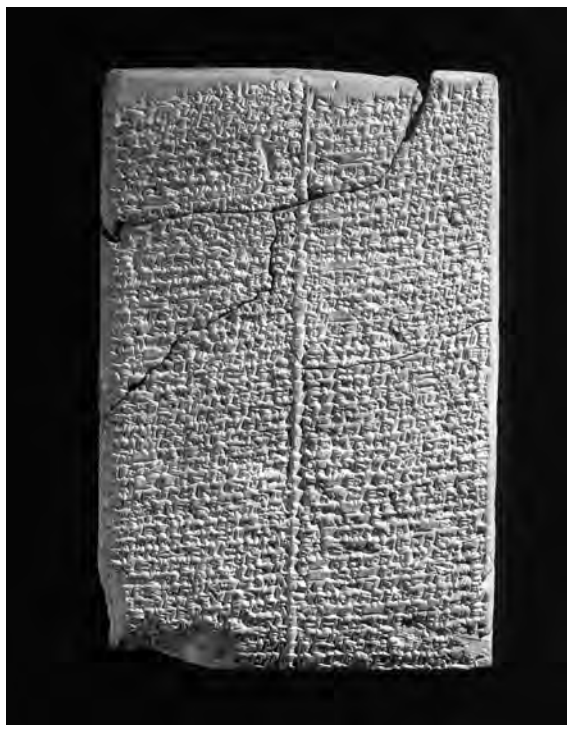


Figure 1.1 Cuneiform tablet fragment containing the Hymn to Ishtar. Nearly complete fragment, containing the Hymn to Ishtar on two columns. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, item no. B7847.

definite temporal or thematic context. The Inanna–Dumuzi corpus of myths, as it is now known, has been brought together through contemporary scholarly endeavour, and defined along thematic grounds (Tinney, 2000: 23). It is difficult to say whether this modern collecting of texts is representative of the grouping of these literary works in the ancient world. Certainly, the differences of Inanna's parentage between hymns are suggestive of works generated from alternate traditions (Assante, 2000: 55).

The authorship of love poetry, like cuneiform literary works more generally, is an area where modern understanding is very limited. Cuneiform texts that have survived to the modern day are frequently later copies, and matters such as the potential time of composition, author and audience are, to say the least, extremely difficult to ascertain. As noted in the Introduction of this book, these difficulties mean that the content of the texts themselves becomes almost the only key that we have for their interpretation. This chapter focuses on analysing the literary theme of love and courtship involving the Mesopotamian goddess of love, in awareness of the restrictions placed on any conclusions drawn by the multitude of currently unresolved questions of authorship, audience and context.

THE SETTING OF THE POETRY

As stated in the Introduction, I will tend to use the name 'Inanna' when speaking primarily of Sumerian texts, and 'Ishtar' more generally. Inanna, in Sumerian literature depicting her courtship with Dumuzi, is at the stage of youth just following puberty, and she lives with her mother and father. The domestic context of the love poetry allows for the exploration of inter-family dynamics, as well as the potential for social change that accompanies love and marriage. Change is presented as a concern for Inanna and Dumuzi, as their love powerfully affects them and those around them. Both lovers express their awareness of the altered family dynamics that will result from their union, and the inevitability of Inanna leaving her established home and loved ones to join Dumuzi in his home, and become part of his family (*Dumuzid-Inana C1*, ETCSL 4.08.29).

To establish a clear parentage for Inanna is a difficult task. As with many myths from the ancient world, the details of the story show a certain degree of fluidity. One explanation for this somewhat confounding quality of ancient myth is that details of the narrative in some varieties of myth may have been subsumed for the purposes of the story overall. There are two main traditions in the identification of Inanna's father. It is generally thought that Inanna is the daughter of the moon-god Nanna-Su'en (Babylonian Sin), and his beautiful wife, Ningal. Therefore, she is the sister of the sun-god Utu (Babylonian Shamash), and the god of heaven, An (Babylonian Anu) would be her great-grandfather (Beaulieu, 2003: 111). The other, less dominant tradition simply has An as Inanna's father. Much less commonly, Enlil, a primary god linked to leadership, or even Enki, the god of wisdom, may appear in the paternal role.

Although Dumuzi is at times referred to as Inanna's brother, this term is used to signify the close relationship between the two lovers, rather than a genuine blood relation. The identification of Dumuzi as Inanna's lover but not her blood relative is

supported by the contrast of his presentation with Utu, a deity who is indisputably Inanna's brother. The sun god Utu is shown in the texts to have easy access to Inanna, as a sibling might, where in comparison Dumuzi is shown attempting to gain access to the goddess, occasionally through the means of deception. While Dumuzi and Utu both bring Inanna gifts, Utu specifically identifies Dumuzi as the man to share the marriage bed with Inanna. Dumuzi's sister by blood in myth and poetry is Geshtinanna.

THE YOUNG GODDESS IN LOVE

The love poetry has a clear domestic setting, and it is staged at a specific time of Inanna's life; she is a young woman either just about to be married, or who has recently wed. She has been through puberty and notes the changes in her body. In copies of texts dated to the Old Babylonian period, the presence of dark pubic hair on Inanna's vulva is poetically described through the symbolism of a flock of ducks on a well-watered field or a narrow doorway framed in glossy black lapis-lazuli (Assante, 2002: 39). In a Sumerian *balbale*, the deity praises her newly firm breasts; a *balbale* is a type of poem that is difficult to categorise, appearing likely to have been 'multimodal' (Rubio, 2009).

> See now, our breasts stand out; see now, hair has grown on our genitals, signifying my progress to the embrace of a man!
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana C*, ETCSL 4.08.3)

The goddess demonstrates awareness of the significance for her new status as a woman of sexual maturity, and is depicted celebrating the newly established sexual allure and capacity that is associated with her development. The youthful enthusiasm of Inanna, rejoicing in her womanly physicality, suggests a high level of sexual confidence despite her young age.

The repeated invitation from Inanna to her lover to 'plough' her vulva has strong connotations of youth and virginity (Leick, 2003: 91). To 'plough' the vulva of the goddess has specific implications for initial sexual penetration; as Leick observes, the young woman is the field awaiting the plough (the penis) driven by the bull (the young man). As a fertility metaphor, this imagery of fields, ploughing and bulls might seem at first to be a reasonably passive means to describe the goddess associated with erotic love. However, the 'field' of the goddess is shown in texts to be 'wet' (*Inana H*, ETCSL 4.07.8), making the erotic readiness and participation of the goddess overt.

The poetic texts, and indeed, the goddess herself, can be seen to demonstrate a great deal of practical knowledge of the stages of female sexual arousal. By presenting Inanna herself as describing these stages of arousal in her body, the texts add to the sense of assured sexuality surrounding the young goddess. Any suggestion of sexual passivity from the goddess is further countered by the poetic descriptions in the text of a rich fantasy life. Several scholars have commented on the presence of the goddess' erotic fantasies in the texts involving her union with Dumuzi/Tammuz (see, for example, Black, 1983; and Leick, 2003: 79). These fantasies are part of the preparations

of the goddess for her union with Dumuzi, and perhaps contribute to the goddess' satisfaction, an outcome given physical expression through orgasm (*Dumuzid-Inana D*, ETCSL 4.08.04) The blending of assorted physical, emotional and religious preparations undertaken by the goddess illustrates the complexity of the union and its conceptualisation in the literature.

UTU AND INANNA

The focus on Inanna's sexuality in modern scholarship has obscured an important characteristic of this literary 'genre', one which this chapter will aim to begin to redress. It is important to acknowledge that Mesopotamian 'love poetry' is not just about lovers – the Inanna-Dumuzi courtship poetry also explores the theme of familial love. The poetry's marital setting carries associations of changing familial structures and dynamics, and these dynamics are at times explored through dialogue. The types of love that are appropriate between relations is a motif that is explored as part of the broader 'family love' theme: while family closeness is important, there are limits to the types of love that can be expressed between relatives. This motif is expressed through subtle allusions to potentially incestuous relationships (considered further below).

Inanna and her brother Utu have a unique and extremely close relationship in these texts, as well as in the broader context of Mesopotamian literature. With Utu representing the sun, and Inanna the star Venus, their roles have a complementary nature. The harmony of the deities' astral roles is reflected in their supportive connection in literary sources. In royal hymns, both Utu/Shamash and Inanna/Ishtar are linked to the establishment and enforcement of cosmic justice and order. Their roles in this regard are distinct but related, and this aspect of the goddess is considered in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Utu has a special relationship with his sister, one that is expressed in glowingly affectionate terms in the love poetry. He is presented speaking to her gently, and patiently answering her many questions. As well as being involved in finding his sister a husband, Utu functions as a confidant for Inanna. This special role for Utu in poetry is also present in the broader literary tradition, where in myths such as *Inanna and An* (ETCSL 1.3.5), the goddess refers to her brother as her 'twin' (*maš*), and informs him of her plans to dominate the heavens.

Utu has the distinction of being one of the few close figures surrounding the goddess whom she does not at some point attempt to overthrow from their position (such as her sister, Ereshkigal; father-in-law and mentor Enki; and her father Anu). Of course, this may be due to our lack of evidence, as might be suggested in a Sumerian hymn to Utu.

> (Inanna speaks:) "My brother, awe-inspiring lord, let me ride with you to the mountains!"
>
> (*Utu F*, ETCSL 4.32.f)

Inanna's suggestion that she accompanies Utu on his journey may, in the context of her ambitious exploits with other deities, hint at usurpation as a motive, but the text is too fragmentary to give definite answers. Despite the scanty evidence, it is much more

probable that Inanna's words to her brother in the hymn reflect a desire for closeness rather than the theft of his domain. This interpretation is supported by the affectionate nature of her speech, her requests for them to share food, and her suggestion that they then return to her family home together. Possible sexual allusions in the goddess' speech, involving the gaining of sexual knowledge through eating of herbs sacred to Utu, have been noted by Kramer (1985: 118).

In the above hymn, Inanna asks her brother to hold her hand and escort her home (a possible reference to astral movements, or a further expression of feelings of intimacy) and praises his kindness and mercy to widows and orphans. The uniqueness of Inanna and Utu's relationship means that the goddess' behaviour towards her twin is unlikely to match precisely with her treatment of other deities. As noted above, the astral aspects of the twin deities are harmonious, and the possible references to the movements of the sun and Venus in the above hymn strengthens the interpretation of this text as reflecting on the supportive and intimate connection between Inanna and Utu.

FAMILY AND THE HOLY MOTHER-IN-LAW

Inanna's mother, like her brother, has a strong presence in the love poetry. The goddess' home is described as her mother's house (*Inana H*, ETCSL 4.08.08), and Inanna bathes and anoints herself in oil in preparation for Dumuzi 'at her mother's bidding' (*Dumuzid-Inana C1*, ETCSL 4.08.29) Although Inanna's father, grandmother and brother are all presented enforcing the traditional methods of courtship that are to be employed by Dumuzi, it is Inanna's mother who seems to have the primary role in supervising the actions of the young goddess. A *kungar* to Inanna shows the young goddess eager to make love to Dumuzi, but conscious of the need to keep the liaison within the appropriate boundaries set by her mother (*Dumuzid-Inana I*, ETCSL 4.08.09). A *kungar* is a type of marriage song (Black et al., 2004: 252).

Dumuzi is shown to be aware of the close relationship between Inanna and her mother, frequently referring to his lover as the 'honey of her mother' (*Dumuzid-Inana B*, ETCSL 4.08.02). This expression references the loving relationship between Inanna and Ningal, but may also be an allusion to the role of Ningal in shaping her daughter into a marriageable young woman – several texts suggest that Inanna received her charming good looks from her mother (see for example the hymn *Inana E*, ETCSL 4.07.5).

Despite Dumuzi's acknowledgement of Inanna's close relationship with her mother, as well as the benefits of this relationship, there is complexity to the connection between Dumuzi and his divine mother-in-law – at times, he seems to view Ningal's influence as an obstacle to gaining closer access to his bride (*Dumuzid-Inana I*, ETCSL 4.08.09). The powerful connection of the young lovers is at times an awkward fit for their domestic setting. Wishing for physical and emotional intimacy, Inanna and Dumuzi must navigate the expectations placed upon them by social conventions. Further challenges are presented by their separate households, differences in status between the divine couple and the presence of potential romantic rivals.

Although the role of Inanna's mother is protective, she is affectionate towards her son-in-law, and speaks with him 'favourably' (*Dumuzid-Inana G*, ETCSL 4.08.07). Inanna views Ningal's connection to her new love positively; she describes her mother as having given birth to her for the very purpose of making love to Dumuzi (*Dumuzid-Inana Z*, ETCSL 4.08.26) and she notes the protection she receives from her mother's supervision (*Dumuzid-Inana I*, ETCSL 4.08.09).

In love poetry, the young goddess relies on the support and supervision of her birth family. Her living arrangements and need for permission to be outside the home can generally be considered as specific to the context of her role as the young woman in the stages of romantic courtship, although at times this living arrangement, with its familial obligations, is present in myths (see for example the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Bilulu*, considered in Chapter 6). In other literature, such as mythical narratives and royal hymns, Ishtar/Inanna shows a broad capacity for agency and independent action, yet even within these texts, her family relationships remain a fundamental aspect of her image, critical to the shaping of her character. Similarly, within the context of the more rigidly structured domestic sphere of love poetry, Inanna demonstrates independent thinking and self-determinism.

While it is frequently noted that the 'traditional' roles of spouse and mother are not dominant in Ishtar's image, the goddess inhabits a clear role in relation to her family and other members of the pantheon, one closely related to her age and gender: she is the beloved young woman. The loving relationships between Mesopotamian deities are commonly mentioned in Sumerian hymns, particularly in relation to the primary gods (Metcalf, 2015: 13), with this literary feature elucidating the status and legitimacy of the referenced deity within the broader context of the pantheon.

Inanna/Ishtar's identification as a charming young woman, loved by those close to her, is a crucial part of her identity. This aspect of the goddess is reflected in her relationships with other deities, as well as in her senior placement within the pantheon, a subject considered in depth in Chapter 3. The role of a loving and loved maiden ties Inanna/Ishtar to the promotion of family intimacy. This connection is expressed in the Sumerian wisdom composition, *The Instructions of Shuruppag* (ETCSL 5.6.1), dating from the early third millennium BCE:

> A loving heart maintains a family; a hateful heart destroys a family.

Ishtar is described in literature as 'the loving heart' (*Šulgi X*, ETCSL 2.4.2.24), and in several mythic narratives she seeks intimacy with family members by asking for their counsel and support (which she then typically ignores!). Communication and closeness are not exclusively Ishtar's concern in romantic matters, she is presented as deeply involved in her familial relationships, but this does not mean these relationships are always presented harmoniously.

INANNA'S LOVER DUMUZI

Dumuzi is a Sumerian god associated with shepherding and milk, and can be considered the divine manifestation of all aspects of the life of the herdsman. Primarily

linked to the production of dairy, he is not a vegetation deity, although his image incorporates some aspects of the vegetation god Damu through syncretism (Alster, 1999: 828). Dumuzi's mother, Duttur, is conceptualised as a kind of deified ewe, further strengthening his associations with fields and flock. Dumuzi's mother, along with his sister, plays an important role in literature associated with the god's death.

The name 'Dumuzi' should most likely be translated as 'the good son', or 'the right son' (Alster, 1999: 828), although there has been some debate about its meaning. In 1953, Jacobsen suggested the meaning of 'he who quickens the young ones', a reference to Dumuzi's association with milk and its life-giving powers (Jacobsen, 1985: 41). Jacobsen later revised this suggestion, interpreting the name instead as meaning 'the good young one', with this name alluding to the deity's power exhibiting itself in the normal form birth of unflawed lambs or kids (Jacobsen, 1985: 45). The meaning of this name is well suited to the image of Dumuzi which emerges from love poetry. Dumuzi is a young man deeply loved by those close to him, with his characterisation as a beloved youth mirroring the same quality in his divine spouse. Like Inanna, he has a close relationship with his mother; he is described as 'his mother's favourite' (*Dumuzid-Inana E*, ETCSL 4.08.5). Inanna and Dumuzi are both impetuous, enthusiastic characters, who are full of potential.

A complicating factor in Dumuzi's image is his association with a human king. The name 'Dumuzi' occurs twice on the Sumerian king list, an ancient literary composition listing historical and legendary kings. The king list survives in multiple versions and while it is extremely difficult to date, estimates generally settle around the period from 2100–1800 BCE. There is some suggestion in modern scholarship that Dumuzi may have been an historical figure from the first half of the third millennium BCE, who later became deified. The earlier entry on the king list of 'Dumuzi, the shepherd', belonged to the antediluvian dynasty of Badtibira (an ancient Sumerian city), and the later Dumuzi is listed as a ruler of Uruk and successor to well-known kings Enmerkar and Lugalbanda (the king who fathered Gilgamesh, in some traditions), and a predecessor of Gilgamesh. It must be noted that the love poetry considered in this chapter involving Dumuzi can be broadly classified as cultic literature, a vastly different genre to epic poetry, focused on the deeds of heroic figures from Uruk's First Dynasty (Sefati, 1998: 21). The extremely complex matter of the continued association of Dumuzi with living kings in Mesopotamian royal ideology has been lucidly analysed by Scurlock (2013: especially 159–175), demonstrating the inherent connections to good shepherding and religious responsibility that this association entailed. Dumuzi is an important figure in the Dying and Rising school of mythology, discussed in the previous chapter.

DUMUZI IN LOVE POETRY

The love poetry is presented from the perspective of the goddess, rather than her spouse (see Cooper, 1989). The poetic description of Inanna's courtship is characterised by its intimacy; the goddess is shown within her private home, surrounded by close family, and expressing the desires that are closest to her heart. For ancient and modern audiences, the use of perspective in the portrayal of Inanna's courtship gives a sense of closeness to the deity. There are frequent descriptions of her preparations

for the marriage in her house, her application of make-up and clothing, and her interaction with her brother, Utu.

Descriptions of preparations for the union undertaken by Dumuzi are less frequent, although we do see him providing Inanna with gifts and using his verbal charms to endear himself to her. Dumuzi's worth is described to Inanna in terms of his capacity to give her love, material comforts and agricultural abundance, as well as his sexual capability, with no mention of his ability to provide her with children. Dumuzi's value, contrasted against a rival, is a thematic concern of the Sumerian composition, *Dumuzi and Enkimdu*, a narrative that holds some similarities to ancient Sumerian wisdom literature:

> (Dumuzi's) butter is good, his milk is good – all the work of the shepherd's hands is splendid.
>
> (*Dumuzid and Enkimdu*, ETCSL 4.08.33)

While the evidence is more concerned with the thoughts and feelings of Inanna rather than Dumuzi, the young shepherd-king's gentle treatment of Inanna in Sumerian love poetry during his courtship of her reflects a sense of care and endearment. Dumuzi is depicted standing before Inanna in prayer and offering words of love (*Dumuzid-Inana W*, ETCSL 4.08.23). Despite his secondary role and the differences in status between the divine couple, the mutual nature of the lovers' pleasure is emphasised; both partners are described kissing 'with the tongue' and using verbal endearments (*Dumuzid-Inana D*, ETCSL 4.08.04). Inanna is presented as having an interest in the pleasure and satisfaction of her beloved, and she fantasises about the happiness he will find in the beauty of her physical form (*Dumuzid-Inana C*, ETCSL 4.08.03).

LOVE IN LITERATURE

Ishtar's image in the modern world owes much to the love poetry between herself and Dumuzi/Tammuz. In addition to shaping the characterisation of the goddess and her spouse, the love poetry of Inanna and Dumuzi is an important source for the analysis of Sumerian thought, religion and cult, as well as being worthy of study (and enjoyment) for its rich use of imagery and perspective. Sumerian love poetry is some of the world's most ancient literature, yet despite a passage of time of over four millennia, the texts retain their vibrancy and sensuality. The poetry is imbued with vivid descriptions of the first blush of love and sexuality, suggesting perhaps that some experiences possess a universal quality impervious to the passing of time. Inanna and her consort Dumuzi enact the world's first known love story, but like many of the world's famous lovers, their story is not destined to end in continued romantic bliss.

Of course, we must not allow all that is seemingly familiar and universal about the love poetry involving Inanna and Dumuzi to preclude our acknowledgement of the fact that this literature belongs to a foreign, ancient culture. While there is some variety among versions of the myths involving the courtship, marriage and eventual conflict between Inanna and Dumuzi, it is worthwhile to provide a brief overview of the main story elements involved in the myths. As the elements of this narrative are crucial to our modern understanding of Inanna, her descent to the underworld, and

her connection to Mesopotamian kingship, the literary analysis of the themes of the poetry are prefaced with a brief summation of their plotlines.

SOME ELEMENTS OF THE INANNA/DUMUZI NARRATIVE

The elements of the narrative listed below should not be considered to give a comprehensive account of Inanna and Dumuzi's relationship, as this would involve creating a sense of completeness to the cycle of myths which would not accurately reflect the reality of the evidence. The Sumerian literary material involving the courtship, love and marriage of the divine pair is extensive and diverse, both in terms of content and in the literary genres to which it belongs (Sefati, 1998: 17). It is also difficult to clearly delineate between texts which may refer to Inanna and Dumuzi, texts which involve a historical king, and compositions involving human lovers – possibly due to these groups having been related to one another, for example, the Inanna–Dumuzi literature may have had its genesis in historical reality, with human protagonists raised into a mythological frame (Alster, 1985: 127–128). The fragmentary nature of the texts concerning the relationship of Inanna and Dumuzi, their large number and the difficulties in ascertaining a sense of possible contexts or purposes for the cycle, creates a sequence of barriers for reconstructing a dominant tradition of the courtship and marriage – if indeed a dominant tradition existed for the myths' original audience. Adding further complexity for providing definition to the cycle of Inanna–Dumuzi myths is the different cultural and temporal environments from which they spring, our knowledge of which is limited.

With these caveats in mind, here are the frequently seen elements of the Inanna–Dumuzi relationship.

- Inanna is a young woman who has recently become sexually aware.
- Her brother, Utu/Shamash, takes on the role of attempting to find his sister a husband.
- Inanna eventually settles on the young shepherd, Dumuzi, after first finding a farmer (Enkimdu) more appealing. While Utu is involved in the decision, Inanna shows a large degree of agency, and enthusiasm, in her choice of husband.
- There seems to have been some pre-marital contact between Inanna and Dumuzi, which may have involved sex. Dumuzi is depicted as loquacious, relative to other male gods (Leick, 2003: 70), and he tries to convince Inanna to meet with him away from her parents.
- Inanna prepares for her marriage to Dumuzi by bathing (particularly her hips and thighs), applying make-up and jewellery and preparing the bed or couch. She fantasises about love-making with Dumuzi, who brings gifts to Inanna's house. Inanna and Dumuzi marry and are lovers.
- Like many of literature's great lovers to follow, the romantic union of Inanna and Dumuzi ends tragically. Dumuzi dies, and Inanna searches for him and mourns.

A further complicating issue in the Inanna–Dumuzi love theme is the narrative differences between Sumerian love poetry and other myths which reference Inanna's

successful return from the netherworld. Dumuzi's untimely death becomes causally linked to his relationship with Inanna in some versions of the story. This version of Dumuzi's death, where Inanna is responsible for her husband's death (at least to some extent), is thought to have been adopted into Sumerian compositions as well as Akkadian ones (Westenholtz, 2009: 339). This version is important for the overall theme of Inanna and Dumuzi's love, referenced in a range of texts, and the story has the following main plotlines:

- Inanna travels to the underworld, the domain of her sister 'Lady of the great place', Ereshkigal. In the underworld, Ereshkigal kills Inanna. The death of the goddess of love leads to the cessation of all earthly sexual interest.
- Inanna is rescued from the underworld by Enki (Babylonian Ea), the crafty god of wisdom. He convinces Ereshkigal to release Inanna, but the Queen of the Netherworld requires a substitute to take Inanna's place.
- Inanna and the *gala* demons (who haul people to the underworld) search the upper world for a replacement to send to the underworld in her place. After deciding against taking her loyal servants, she comes upon Dumuzi, seated on a throne and dressed regally; he is not appropriately mourning his wife's death. Inanna becomes angry and orders the demons to take Dumuzi as her replacement, down to the underworld.
- A cycle of myths is devoted to the young god's attempts to escape, and his death.
- Dumuzi's mother, Duttur, and his sister, Geshtinanna, search for him. Geshtinanna finally makes a deal where she shares Dumuzi's fate, and spends half the year in the underworld so he might return to the upper world.

There are many different versions of how Dumuzi dies, but in this chapter, the focus is on the resulting grief of his spouse. Indeed, the variety in the causes of Dumuzi's death suggests that, for the ancient composers, it was the impact of the god's demise, rather than how it occurred, that was of primary importance to the narrative. Ishtar's grief for her lost husband is an important aspect of her identity in compositions from the Sumerian literary genre of lamentations. In these texts, Inanna is highly praised, and depicted grieving deeply for Dumuzi. At times, the lamentations seem to base their image of the goddess, not on the literary text of the journey to the underworld, but on the alternate version where Inanna is not responsible for Dumuzi's death. This is not to say that Inanna/Ishtar could not lament for her husband even when she herself was involved in his demise; it is precisely this situation that appears to occur in the Sumerian version of *Inanna's Descent to the nether world* (ETCSL 1.4.1), and the goddess' response fits well with the mythic text's thematic concern with appropriate mourning behaviour.

> Holy Inana wept bitterly for her husband.
>
> (ETCSL 1.4.1)

We return to the genre of lamentations following an examination of some of the dominant themes in the love poetry.

DEFINING TERMS IN SUMERIAN LOVE POETRY

The lyrical courtship literature describing the union of Inanna and Dumuzi is one of the world's first examples of a written love story. Due to several factors, not the least being the extreme antiquity of these compositions, contemporary scholarship has struggled to form a consensus on their classification into an established genre. The explicit nature of the poetry has led to the suggestion it may better suit the description of 'sex poetry' rather than 'love poetry'. Some scholars might prefer the title 'sexual lyric' (see for example, Tinney, 2000). Rubio observes that scholarly reluctance to attribute the term 'love poetry' to the sexually overt texts is 'probably the result of our Western bias' (Rubio, 2001: 268). The tradition of love poetry, stemming from the troubadours of the Middle Ages, and stretching all the way to the poetry of Romanticism, is more concerned with the disembodied idea of love, and less with the physicality of it (Rubio, 2001: 268). The physical side of love is dominant in Sumerian love poetry, with Inanna depicted in the lyrics as being highly aware of the connection between her body and love-making, with emphasis on physical pleasure:

> Let us be very glad about my genitals! Dance, dance! Later on it will delight him, it will delight him!
> (*Dumuzid-Inana* C, ETCSL 4.08.03)

Rubio notes the discomfort of some scholars with the literal translation of the Sumerian word for vulva (gal_5), preferring instead to use the more euphemistic 'private parts' or 'nakedness' (Rubio, 2001: 271). Rubio is right to suggest that this scholarly shyness risks diminishing the erotic quality of the texts. Stol has recently provided an appealing example of how modern concerns for propriety can be balanced, if needs be, against efforts to accurately reflect the text; Stol helpfully directs the reader to Leick's discussion of the goddess and her vulva, saying that this is for the sake of brevity, but also 'to spare our blushes' (2016: 433).

By writing plainly about female genitals, the Sumerian authors increase the sense of intimacy which is central to the texts. The textual focus on genitals may be reflected in cult practices related to the goddess – votive offerings in the shape of vulvas are recorded in the archaeological records of the goddess' temples, from an early period. Clear literary descriptions of female genitals reflect the enthusiasm and pride of the goddess as she explores her sexuality. Inanna is not presented as being shy about her body or her sexuality, and this divine confidence seems well suited to direct language.

THEMES OF SUMERIAN LOVE POETRY

Courtship, marriage and the fertility of fields and flock are dominant themes of Sumerian love poetry (see especially Sefati, 1998: 17–29). Love poetry involving Inanna and Dumuzi is further thematically marked by a particular emphasis on joy and intimacy, as well as abundance. These concerns are given poetic expression through imagery and dialogue.

Frequently, the two lovers speak directly to one another and to those close to them. The dialogue form – together with their discussion of the pleasures of the bedroom

interwoven with imagery of agricultural richness and wealth – enhances the remarkable sense of closeness these poems exude. Through speech, the goddess connects to her loved ones emotionally and expresses her joy and delight. Frequently, as we will see, these poems celebrate free expression and the life-giving powers of good sex.

With the emphasis on communication and closeness, the Inanna–Dumuzi corpus of literature reveals a thematic concern with intimacy that is well suited to the character of its central protagonist. Inanna, one might say, specialises in emotional intimacy. Communication and the strengthening of social ties are at the heart of her power. The goddess' ability to promote closeness is expressed (in terms of its absence) among people of a foreign land the goddess has captured in Enheduanna's hymn, *Inanna B*, also known as the *Exaltation of Inanna* (ETCSL 4.07.2):

> (The city's) woman no longer speaks affectionately with her husband; at dead of night she no longer takes counsel with him, and she no longer reveals to him the pure thoughts of her heart.

Love poetry involving Inanna and Dumuzi has an overwhelmingly joyous tone. The love of the young goddess fills her heart with happiness. The world in which this love exists is one filled to overflowing with vitality, as can be seen in Sumerian hymns to the divine couple.

> Your (Dumuzi's) coming here is life indeed, your entering our house is abundance; lying at your side is my utmost joy. My sweet, let us delight ourselves on the bed.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana G*, ETCSL 4.08.07)

Inanna's vitality is expressed elsewhere in descriptions of her swiftness, beauty, stamina, youth and strength. The dominance of the characteristics of vivacity and fleetness in the goddess' image have been noted to likely stem from her astral identification with the planet Venus – she embodies the radiance of the celestial body, as it 'races' along its path (Beaulieu, 2003: 115). In the love poetry, the goddess is full of life, but is also capable of granting long life and other blessings of abundance on her spouse (see for example *Dumizid-Inanna D1*, ETCSL 4.08.30). The goddess' joy in her blossoming love carries transferable benefits to those close to her.

SEXUAL INTIMACY

As can be seen in the reference to the delights of the marital bed in the previous excerpt from a *balbale* to Inanna, physical expressions of sexuality are a thematic concern for the 'genre'. Inanna, depicted as the young wife of Dumuzi, is full of potent sexuality that requires the employment of analogies and metaphors from the natural world for adequate means of expression. The sexual union of Inanna and Dumuzi involves a procedural sense of ritual, which is most easily observed in the goddess' physical preparations and the gift-giving, considered later. There is a sense of ritual, too, in the setting up of the marital bed, the preparations of which in many ways parallel the personal preparations undertaken by Inanna herself. The marital bed must

be carefully dressed, using fine materials that are skilfully fashioned. Inanna's partner who will share the bed is found by Utu, and the bed itself is described in strongly sexual terms that mimic the arousal and satisfaction of the young goddess, as seen in a Sumerian song:

> The brother brought you (Inanna) into his house and had you lie down on a bed dripping with honey.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana D*, ETCSL 4.08.04)

The erotic symbolism of honey, which in the texts is described as 'sweet', like the goddess' mouth and vulva, is also employed in close association with a bed in a love song for Shu-Sin, a Sumerian king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, and Inanna:

> In the bedchamber dripping with honey let us enjoy over and over your allure, the sweet thing. Lad, let me do the sweetest things to you. My precious sweet, let me bring you honey.
>
> (Šu-Suen *B*, ETCSL 2.4.4.2)

Sex in Sumerian love poetry is depicted as a pleasurable activity that enhances loving feelings of intimacy, as opposed to an efficient means of procreation. Poetic references to the sweet taste of the goddess' mouth and vulva may be interpreted as references to cunnilingus (Leick, 2003: 94), a practice more directed towards sexual pleasure and fulfilment than reproduction. While the textual symbolism suggests the union will create a bountiful abundance (Assante, 2002: 39), there is no emphasis (or clear mention) of conception or potential offspring. This is not altogether unusual: in Mesopotamian mythology, male sexual activity is traditionally considered in terms of reproductive efficiency, and sexual pleasure is associated with female lovers (Leick, 2008: 125). The focus on pleasure, as well as the bias towards the perspective of the goddess, makes Inanna the dominant figure in these stories, and shows that sex, in the context of this love poetry, forms an integral part of a broader thematic emphasis on the joy that is associated with blossoming love.

Although we see Dumuzi taking the role of the more experienced lover, the initiation and enjoyment of love-making is not solely the preserve of either partner. Inanna can be seen craving sexual union with Dumuzi, and the bed (or 'couch') they share is depicted as a place of joy (*Dumizid-Inana D1*, ETCSL 4.08.30). The physical act of copulation brings happiness and results in increased intimacy and fulfilment, two primary thematic concerns of the love poetry genre. The bed is not purely a setting for sexual copulation, but a place for physical and emotional closeness. The intermingled physical and emotional closeness between lovers is emphasised in Sumerian poetry:

> As hand is put to head, the sleep is so pleasant. As heart is pressed to heart, the pleasure is so sweet.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana T*, ETCSL 4.08.20)

Imagery of physical and emotional closeness between the lovers is frequently juxtaposed in the love poetry, demonstrating the depth of their intimate bond.

JOY

Although, as previously noted, the desires and pleasures of the lovers are shared in the poetry, it is predominately the happiness of the goddess rather than her consort that is the concern of the texts. Ishtar's happiness is of great cosmic importance, and the texts emphasise the joy that fills the goddess' heart during her courtship. The joy of the goddess' heart is also given serious consideration in sacred marriage texts between the goddess and Mesopotamian kings, such as a hymn of the fourth king of the Isin dynasty, Ishme-Dagan:

> The good shepherd, the man of sweet songs, will loudly (?) sing songs for you; lady, with all the sweetest things, Inana, may he make your heart joyous!
>
> (*Išme-Dagan J*, ETCSL 2.5.4.10)

By ensuring the goddess has a happy heart, a range of benefits to the community could be enjoyed, such as improved cosmic outlooks and assistance on the battlefield. Singing, dancing, laughing and playing games are all integral to Ishtar's characterisation in poetry as well as in the broader context of ancient literature. The goddess is identified as 'the dancing one' and 'the maid who laughs with a joyful heart' (*Gilgameš, Enkidu and the nether world*, ETCSL 1.8.1.4).

As well as being filled with joy, the goddess' heart overflows with love, a quality noted in a devotional Akkadian poem:

> You are she who loves rustic shelters,
> Who loves all humankind.
>
> (III.43.d 'A Gift to Ishtar', Foster, 2005: 677)

Love for the goddess in poetry is expressed through gifting, the use of verbal endearments and physical expressions of intimacy. The emotions of love and happiness are tightly entwined in the love poetry of Inanna and Dumuzi, just as the loss of love and sadness are connected in the genre of lamentations.

SPEECH AND INTIMACY

Ishtar's use of speech and her voice are crucial to her identity; this quality of the goddess is considered in detail throughout this book. Ishtar's voice is one of her most powerful attributes; it is a central aspect of her character across a range of ancient literary genres. She uses her voice to decree destinies and enact blessings and curses, to enlist support, to express powerful emotions and to transform the world around her.

In the genre of love poetry, the goddess' voice heightens her connectedness to those around her – including her lover – as well as communicating her feelings of happiness and excitement. Intimacy between the divine couple is expressed through affectionate speech; both partners use analogies of agricultural abundance and fecundity to describe the attractive qualities of their beloved.

In a Babylonian ballad with similar thematic concerns to the Sumerian poetry, Ishtar emphatically declares her love for her husband:

> Yes indeed! I love him, I love him![2]

In the speech of both deities, analogies are made with apples, beer, honey, wine and various dairy products, fitting to the shepherd deity Dumuzi. Dumuzi is described by Inanna as having beautiful eyes, while Dumuzi refers to Inanna as 'honey-mouthed' (*Dumuzid-Inana B*, ETCSL 4.08.02). The intimacy of the divine couple is further expressed through the expectation of exclusivity in the relationship, articulated by Inanna in a Sumerian love song through means of a request for an oath of fidelity from her partner, where he must promise not to touch another (presumably in the intimate manner he touches his wife), for as long as he lives:

> I shall impose an oath on you, my brother (Dumuzi) of the beautiful eyes. You are to place your right hand on my genitals while your left hand rests on my head, bring your mouth close to my mouth . . . This is the oath of women, my brother of the beautiful eyes.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana B*, ETCSL 4.08.02)

Ishtar's speech is used to create intimacy with Dumuzi, but also to enlist the support of those close to her, such as her brother, Utu. Intimacy in the love poetry is not just established between the courting partners, but between their families, creating enhanced community ties.

The marital union between Inanna and Dumuzi has a transformative effect on the status and identity of both lovers and their families: Dumuzi will shift into the role of son-in-law, brother-in-law as well as husband, and Inanna will be a daughter and sister-in-law. Although fragmented, a hymn to Inanna shows her awareness of the changing nature of the relations between her family, and her husband's relatives (*Dumuzid-Inanna C1*, ETCSL 4.08.29). Dumuzi's sister is described in another hymn as the goddess' 'beloved sister-in-law' (*Inanna D*, ETCSL 4.07.4). Dumuzi's relationship to Utu, through his marriage to Inanna, is referenced in several texts (see especially the myth of *Dumuzi's Dream*, ETCSL 1.4.3) and this bond is used by the shepherd to gain the sun deity's assistance when attempting to escape demons in the Sumerian myth of *Inanna's Descent to the nether world*, a composition considered further in Chapter 3.

> The lad raised his hands to heaven, to Utu: 'Utu, you are my brother-in-law. I am your relation by marriage. I brought butter to your mother's house. I brought milk to Ningal's house. Turn my hands into snake's hands and turn my feet into snake's feet, so I can escape my demons, let them not keep hold of me.'
>
> (*Inana's descent to the nether world*, ETCSL 1.4.1)

The communal aspect of Inanna's romantic relationship should be considered as connected to her role as the beloved young woman in relation to many other Mesopotamian deities, but also to the transitional nature of the journey from a young

single girl to a wife. Periods of transition, such as the lead up to a marriage or the period following a death, are traditionally times where the individual most requires the support of the community. Ishtar's dominance in these periods of transition is fitting considering her own transformative nature (see the Introduction), and her close association with destiny and fate.

As well as using her voice to express herself through speech, Inanna sings, and the love poetry depicts her laughing and dancing, adding to the overall sense of joy in the texts.

> The maiden, singing, sends a messenger to her father. Inana, dancing from joy, sends a messenger to her father.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana T*, ETCSL 4.08.20)

The happiness of the lovers is experienced also by their families and community, but the familial relations are presented as inhabiting an orderly structure, and there are limits on the types of intimacy that may be shared between relations. In a *balbale* to the goddess, Utu makes it clear that while he will find a partner for his sister's marital bed, he will not share the bed with her himself (*Dumuzid-Inana A*, ETCSL 4.08.01). Conversely, Dumuzi seems to go outside this order with his sister, Geshtinanna. In a song to Inanna and Dumuzi (*Dumuzid-Inana B1*, ETCSL 4.08.28), the shepherd king leaves his wife behind and goes back to the sheepfold, where he seems to invite his sister, using his verbal skills, to join him in an incestuous sexual relationship (the incestuous nature of the text is discussed by Leick, 2003: 86–88). The imagery of agricultural abundance, and the use of gifts to strengthen relations between the courting couple, are used in this text to describe the relationship between Dumuzi and his sister, instead of the relationship with his wife. The speech of Dumuzi, and his accompanying actions, appears to have the negative effect of throwing Inanna into confusion, an emotion more traditionally associated with lamentations in Mesopotamian literature than with celebration:

> He told his wife of his resolve . . . she was dumbfounded; the mistress Inana was thrown into confusion as if by a flood wave.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana B1*, ETCSL 4.08.28)

Inanna herself is often shown to have a powerful ability to confuse enemy troops in battle, throwing them into disarray and priming them for defeat – this quality is noted in Sumerian hymns for her praise:

> She stirs confusion and chaos against those who are disobedient to her, speeding carnage and inciting the devastating flood.
>
> (*Inana C*, ETCSL 4.07.3)

By presenting Inanna as the subject of confusion, rather than its cause, the implication is that Dumuzi's actions and words are inappropriate. The very fragmentary condition of the evidence precludes us from ascertaining the outcome of the narrative

(although it seems probable, in line with the rest of the Inanna–Dumuzi corpus, that things may not have turned out in Dumuzi's favour).

In love poetry, as seen previously, speech and communication between the lovers does not always result in enhanced bonds. In one composition to the goddess, the young couple's words to one another are described as creating alienation instead of closeness. Dumuzi advises Inanna against provoking a quarrel, with the text noting that the young man's words are aimed at causing an argument instead of expressing desire (*Dumuzid-Inana I*, ETCSL 4.08.09). In a *tigi* (a kind of hymn with the accompaniment of a lyre), Dumuzi tells Inanna to lie to her mother so as to spend time with him unsupervised. Following the bridegroom's instructions would result in increased physical intimacy for the two lovers, but reduced emotional intimacy with Inanna's family.

> Offer this as a lie to your own mother. As for us – let me make love with you by moonlight! Let me loosen your hairgrip on the holy and luxuriant couch. May you pass a sweet day there with me in voluptuous pleasure.
>
> (*Inana H*, ETCSL 4.08.08)

In this text, there is a reflection of the potential for the upheaval of the familial order through the course of a marital union, to create alienation among community members as relationships experience changes. The overall emphasis on the bride's supportive and protective family in the love poetry stresses the importance of increased community bonding during times of upheaval, rather than embracing the alienation that can accompany the increasing independence of younger family members. In these texts, increased maturity and changing roles can be generally seen to transform and re-establish relationships between family members, rather than weakening them. Inanna's special competency with intimacy is thus well-suited for her dominance in love poetry. By seeking the advice and protection of her family, she draws upon the loving bonds that will continue to support their relations after her marriage. By discussing concerns over status and expressing her love for her bridegroom, the goddess prepares for her new familial role.

THE WORLD'S FIRST POWER DRESSER?

Marriage in poetry is a presented as a transitional time. During this time of upheaval, it is not only relationships that can change, but also the social status of the lovers and their families. The texts' emphasis on status is seen in Inanna's opulent dressing for her partner, and in the theme of gifting and abundance. The goddess' careful preparations for the arrival of her lover expresses her eagerness and passion, but may also give an insight into bridal customs, especially for the higher social and economic elements of society (Leick, 2003: 67). Inanna's preparations lend themselves to considering her close connections to the areas of love and battle. Inanna is described in Sumerian poetry bathing, anointing herself with oil and dressing in luxurious garments while awaiting the arrival of her lover:

> Inana bathed in water and anointed herself with sweet oil. She covered her body with a grand robe; she also took her pin. She straightened the lapis lazuli stones on her neck, and grasped her cylinder seal in her hand. The young lady stepped forward as Dumuzid pushed open the door, and like a moonbeam she came forth to him from the house.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana C1*, ETCSL 4.08.29)

Alster suggests that the anthropomorphic quality of the gods in these texts, in particular their representation of human marital customs, indicates that we should not read too much into Inanna's behaviour (1999: 832). Yet, the goddess' careful dressing behaviour does appear telling. In another text, central to Ishtar's image, she is depicted dressing in fine garments and carefully applying her make-up – this occurs in her preparations for her descent to the underworld. Inanna's trip to the underworld is motivated by ambition; she plans to usurp the sphere of influence of her sister, Ereshkigal. It is interesting to note that behaviours centred on enhancing the physical appearance of the goddess are described as undertaken by Inanna prior to sex with her husband, as well as preceding expected conflict with her sister.

The use of 'power dressing' prior to expected battle is also seen in the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Ebih*, one of several poetic compositions attributed to Enheduanna. In this story, the goddess prepares to attack the mountain (Ebih), due to its failure to show her an appropriate level of respect. Before visiting with the god of heaven, An, Inanna dresses herself in the 'garment of royalty' (*Inanna and Ebiḫ*, ETCSL 1.3.2). She girds herself with weapons, but also with jewellery made from lapis lazuli and cornelian. The combination of these types of gemstones appears to be an indication of high status; several other Sumerian compositions describe the combination of lapis lazuli and cornelian, often alongside precious metals such as gold and silver, in the context of their associations with royalty or divinities. An example of this can be seen in the royal praise poem, *Enlil-Bani A* (ETCSL 2.5.8.1), which describes lapis lazuli and cornelian being brought before the king as a tribute from foreign allies.

The goddess adorns herself with lapis lazuli in the myths *Inanna and Ebih* and *Inanna's Descent to the nether world* in the context of preparing to visit the home of a fellow deity, and the motif of dressing is also presented alongside visits between deities in love poetry. The goddess' power dressing in love poetry is associated with visits to and from her lover, Dumuzi, and his provision of gifts for her. In these poems, the goddess is described as draped in lapis lazuli and other jewels, and decorating her body with necklaces and bracelets. The goddess' power dressing is meticulous; she is described straightening the beads of the necklace at her throat, carefully applying kohl to her eyes, attending to her hair style and arranging her jewels. In the mythic narratives of *Inanna and Ebih* and *Inanna's Descent*, the goddess' power dressing precedes conflict and destruction. While there is no physical conflict between Inanna and Dumuzi, one composition includes a reference to the goddess testing weapons amongst descriptions of her dressing (*Dumuzid-Inana C*, ETCSL 4.08.03). The goddess' tendency to enhance her physical appearance prior to transitional events is a complicated element of her image. Although the literature does not give a clear account of the significance of this behaviour, the dressing is presented in terms of wealth, power and status:

> Inana, the child of Suen, put on the garment of royalty and girded herself in joy. She bedecked her forehead with terror and fearsome radiance.
>
> (*Inanna and Ebiḫ*, ETCSL 1.3.2)

Visual sources also reflect the goddess' adornment; in anthropomorphic form, Ishtar's artistic representation commonly involves presenting her as wearing necklaces (including a collar or choker), bracelets, and earrings (Bahrani, 2001: 155–156). The connection of beauty and joy with high social status in depictions of the goddess' power dressing suggests that, through enhancing her appearance, she is using her physicality to heighten her power and social currency prior to events with high stakes and unpredictable outcomes. As a goddess closely linked to beauty and happiness, Inanna is particularly well equipped to capitalise on outward displays of prosperity and status.

Bathing, which forms a repeated part of Inanna's preparations for the arrival of Dumuzi, seems to have had a religious as well as physical cleansing effect in the Ancient Near East. In some traditions, bathing seems to have been a prerequisite for contact with the deity. The emphasis on bathing in the love poetry texts is more likely to be a reference to the religious aspects of the union that is to take place,

Figure 1.2 Line drawing of 'Lady of Uruk' Mask. Drawing by Kerry Pryke.

than simply reflecting ancient custom. Of course, the two ideas are not mutually exclusive; it is possible that, if bathing was ritually associated with preparation for marriage, this may also reflect religious purposes. Bathing, like power dressing, may have also functioned as a type of preparation associated with going into battle; in the Sumerian epic of *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* (ETCSL 1.8.2.1), the early king Enmerkar goes on a long march to the city of Aratta, to conquer it in battle. Although the text is fragmentary, it appears that Enmerkar, along with his entire army, bathes just prior to going into battle.

Inanna makes preparations which enhance her physical attractiveness, such as the application of scented oil, make-up and fine garments, before her marriage and also prior to her journey to the underworld. The application of makeup and fine clothing and jewellery is a distinctively female method of preparing for a liminal experience, and emphasises the goddess' gender. The focus on grooming and beauty suggests that there are some aspects of Inanna/Ishtar's power that are closely entwined with her appearance.

Both her marriage to Dumuzi and her voyage to the underworld are transformative events, and prior to both, the texts depict Inanna enhancing her sexual appeal and seeking support from those close to her, using her formidable capacity for social networking. In the lead-up to her marriage, the goddess seeks the support of close family members, and prior to her journey to the underworld Ishtar enlists the help of her faithful servant, Ninshubur, and through Ninshubur, other gods, such as Enki. The similarity in the goddess' behaviour for these two different events gives some coherency to her characterisation as a deity closely linked to beauty, intimacy and communication. Marriage and death involve different, unique challenges, but by preparing for both activities in a similar manner, the goddess plays to her strengths.

MARITAL AND MATERIAL STATUS

Inanna-Dumuzi love poetry displays a high level of interest in luxury goods and prestige. Dumuzi is depicted bringing many gifts to Inanna, such as dates and gems of lapis lazuli. It seems probable that the emphasis on luxury goods is more in line with considerations of status and the theme of abundance than with materialism and avarice. Inanna's high status, despite her youth, is a concern for the genre as a whole (if we may say that there is a sense of a 'whole' to this genre). There is a further layer of meaning to the gifting and presence of luxury goods in the texts: many of the gifts carry strong symbolic references to sexuality and fertility (Tinney, 1999: 37).

In one Sumerian composition, we see Dumuzi assuring Inanna that she is not a woman off the street, and he further reassures her that she will not need to spin and weave once she is his wife. Although fragmentary, Dumuzi's promises to Inanna in the song appear to address the goddess' concerns for her treatment once she is married:

> I have not carried you off to be my slave girl! . . . your table will be a splendid table. You will eat at a splendid table.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana C1*, ETCSL 4.08.29)

Dumuzi's assurance to Inanna that she will not need to perform weaving and sewing further informs on her high status. A *balbale* between the goddess and her brother, Utu, gives an insight into the goddess' perspective on the weaving and spinning. While *balbale* poetry is especially 'difficult to define' (Rubio, 2009: 64), it can involve dialogues and often employs the literary technique of parallelism. Repetition is also used in the genre for emphasis.

> The brother speaks gently to his sister, Utu speaks gently to his sister, he speaks tenderly to holy Inana . . . 'Young lady, I will bring you flax from the garden beds. Inana, I will bring you flax from the garden beds.'
>
> 'Brother, when you have brought me flax from the garden beds . . . who will spin it for me? Who will spin it for me? Who will spin that flax for me?'
>
> 'My sister, I will bring it to you already spun! Inana, I will bring it to you already spun!'
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana A*, ETCSL 4.08.01)

Handcrafts such as the working of wool were traditionally female crafts in the ancient world, and female deities from a variety of cultures are shown to be proficient weavers and spinners. The Greek goddess Athena displays the dual capabilities of weaving and war making (Deacy, 2008: 51). While Inanna, like Athena, is also a talented warrior, handcrafts seem to hold comparatively little appeal for her (Harris, 1991: 269). In the above *balbale*, Inanna is depicted as being quite aware of the necessary steps in preparing a covering for her marital bed, but continually asks her brother who will perform the necessary work to prepare the material; with no suggestion made by either party that she undertake the work herself! It is Utu who will organise the working of the flax. Utu provides a further service to his sibling in this song – he organises a bridegroom to share the finished product of the weaving with Inanna.

> Brother, when you have brought it to me already bleached, who will lie down on it with me? Who will lie down on it with me? Who will lie down on that linen with me?
>
> There shall lie down with you, there shall lie down with you, there shall lie down with you your bridegroom!
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana A*, ETCSL 4.08.01)

As we do not see Inanna spinning and weaving in these stories before she marries, it is possible that Dumuzi's assurances that she will be exempt from such work are a veiled promise that Inanna will suffer no loss of status through her union with him. Of course, the fragmented nature of the evidence creates difficulties for any certainty in our assessment of any underlying meaning of Dumuzi's promise. In addition to being a concern for the genre, the status of the goddess can be seen to be a concern for the deity herself in the poems. In one pre-marital courting text, Inanna compares her divine pedigree to that of her lover Dumuzi, and tells him she is too good for him, as her mother is Ningal, her father is Sin and her brother is Utu, all powerful Mesopotamian deities. Dumuzi responds by saying his family are just as good as hers, with Enki as good as Sin and Duttur as good as Ningal (*Dumuzid-Inanna I*, ETCSL 4.08.09). In another narrative text, the goddess protests becoming the wife of a shepherd, while being counselled into the marriage by Utu.

> The shepherd shall not marry me! He shall not make me carry his garments of new wool. His brand new wool will not influence me.
>
> (*Dumuzid and Enkimdu,* ETCSL 4.08.33)

Inanna's concerns reflect the intertwined nature of clothing and status; the Sumerian verb 'to carry' can mean 'to wear' when said of a garment. If taken this way, it would seem that Inanna is aware the match would entail dressing as would be appropriate for a shepherd's wife, a sartorial statement that would advertise the low status of her husband for all the world to see.

The love poetry has an exuberant tone which, in many ways, centres on the transformative capacity of sex; a capacity that is clearly embraced by the goddess. The young goddess is depicted exalting over the changes in her body, and how these changes will prepare her for union with her husband. She is depicted carefully transforming her physical appearance, before her body undergoes further (practical) changes as she anticipates love-making. The marital union between Inanna and Dumuzi, as well as their sexual union, connote significant changes for the deities, including changes in status.

GIFT-GIVING AND AGRICULTURE

Themes of fertility and agriculture increase the impression of joyous abundance given in poetry describing Dumuzi's courtship of Inanna. The love-making between Inanna and Dumuzi is described with an assortment of food-based analogies; imagery associated with the fruit of the date palm infuses the love poetry between Inanna and Dumuzi. The use of date imagery, along with that of honey, with its associated 'sweetness', is juxtaposed against the 'sweetness' of the love-making between the two deities. To 'sweeten the lap' of a woman is suggestive of orgasmic sex (Leick, 2003: 285). The use of dates and honey in imagery describing the union of Inanna and Dumuzi is notable for the sweet flavour of both types of food, but also for the reputation of both types of food for having a long shelf-life, as might a successful marriage union. Although we know the marriage between Inanna and Dumuzi will not prove enduring, the imagery captures the optimistic appraisal of the future associated particularly with young lovers.

Despite the repeated emphasis on the fertility of fields and flocks in this literature, the marriage of Dumuzi and Inanna does not end in the begetting of children. Their marriage is doubtlessly consummated yet it remains a fruitless union – and one that ultimately leads to the death of the male partner. This raises an important yet difficult question: what is the purpose of the love poetry that depicts the union between Inanna and Dumuzi?

CONSIDERING POSSIBLE PURPOSES FOR SUMERIAN LOVE POETRY

The ultimate transformative power of sex is the creation of new life, and yet this transition seems out of place in the Inanna–Dumuzi literary corpus. Inanna/Ishtar does have

children, with her sons Lulal and Shara appearing in myths and royal hymns. In contrast to compositions focused on the goddess' marriage to a human king, Inanna does not have a maternal role in the Inanna–Dumuzi love poetry, and Wilcke observes that Dumuzi is never named as the father of the goddess' children (Wilcke 1976–1980: 80) – although for a possible reference to children shared by Ishtar and Dumuzi, see 'Seeking out Dumuzi', (IV.61, Foster 2005: 1025). While the sexual connection of the young couple is an important theme of the songs, it is not clear whether they were intended to be part of a wedding ritual (Leick, 2003: 67). Assante argues for a marital purpose for the bridal hymns, to teach inexperienced young lovers in ancient Mesopotamia, particularly women, what to expect from intercourse (Assante 2000: 229). Assante has further suggested the poetry has significant magical potency. This makes the poetry particularly well-suited to the liminal character of Inanna, and the suggestion of a combination of practical and divine purposes has much to recommend it.

The transformative capacity of sex was commonly recognised in the religions of the ancient world, and a divine purpose, or purposes, for the literature seems inescapable, even allowing for the idea that the texts had other, more mundane, applications. Indeed, it is interesting to note in the texts how the ritualised behaviours between Inanna and Dumuzi seem to be composed of imagery and actions which have both practical and divine import. Inanna's body physically transforms in preparation for her orgasm, with stages of arousal, such as the increased lubrication of her vulva, carefully catalogued. At the same time, the goddess' ritualised dressing and gift receiving lead her unequivocally towards the marital bed – a liminal space frequently involved in magic and exorcisms in ancient Mesopotamia (Assante, 2002: 39). However, the focus on the sexuality of the lovers obscures the possibility of purposes outside of the erotic frame. While sex is important in love poetry, love and intimacy are presented in many forms in the poems. The complexity and diversity of the imagery used in Inanna–Dumuzi love poetry gives plausibility to the idea that the texts had multiple purposes in the ancient world. Yet, without a clearer sense of the context of the literature, its intended audience, or the identity of its authors, definite ideas on the poetry's functions remain elusive.

Alster sees the poetry as an analogy for human lovers, with Inanna and Dumuzi functioning as their representatives – the divine pair of young lovers *par excellence* (Alster 1999: 832), with the poetry possibly being performed at weddings, particularly among the upper class of Mesopotamian society. While Alster's assessment of the poems' function may be accurate, this does not in itself assist with finding an answer to the question of the lack of focus on procreation in the texts. Marital unions traditionally functioned as a process of legitimisation for potential offspring in antiquity. With such a large weight of ancient literary evidence supporting the doomed outcome of the union of Inanna and Dumuzi, is this really a desirable parallel to create at a wedding?

Inanna's love and happiness were perceived as extremely powerful divine forces in the ancient world. The focus on intimacy and the enhancement of community ties in the texts may have created some sense of accessibility to the goddess' potency. Celebrating and embracing this potency, and placing it within a formal ritualistic context, seems likely as one purpose behind the Inanna–Dumuzi corpus of love poetry.

Acknowledging the goddess' competence in strengthening loving bonds would create further intimacy between the goddess and her ancient audience.

The focus in poetry on the perspective of the young woman and her happiness, involving physical and emotional components, and the use of vivid imagery encapsulating the potency of the natural world, supports this view. Dumuzi, like Inanna, is described in terms of natural imagery, but his perspective is infrequently seen, and he does not undergo the same level of physical or psychological preparations for the union as his partner. While Inanna is the primary focus of the poetic literature, the closeness of Inanna and Dumuzi, celebrated in the genre, meant that his potency could be accessed by her devotees through the intercession of the goddess, as well as directly (see for example III.35 'To Dumuzi', Foster, 2005: 641). In a devotional poem (also noted above) from the Akkadian Mature Period (ca. 1500–1000 BCE), the poet makes an offering, seemingly a cultic object in the shape of a vulva, in a divine quid pro quo for the goddess' mediation.

> I have given you a great gift:
> A lapis vulva, a star of gold, as befits your divinity.
> Intercede for me with Dumuzi your lover,
> May Dumuzi your lover take away my tribulation.
>
> (III.43.d 'A Gift to Ishtar', Foster, 2005: 677)

Celebrating the union of Inanna and Dumuzi through love poetry was also to praise the deities themselves, and their divine extended families. Considered in this way, the theme of intimacy in the texts can be viewed as extending even to potential audiences of the poetry. Praising the joyous union of the goddess may have been a means to gaining her favour – after all, it must be noted that these compositions combine three of her favourite things: love, sex and song. Several ancient literary works note the effect of song in gladdening the goddess' heart (see for example, *Iddin-Dagan* A, ETCSL 2.5.3.1), and as we have seen in this chapter, the goddess' happiness is closely linked to blessings and the gift of life.

LAMENTATIONS FOR DUMUZI

Despite its celebration in love poetry, the marital union between Inanna and Dumuzi ends tragically, with his death. The premature demise of the young god serves as a key plot point in several Mesopotamian myths, including *Inanna and Bilulu* and *Dumuzi's Dream.* The death of Dumuzi ends Inanna's marriage but her love for her bridegroom is not as easily extinguished. Inanna's love for Dumuzi survives and continues following his death, as can be seen in the genre of lamentations.

The depiction of the union of Inanna and Dumuzi in Mesopotamian literature has an exaggerated emphasis on two aspects of the relationship which are opposites of one other, that is, the union's beginning and its end. Material detailing the period of time where the lovers are married is less thoroughly represented. While love poetry, as we have seen, celebrates the start of the marriage and its initial erotic undertakings, literature in the genre of lamentations focuses on mourning the end of this relationship,

and the ramifications of the loss of Dumuzi. As in love poetry, the lamentations for Dumuzi show a focus on exploring the perspectives and feelings of Inanna, which is perhaps to be expected due to her status as the surviving member of the union. The lamentations also eulogise the dead shepherd-king, praising him in ardent terms. The goddess' love for her husband thematically links the two genres; her love causes Inanna joy in love poetry, and sorrow in lamentations.

It is intriguing to further note the manner in which texts about the Inanna–Dumuzi union can be seen to be focused upon transitional periods, where there is a corresponding rapid change in social status. Inanna goes from a young woman who has just reached sexual maturity to a married, sexually active woman in the Sumerian sexual lyric, and is then transformed swiftly from a married woman to a widow in the lamentations. The 'in-between' area, meaning the time within the marriage, and a period where Inanna's status in society remains stable, appears to be of less interest to the ancient composers of the literature. It seems that this fixation on abrupt changes in status reflects an understanding of the goddess' areas of competency in ancient Mesopotamia. References in love poetry to the transformation of the young goddess from a child to a sexually aware young woman suggest Inanna's involvement in this significant transitional period for young women. Hymns and magical incantations to the goddess have been discovered, as well as votive offerings shaped as female genitals. Ishtar/Inanna was called upon to assist in childbirth, conception, and various other difficult and transitional periods such as illness.

Dumuzi's youthfulness and his links to agriculture function as a kind of literary leitmotif in the lamentations. The focus on his youth emphasises the untimeliness and unnaturalness of his death, but also his lost potential. It is not only Inanna who mourns for Dumuzi, but also his mother, Duttur, and his sister. The emphasis on the grief of these three women mourners in lamentations may betray the genre's origins in the musical and performance sphere of women. Traditionally, women's musical performance is almost universally featured in weddings and funerals. Cooper has argued that the focus on the divine couple of Inanna and Dumuzi in Sumerian love poetry and in lamentations stems from the association of these genres with women's music (Cooper, 2006: 44).

Love poetry and lamentations vary greatly in content and style, yet both genres are focused on the loving relationship between goddess Inanna and her consort, Dumuzi. The Emesal dialect, known to be reserved for the speech of women and goddesses in many Sumerian texts (Cooper, 2006: 44), is also shared by the two genres. Importantly, the emphasis on family ties places a continued stress on the strengthening of community bonds during transitional periods in both types of literature related to the goddess. Inanna's love for Dumuzi continues after his death, as does her relationship with his family.

The Sumerian genre of lamentations is a category of literature with great variety, but can be broadly divided into two main groups; congregational laments and individual laments. Dumuzi laments could be thought to inhabit the category of congregational laments. Two common types of lamentation are the *balag* genre and the *ershemma*. Like Archaic lyric poetry from the Classical world, both compositional styles derive their names from the musical instrument which is believed to have accompanied them, possibly a harp and a *shem*-drum. These types of lament, first attested in the

Old Babylonian period, are associated with *gala*-priests, which suggest they were strongly performance-oriented in nature (Rubio, 2009: 63). Dumuzi laments have, in past scholarship, been considered to serve the purpose of appealing for the return of the deceased deity to the world of the living, to aid the continuation of seasonal fertility (through the lens of the Dying and Rising God theory). This view has fallen out of favour, and in more recent times, it is the death and mourning of Dumuzi that has been recognised as the compositions' focal point, rather than any potential revival of the deity (see Scurlock, 2013).

Lamentations for Dumuzi show a kind of hybridity of genre which creates problems for their classification, as well as for the assessment of their function and context. Dumuzi lamentations contain a mixture of lament and myth, with the mythical elements focused on the death of the young god, and its immediate consequences. The lament 'The Death of Dumuzi' incorporates material from mythical compositions such as *Dumuzi's Dream*, and *Dumuzi and the galla-Demons*. Cooper notes that while ancient Babylonian funerals and weddings are a subject about which modern scholars know next to nothing, both events are the only 'transformative life-cycle rituals' from Mesopotamia for which we have any evidence (Cooper 2006a: 44). These transformative elements would make the content of wedding and funeral music well suited for involving Inanna.

Like the poems reflecting the marital union between Inanna and Dumuzi, the genre of lamentations can be considered to have important religious significance. The sense of religious duty embedded in lamentations is highlighted in a Sumerian proverb:

> Fear of god creates good fortune. Lamentation absolves sin. Offerings extend life.
>
> (*Proverbs: collection* 26, ETCSL 6.1.26)

The correct mourning of a loved one held crucial significance in the culture of the ancient world, and in Mesopotamia, the relatives of the deceased had specific obligations that needed to be fulfilled. In Mesopotamian culture, one's dead relatives required ongoing care; spirits were thought to rise and receive offerings and smell burning incense provided by loved ones, where neglected and hungry spirits fed off 'the garbage thrown into the streets' (Yamauchi, 1965: 288). There was an element of danger to the neglect of the dead; ghosts could easily turn into demons, which might return to terrify the living if disturbed or improperly buried (Hallo, 2010: 530).

In lamenting Dumuzi, Inanna experiences the emotional pain of love's loss. Her voice, in other contexts used to celebrate her love, is used in this genre to lament for her husband. Instead of joy and abundance, there is grief and loss. Constant across the two 'genres' of love poetry and lamentations is the importance of the support of loved ones during the difficult periods of change in life.

OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we have seen that love poetry celebrates the physical and emotional bonding between Inanna and her husband, but also the love and close ties between

families at a time of significant change. Inanna's identification with love, intimacy and joy makes her well suited to preside over an event where a great deal is at stake for the community, and over events that involve sudden changes in social status. The use of speech in love poetry expresses the changing relationships between the lovers and their families. The goddess uses speech in the texts to enhance social bonding, and her association with joy, love and abundance gives coherency to her characterisation in the texts. The importance of emotional closeness and joy in the goddess' links to sexuality are further explored in the next chapter.

Mesopotamian love poetry and lamentations provide an insight into the way that liminal experiences were transformed into opportunities to commune with the divine by the literature's ancient audience. We have seen that the goddess' love carries significant benefits and blessings, and these benefits are experienced by Dumuzi even after his death. The goddess' love (somewhat ironically) grants long life while her husband is alive, and protects and cares for him in the afterlife when he dies. By celebrating the excitement of first love with the young goddess, and then joining her in mourning, the ancient audience took part in experiences with universal relevance, allowing for an intimate experience of the goddess' inner life.

NOTES

1 Translations of Akkadian sources in this book are taken from Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005) unless otherwise noted.
2 Translations of the ballad from BM 47507 are taken from J.A. Black, 'Babylonian Ballads: A New Genre', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, 1983, p. 31. BM 47507 can be viewed on the British Museum website through their collection search at www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx

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SEXUALITY AND ORDER

Ishtar's sexuality is a fundamental part of her nature, she embodies beauty, love, libido and sexual behaviour. In Chapter 1, we explored love and sexual intimacy in Sumerian poetry. In this chapter, concepts of sex and gender involving the goddess in a broader range of literature are considered. The goddess' sex life involves diversity, yet in all of its manifestations, Ishtar's sexuality should be viewed as closely related to happiness, intimacy and prosperity.

Sexuality was central to Mesopotamian life. Ishtar was the most prominent goddess of the Mesopotamian pantheon, making the combination of sex and religious beliefs and practices in Mesopotamia particularly potent and useful for gaining insights into ancient Mesopotamian culture. Mesopotamia was a patriarchal society, meaning that there was an unbalanced distribution of power and status between men and women. Women's lives and resources were, generally speaking, subject to the authority of male relatives, although less egregiously so than in ancient Israel, Greece or the European Middle Ages (Cooper, 1997: 89). In the fields of love and sexuality, there was greater equality for women than in other areas of life (Bottéro, 2004: 95), and both sexes were entitled to the enjoyment of sexuality.

Ishtar's connection with a wide range of sexual practices is an aspect of her identity in the ancient world that overshadows her modern image, where she is frequently depicted as a chaotic sexpot. While the goddess' liminal and transgressive quality is at times expressed in her associations with sex, this should not be confused with a lack of order. The sexual world inhabited by the goddess contains boundaries and structure. Good sex is presented bringing happiness to the goddess' heart, but not all expressions of sexuality are depicted positively, or condoned by the goddess. Despite Ishtar's authority in the sexual realm, her divinity and her associations with battle and vengeance, she is the victim of sexual violence in the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda*. The depiction of the goddess' rape in this myth gives significant insights into Inanna's characterisation, and her commonly overlooked role as an enforcer of universal order.

When considering the goddess' gender, as well as her sexuality, we immediately face the challenge of what those concepts ('gender' and 'sexuality') may have meant in their original ancient contexts (for a detailed analysis of gender in Mesopotamian divinities, see Asher-Greve, 2013). For our purposes here, gender is defined as a societal role which is performed, with different cultures constructing varying paradigms

that determine two (or more) genders (Zsolnay, 2010: 391). Female and male are biological terms, and masculine and feminine relate to gender. In Mesopotamia, the two concepts were related, with biological sex understood as an element of the body, upon which gender was inscribed (Asher-Greve, 1998). Although the different gender roles and behaviours were based on different sexes, they were not biologically predetermined, instead having their roots in processes of socialisation (explored more fully in Asher-Greve, 2002: 11–21).

Ishtar's complex image, her association with the extremes of life and her links to the traditionally male-dominated field of battle, have raised suggestions in modern scholarship that the goddess is a 'hermaphrodite', 'transvestite' or 'androgynous'. Yet, many of the texts centred on the goddess emphasise her feminine features; in hymns of praise to her breasts and vulva, Inanna places a stress on physical qualities that biologically define her as female (for example, *Dumuzid-Inana* C, ETCSL 4.08.03, considered in the previous chapter). The goddess' depictions in Mesopotamian visual arts are also consistently feminine (Bahrani, 2001: 155).

While it is perhaps anachronistic to apply the terms 'homosexual' and 'bisexual' in the context of ancient Mesopotamian society, same-sex desire and relations were certainly a part of Mesopotamian culture, yet our limited knowledge of this culture in the Ancient Near East creates interpretive problems for assessing the meaning of various forms of sexuality to the Mesopotamians' social and religious experiences. While the physical realities of sexual intercourse have likely remained more or less the same over time, the associated customs, taboos, consequences, and contexts of sexual activity have experienced a high level of fluidity, creating a significant cultural and temporal divide.

SACRED PROSTITUTION AND SACRED MARRIAGE

To gain an overview of the image of Inanna/Ishtar in the ancient world, we begin by confronting a historiographical bias regarding Ishtar's sexuality and gender. Assante (2009: 24) has argued that the focus on Ishtar's sexuality has created a kind of myopic view of the goddess in academic works, leading to a failure to fully examine those aspects of the deity that are not explicitly related to sex. She argues further that, even within the context of this intense scrutiny of the goddess' sexuality, the modern image of the goddess has been seriously misshaped due to scholarly prejudice. It is true that, in scholarship on Ishtar's sexuality, emphasis has been given to the discussion of two ancient customs that, it would now seem, had little, if anything, to do with the cult of the goddess: the rites of sacred marriage and sacred prostitution.

The concept of a sacred marriage ritual, in which a Mesopotamian king was married to the goddess with the suggestion of physical consummation, is a complex issue, discussed in Chapter 4, relating the goddess to kingship. The case for sacred prostitution is far less nuanced. There is no evidence linking Ishtar to sacred prostitution (Budin, 2008: 48). Nonetheless, it is important to examine this historiographical tradition, as the conviction with which this view was once espoused in scholarly circles, and its lingering influence on modern interpretations of the goddess' cult, cannot be overstated. This convention of associating Ishtar with temple prostitution

is considered in more detail in the analysis of Ishtar's reception by later audiences in the final chapter of this book.

In her definitive study on myths of sacred prostitution in antiquity, Budin observes the influence that the theory of temple prostitution has had not only on the image of Ishtar, but also our modern understanding of her cult personnel (2008: 320–321). She notes that the scholarly concept of Ishtar as a deity failing to ascribe to later concepts of 'morality', together with the distorted view of the goddess' sexuality, has led to the further misidentification of Ishtar's cult attendants as lacking in morals and being hyper-sexualised. In a kind of self-perpetuating modern myth, this distorted view of the goddess' cult attendants then enhances the already dominant tradition in scholarship of Ishtar's cult being defined by sexual 'excesses' (Budin, 2008: 321). Assante sees the marginalisation of Ishtar's cult functionaries into purely sexual roles as stemming from androcentric preconceptions in ancient Greek and modern treatments of the goddess – where the deity's primacy in matters relating to sex was ideologically acceptable, but her significant authority in non-sexual domains, such as the field of battle, was not (Assante, 2009: 24). Ishtar's cultic personnel, viewed through this distorted lens, became exclusively associated with sexual roles; the female cult workers were depicted as sacred prostitutes, while male functionaries were seen as 'prostitutes', 'hermaphrodites', 'eunuchs' and 'masochists', 'circulating like minor moons around a celestial fetish' (Assante, 2009: 24).

Ishtar's unique competence in the field of sexuality has eclipsed her authority in other areas; the causes of this oversight in modern scholarship are complex but not solely the result of androcentric biases. The goddess movement, rising out of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s, cannot be considered 'androcentric', yet it has had a powerful influence on the conception of ancient goddesses in the modern world. Considered through the lens of the 'goddess movement', with its focus on peaceful, nurturing matriarchal goddesses in the ancient world, Ishtar's terrifying capacity for bloodshed and destruction makes her an awkward fit for the archetype of the peaceful Mother Goddess. Of course, the focused nature of this book, providing an overview of the goddess' main features, does in itself create a kind of bias, even in terms of the necessity of choosing which aspects of Ishtar are most valuable for our understanding of the goddess.

Recent contributions such as those by Budin and Assante have begun the important work of addressing the lack of balance and nuance in depictions of Ishtar and her links to sexuality. The rejection of the once widely accepted traditional views of the cult of the goddess has not been accompanied by a correspondingly united new trend in interpretations of the ancient evidence. There remains much to be discovered about the positions and roles of the goddess' cult functionaries. While the goddess' powerful sexuality has blurred her modern image, it remains a primary aspect of her identification.

SEX AND THE SINGLE GODDESS

Ishtar's image in the ancient world is tightly entwined with her role in Sumerian love poetry depicting her courtship by Dumuzi, and her spousal relationship with

Mesopotamian kings. Sexual activity features prominently in literature associated with both relationships, and both possess a similar emphasis on love, intimacy, abundance and joy, presented in numerous texts. Despite this overarching emphasis, there is still much diversity in the representation of the goddess' connection with sexuality in ancient literature. While generally speaking, sex remains conceptually linked to pleasure, abundance and the satisfaction of the goddess' desires, the sexual experiences of the goddess, and her relationship to sexuality, can be presented in a less intimate manner.

Less of an emphasis on emotional closeness can be seen, for example, in the Akkadian praise hymn to Ishtar, known as 'Ishtar Will Not Tire' (III 43.e, Foster, 2005: 678). This composition is thought to date to the Mature period of Akkadian literature (ca. 1500–1000 BCE), although there has been some suggestion that it is a much later imposture, from the Neo-Babylonian period (Cooper, 1997: 91). In the hymn, the goddess engages in sex with 'sixty then sixty' lovers. While the young men tire, the goddess remains fresh and lively. Although one imagines that there are limits to the emotional intimacy that can be experienced with so many concurrent lovers, the hymn nonetheless presents love-making as a physical act aimed at addressing mutual desires.

> As the girl demanded,
> The young men heeded, gave her what she asked for.
>
> (III.43.e, Foster, 2005: 678)

The hymn's refrain – 'The city's built on pleasure!' – reinforces the relationship of the goddess to the city, and the important conceptual linking of sex and joy. Ishtar's tirelessness in the bedroom can be viewed as an outcome of her vitality, as well as representative of her divine role in sparking sexual desire and embodying lust. A similarly untiring quality is found in her depiction as a warrior deity, an aspect of her identity considered in Chapter 4. The setting of this sexual scene, in the shade of the city wall, places the liaison geographically and thematically outside of the Inanna–Dumuzi/Mesopotamian king traditions, with their corresponding focus on the setting up and positioning of the marital bed or couch. A location outdoors suggests less intimacy than an indoor location might; public spaces and intimate acts are directly juxtaposed. In the myth of *Enki and the World Order* (ETCSL 1.1.3), the goddess is described in terms of her capacity to induce sexual intercourse, and as 'the lady of the great powers who allows sexual intercourse in the open squares of Kulaba'. The broad spectrum of the goddess' associations with sex can also be seen in her description as a young virgin, in a very fragmentary text in praise of her brother Utu (*Utu F*, ETCSL t.4.32.f).

Ishtar's loveliness and charm have great potency: as well as being beautiful herself, she was considered to have the capacity of making people and places more alluring and beauteous ('To Secure Brisk Trade at a Tavern' IV.56., Foster, 2005: 1014). Her ability to bless followers with attractiveness is referenced in a royal praise poem, where the king Ishme-Dagan credits the goddess for his appeal: Ishme-Dagan says that Inanna 'has made me attractive' (*Išme-Dagan A + V*, ETCSL 2.5.4.01).

As well as taverns (referenced above), the goddess could make other spaces full of attractive lavishness, an ability closely linked to her capacity to bring joy and abundance, an ability poetically described in a Sumerian hymn:

> With her, the desert is filled with a glorious garden.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana P*, ETCSL 4.08.16)

The power of the goddess' sexuality and her ability to transform reality find further expression in Mesopotamian love charms, such as the Old Akkadian charm quoted below, in which spells invoke the goddess so as to capture the heart of a lover. A thematic concern of this book is Ishtar's special role in the decreeing of fates and deciding of destinies. This aspect of the goddess, together with her extreme proficiency in matters of the heart, makes her a natural fit for the magical improvement of romantic fortunes.

> I have seized your mouth for love-making!
> By Ishtar and Ishara I conjure you:
> May you find no release from me
> Till your neck and his neck lie close beside!
>
> (*Love Charm* 1.4.c, Foster, 2005: 67)

In the above love spell, Ishtar is invoked alongside Ishara – a goddess considered a syncretism of Ishtar, particularly associated with love (Becking, 1999: 450). In addition to assisting her followers to gain their heart's desire, the goddess could also be invoked to curse romantic rivals, even at times within a few lines of the same composition (see for example *The Faithful Lover*, D.II.16, Foster, 2005: 155).

Ishtar, as we saw in the previous chapter, holds a role in the Mesopotamian pantheon that is linked closely to her youth and feminine gender. She is the beloved young woman, known for her joyous and loving heart.

> May the loving heart, Inana, never abandon you!
>
> (Šulgi *X*, ETCSL 2.4.2.24)

Many texts highlight attributes of the goddess which the Mesopotamians associated with femininity. Her beauty, charm and loveliness are important parts of her identity, as is her sweet-sounding voice.

> You (Inanna) have been decreed femininity, you are full of charm.
>
> (*Rim-Sin H*, ETCSL 2.6.9.8)

Inanna's femininity and sweet voice are recognised by the god of wisdom, Enki, who describes the charms he has blessed her with in the myth of *Enki and the World Order* (ETCSL 1.1.3). In this myth, known from copies dating to the Old Babylonian period, Enki assures Inanna that he has made her speak 'as a woman with a pleasant voice', clothed her in the garments of women's power and put women's speech in her mouth.

Figure 2.1 Female figure from the Cella (Room G29) of the Temple of Ishtar, Stratum II. The figure's oversized eyes and the central position of the arms, with clasped hands, indicates a worshipper in a praying posture. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard/ Baghdad School Expedition (1929–1930), 1931.141. Copyright Photo: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College (permission acquired by author).

Despite the emphasis on Inanna's biological sex in love poetry and the frequent praise of her more esoteric feminine charms in many texts, the cult of the goddess allowed Inanna to enjoy a degree of gender fluidity. Several texts contain descriptions of cultic activities involving cross-dressing for the participants, with partakers in the festivities dressed in men's clothing on their right side and women's clothing on their left (*Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1). References to sex changes and cross-dressing are found in the poetry of Enheduanna, from the third millennium BCE, including Inanna's victory speech in the mythical composition, *Inanna and Ebih*; a composition praising the goddess' victory in battle against a disrespectful mountain:

> I have given the cult-players their daggers and goads?
> I have given the singers of laments their drums and tambours,
> I have changed the sex of the cult impersonators.
> Victorious, I have attacked the mountains,
> Victorious, I have attacked Mount Ebih!
>
> (*Inanna and Ebih*, Foster 2015: 346–347)

In Enheduanna's poetry, Inanna's transformative capacity is described as capable of changing a man into a woman, and a woman into a man. The context of the description of this ability in Enheduanna's praise poetry is the goddess' awesome power to bring about swift reversals in fortunes, and to span contrasting extremes of existence – such as those seen in the poet's examples of windfalls and bankruptcy, strength and weakness, triumphs and submissions, and highs and lows.

Ishtar's sex-altering quality is famously noted in the later Akkadian composition known as *Erra and Ishum*, perhaps more commonly known as the *Erra Epic*, often dated to the eighth century BCE (see George, 2013: 47 for an overview of dating and further bibliography). The authorship of the poem is ascribed to the Babylonian poet, Kabti-ilani-Marduk, and it relates the war-mongering deeds of Erra, the Mesopotamian deity of pestilence (questions around the historicity of Kabti-ilani-Marduk are discussed in Sasson, 2005: 223).

In the opening of the poem, Erra debates with himself, his advisor (Ishum) and his weapons, the Seven; although elsewhere he is a god of pestilence, in this composition, Erra is a war deity. Once he eventually commits himself to conflict, Erra's violence rages out of control. The epic is considered 'perhaps the most powerful denunciation of war to come down to us from the ancient world' (Foster, 2007: 75). The description of Ishtar transforming the sexes of her followers is located in a long section of the poem detailing the destructive capacity of civil war, and how the activities of Sutean nomads negatively impacted the city of Uruk and Ishtar's attendants.

> They (Sutean nomads) turned out the actors and singers (of) Eanna,
> Whose manhood Ishtar changed to womanhood to strike awe into the people.
>
> (*Erra and Ishum*, C.4.17, Foster, 2005: 904).

It has been suggested that Kabti-ilani-Marduk seems to disapprove of the activities of Ishtar's cult attendants, an observation that might find support in his description of her attendants:

> The wielders of daggers and razors,
> vintner's shears and flint knives,
> Who take part in abominable acts for the entertainment of Ishtar.
>
> (*Erra and Ishum*, C.4.17, Foster, 2005: 904)

As *Erra and Ishum* rails against warfare, it is possible that Ishtar's warrior image is the cause of the poet's apparent disapproval. Yet, it is important to note that at an earlier stage in the same poem Ishtar is presented as trying to calm Erra and prevent his destructiveness. The poet's references to her cult attendants and their activities show them being displaced by warfare – providing an example of some of the negative impacts of conflict emphasised throughout the poem. The goddess' knife-wielding cult attendants are also present in the earlier Sumerian composition *Iddin-Dagan A*, a poem from the second millennium BCE, celebrating the union of the king Iddin-Dagan, of the Isin dynasty, and Inanna:

> Young men put into neck-stocks (?) sing to her and parade before her, holy Inana . . . With daggers in their hands, . . . kurgara priests parade before her, holy Inana. Those who cover their swords with gore spatter blood as they parade before her, holy Inana.
>
> (*Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1)

The capacity of the goddess for blurring the boundaries of gender is spoofed in the poem *Ishtar, Harasser of Men*, a composition written in the Classical literary dialect, but considered to be a late imitation (Foster, 2005: 281). In the poem, women are described holding male weaponry, and men carry women's possessions, such as a harp and a hairpin (see Asher-Greve, 2002). Alongside the role reversals in the poem are acknowledgements of Ishtar's capacity to inspire harmony and terror. The repeated references to fear in the composition are perhaps related to the dangers involved in the crossing of boundaries and subverting social expectations. *Ishtar, Harasser of Men* presents a less than positive appraisal of the goddess, particularly in her relation to the sex and gender of her followers.

It is difficult to interpret how cross-dressing or sex changes may have been involved in Ishtar's historical cult for several reasons. The evidence for this aspect of the deity is fragmentary and difficult to contextualise, the terminology involved in describing the cult performers evades scholarly consensus, and the ancient evidence is perhaps (as previously noted) coloured with bias. What is clear from the Sumerian and Akkadian sources is that the literary depiction of this aspect of the deity's cult shows some variation in different time periods, and appears across a range of genres. The most likely interpretation of these literary references is that they describe the transformative nature and broad potency of the goddess – including her power to alter fates – rather than depicting cult-specific 'hermaphrodites' and ritual acts of castration (Assante, 2009: 46). In awareness of the scarcity and fraught nature of the evidence, I tentatively suggest that the texts considered here are describing historical rituals associated with Ishtar/Inanna from an early period (as evidenced references in Enheduanna's poetry), and are closely related to her role as a warrior deity. These rituals seem to involve weapons such as daggers, musical performers and alterations of clothing that represent sex changes. The references to costume changes and the appearance of singing 'young men put into neck stocks' (*Iddin-Dagan* A, ETCSL 2.5.3.1) creates a sense of theatricality to the literary depiction of the rituals, and perhaps suggest that the singers and actors of the deity may have played the roles of conquered enemy warriors. It is the goddess' power to effect changes in status, fate and order that are highlighted by these rituals, and this ability held special significance when viewed from the perspective of the deity's martial role.

The ability to change sexes is attributed to Ishtar most frequently in the curse sections of treaties from the late second millennium and early first millennium BCE (Kamionkowski, 2003: 84). The issue of sex and gender, relating to Ishtar in her role as a warrior deity, has been thoughtfully examined by Zsolnay (2010). Zsolnay notes that the deity's ability to change men into women was important in warfare. 'Masculinity', in terms of Mesopotamian gender roles, could be related to strength, potency and action, whereas 'femininity' was often connected with acquiescence (Zsolnay, 2010: 393).

Ishtar controlled the masculinity of the king, which, through the related capacity to modify his performance, could prove decisive in battle (Zsolnay, 2010: 402).

Ishtar herself is at times presented as bearded and male (see the very fragmentary reference in *Ishtar Queen of Heaven*, III.26, line 78 in Foster, 2005: 595, and the thoughtful discussion by Groneberg, 1986). These descriptions and references to the goddess possessing powers related to manhood or carrying out actions in a 'masculine' manner (*Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, ETCSL 1.8.1.2) should be viewed as adding to the wide variety of expressions of the goddess' power and sexuality. The use of gendered imagery in relation to the goddess' characterisation and cult is a complex area of scholarship that is still in its early stages, and the frequent assertion in modern scholarship that Ishtar's 'masculine' ties to battle and might make her an androgynous deity (see for example, Harris, 1991), is not convincing. The use of spousal and maternal imagery to describe the warlike Ishtar (considered in Chapter 4) demonstrates that her feminine side was closely related to her role as a warrior, and her masculine qualities in warfare relate to her connection to the universal powers of the *ME* and heroism (Zsolnay, 2010: 401). Ishtar's sexuality incorporates a broad spectrum of qualities including aspects related to masculine and feminine gender roles, while the prevailing gender in her complex identity can most consistently be described as feminine.

ISHTAR/INANNA AS LIBIDO

The mingling of sex with religion in Mesopotamian myth is not unique; sexuality is frequently a central element in the construction of religious meaning. Sexuality in the Ancient Near East was often viewed both as a disruptive force, curtailed by divinely sanctioned 'notions of gender-specific propriety and morality' and as a creative force with a life-giving potential, understood as divinely given (Leick, 2008: 119). The focus on sexual drive in antiquity can be divided into two overriding areas of concern: attempts to harness the prodigious creative power of sexual desire through ritual, ideology and magic, and efforts to constrain the potentially damaging aspects of that power. There is much evidence in literature featuring Ishtar that can be viewed as embracing sexuality, but not all sexual behaviour is presented as appropriate or condoned by the goddess.

The primal and transgressive force of sexual libido is reflected in Ishtar's characterisation. In several myths, she is depicted as embodying a kind of lively boldness which at times has dangerous overtones. She is also frequently described as vivacious, swift and tireless. As in the myth of *Enki and the World Order* discussed above, Inanna/Ishtar's libido becomes tangible in the Akkadian version of the myth of her descent to the underworld. The myth of *The Descent of Inanna/Ishtar to the Netherworld* is known from its Sumerian and Akkadian versions. Although there is some variation between the two texts, the main narrative is relatively consistent in the earlier and later versions. The Sumerian version of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* has been reconstructed from thirteen tablets found at Nippur, written in the early second millennium, although the date of the myth's composition is unknown (Schneider, 2011: 46).

The Akkadian version, *The Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld*, is dated to a later period and is much shorter in length. For clarity, in this volume I will tend to refer to both versions as a single mythic narrative except for where the differences are significant for the study at hand.

In the myth of the descent, perhaps the most famous narrative associated with the goddess, Ishtar's death results in the sudden and total cessation of all earthly sexual activity, both in terms of humans and other animals. The end of earthly sexual activity and fertility, caused by Ishtar's death, is presented as a serious problem even for the gods, and this disruption in creativity plays a key role in motivating other deities to revive the goddess.

> As soon as Ishtar went down to the netherworld,
> The bull will not mount the cow, the ass will not impregnate the jenny,
> The young man will not impregnate the girl in the thoroughfare
> The young man has slept in his [bedroom?],
> The girl has slept by herself.
>
> (*Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld,* III.19, Foster, 2005: 502)

In the company of the Mesopotamian pantheon, Ishtar is not the only deity with powers linked to creativity. Indeed, in the myth of her Descent, Ea (Sumerian Enki) creates Asushunamir, through an asexual process, to rescue Inanna from the netherworld. In the Sumerian version, the creatures created by Enki come from the dirt beneath his fingernails (*Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, ETCSL 1.4.1), a genesis that maintains the myth's narrative coherence with the lack of sexual activity caused by the goddess' death. Further examples of divine creative behaviour, more specific to the realm of humanity, are found in the genre of Mesopotamian epic. In the creation narrative *Enuma Elish*, Marduk, the king of the Mesopotamian gods, uses the blood of a dead god to create humankind, for the purpose of working in servitude for the gods. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the mother goddess Aruru is credited with making the first humans, through the media of clay, and she also creates Gilgamesh's companion, Enkidu.

Despite all this divine creative activity, Ishtar's role in sparking human and animal desire is shown in myth to be irreplaceable; her powerful stimulus stands at the very beginning of mortal creativity. The goddess is inextricably linked to the creative process through inspiring the inception of sexual desire, and without her instigation, no sexual act is possible. Her influence in sparking lust between mortal creatures is shown to be universal in its scope, strongly affecting human lovers as well as animals. This universal quality to the goddess' power can be seen in the myriad of sexual and romantic practices in which she is involved or invoked.

SEXUALITY AND BOUNDARIES

The urgency of sexual desire is a powerful natural force at odds with forbearance and rationality. The contrast between sexual desire and restraint is reflected in Mesopotamian myths where the impetuosity of the young goddess is frequently

juxtaposed with the more cautious attitudes of other (frequently older) deities. In the Sumerian version of *Inanna's Descent to the nether world*, the goddess is aware of the dangers of the journey she is about to undertake, yet she proceeds on her perilous voyage. Inanna's knowledge of the risks inherent in 'visiting' the underworld is articulated clearly in the text through the goddess' strategy of enlisting the support of other gods to secure her release. Her decision to visit the underworld, despite knowing the risk this involves for her life, is questioned by the other gods. Even the keeper of the gates of the underworld, Neti, says:

> Why have you travelled to the land of no return? How did you set your heart on the road whose traveller never returns?
>
> (ETCSL 1.4.1)

Although Ishtar is presented in mythic narratives as behaving transgressively and often causing upheaval, the world that she inhabits is defined by order and structure. The goddess is presented to have a deep awareness of the natural or 'proper' universal order, and she plays a critical role in the enforcement and reestablishment of this order in Mesopotamian religion.

Ishtar's divine competence in re-establishing order is a fundamental quality of the goddess, closely entwined with her transgressive and wide-ranging abilities. As a deity capable of living at the extremes of life – and sometimes even beyond – Ishtar's extensive range of powers makes her well placed to reinforce cosmic balance.

ISHTAR AND COSMIC ORDER

The establishment and maintenance of justice and order were considered subject to divine authority in ancient Mesopotamia. Several primary deities (such as Utu/Shamash) are known for their especially strong association with justice and the forging of destinies (such as Anu and Enlil). While the order of the cosmos was a concern of multiple deities, the roles of individual deities in regards to order show some specialisation. Different deities also had greater prominence during different periods.

A complex subject, Ishtar's 'speciality' in the ordering of the cosmos can be broadly conceptualised as a concern for destiny and justice that is often manifested in the 'decreeing' of fates and the re-establishment of cosmic order. In her divine role of assisting in the maintenance of universal order, Inanna/Ishtar is often depicted as working alongside other primary deities, such as in Sumerian hymns:

> (In the assembly of the deities), there the goddess without whom no destiny is determined in heaven or earth sits on the dais with An and Enlil, taking counsel with them.
>
> (*Ur-Ninurta* A, ETCSL 2.5.6.1)

The order of the universe was a morally charged structure, and the goddess was involved in judging between good and bad actions, and decreeing corresponding destinies.

> Then (Inanna) makes her orders known, and identifies the evil. She judges the evil as evil and destroys the wicked. She looks with favour on the just and determines a good fate for them.
>
> (*Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1)

Ishtar's role in universal ordering involved the use of her voice. The power of the goddess' voice to create powerfully intimate connections in times of joy and grief was considered in Chapter 1, but Ishtar's voice was also important in decreeing destinies. Her 'word' was authoritative in determining outcomes and fates, a power gifted to her by Enki (*Enki and the World Order*, ETCSL 1.1.3) and Enlil (*Inana E*, ETCSL 4.07.5). It is difficult to clearly establish exactly how the goddess' 'word' functioned, both in terms of 'fixing' fate and in relation to the influence of other deities, but she seems to have held an especially close connection with words of assent (see *Inana D*, ETCSL 4.07.4). The role of the goddess in decreeing good destinies is considered further in Chapter 4, and her ability and means of re-establishing order are explored in Chapter 6, where the theme of the goddess and vengeance is considered.

ISHTAR AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The transgressive potency of sexual desire is not always presented positively in the ancient sources. In the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda,* the young goddess is presented as the victim of sexual violence; she is raped by the gardener, Shukaletuda. In response to this violation, the goddess hunts Shukaletuda down and kills him. This myth involves several important elements, but especially noteworthy is the depiction of the unpredictable power of sexual lust working against the goddess who embodies it. This reversal of the established order creates a divine injustice in the cosmos, leading directly to an imbalance in nature that threatens life on earth, before order is finally re-established by the goddess.

The History of The Narrative

Inanna and Shukaletuda is perhaps one of the least known myths involving the goddess, but evidence from ancient literature suggests that the story was once much more widely recognised in the ancient world. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the eponymous hero references a mythical narrative involving Ishtar and a gardener, which parallels the myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* in many ways – although it is possible that he is alluding to an alternative version of the story (see the extensive commentary by Volk, 1995: 60–64). The evidence supporting the identification of Gilgamesh's story about Ishtar and a gardener with the myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* is considered further in Chapter 5. Other references to the myth can be found in a variety of genres, again supporting the view of the text's wide-ranging recognition in the Ancient Near East. The goddess' role in making people drink blood is seen in Enheduanna's *Inana B* (ETCSL 4.07.2), and the story of *Sargon and Ur-Zababa* (ETCSL 2.1.4) mentions both

the punitive use of blood (also seen in another of Enheduanna's praise poems, *Inana* C, ETCSL 4.07.3) and the goddess' ability to stretch broadly across the heavens.

A tablet containing the myth was excavated at Nippur in the early twentieth century, and is dated to the first half of the second millennium BCE. A critical edition of this myth has only been available since its publication by Volk in 1995. While a persuasive case has been made for the myth having astral applications (notably Cooper, 2001: 143, and Cooley, 2008), there have also been suggestions that the myth may represent political tensions between the Sumerian and Akkadian societies (Wilcke, 1973: 163; Volk, 1995: 60). The text was first discussed in an article by the legendary Sumerologist, Samuel Noah Kramer in 1949, in which he explored striking parallels between this myth and the biblical blood plague from the Book of Exodus 14–24.

Due to the myth's modern-day obscurity, the main storylines of the narrative are recounted below. It must be noted that the tablets containing the myth are fragmented, with many lines missing. Despite this, the description of the story here aims to broadly represent the shape of the narrative, to be followed by a closer and more detail-focused analysis below.

Inanna and Shukaletuda

The myth begins with a hymn of praise to Inanna. Special emphasis is given to her divine status, as 'the mistress who, having all the great divine powers, deserves the throne-dais', and to her role as a dispenser of justice, 'to detect falsehood and justice, to inspect the Land closely, to identify the criminal against the just, she went up into the mountains'.

- Inanna, presumably in her role as a dispenser of justice, departs from heaven and climbs up into the mountains, leaving the earth.
- A story about Enki and a raven (lines 42–88) follows, which appears to involve aetiological elements. The raven seems to perform agricultural work, 'the work of a man'. The relation of this story to the rest of the narrative is difficult to ascertain, particularly due to the missing and fragmentary elements of the text.
- There is a sharp change in perspective and focus; Shukaletuda, the son of Igisigsig, is introduced. Shukaletuda sees the goddess Inanna and recognises her 'by her appearance'. Again, the status of the goddess is emphasised:

  > He saw someone who fully possesses the divine powers.

- Another change of perspective returns the focus to Inanna. The goddess is 'tired' from her journey through the heavens, and she falls asleep in the garden beneath a tree. Shukaletuda sees the sleeping goddess, rapes and then kisses her, and leaves. Inanna awakes in the morning, inspects herself carefully, and realises she has been violated.
- Inanna becomes very angry and destructive in response to the gardener's crime. She is determined to hunt down the person responsible for the assault upon her, at once creating a curse which turns the waters of the land into blood.

- Shukaletuda confesses his crime to his father, and tells him about the intention of the angry goddess to hunt him down. Igi-sigsig advises his son to go and hide in the city: presumably because he will be harder to locate in the crowds of people. Shukaletuda follows this advice and evades the goddess' hunt for him.

> (Shukaletuda) joined the city-dwellers, his brothers all together. He went at once to the black-headed people, his brothers, and the woman did not find him among the mountains.

- Inanna sends a second curse down on the land, this time in the form of a giant storm of dust, and continues her hunt for her assailant. The gardener's son repeats his concern to his father, who once again instructs him to go and hide in the city.
- Inanna, undeterred by her two failed attempts to find the young man, sends a third curse against the land. This part of the text is especially fragmented but it appears the curse somehow blocks the roads, preventing traffic from moving throughout the land. Inanna's search for her assailant continues, but is unsuccessful. The gardener's son once again asks for his father's advice, and again he is told to go to the city. The young man follows his father's advice; his location is not uncovered by the goddess.
- Inanna now turns to her 'father', Enki, to succeed in hunting down the assailant. With the support of Enki, Inanna goes out of the *abzu* (Enki's special home) and stretches herself across the heavens 'like a rainbow'. Finally, she succeeds in finding Shukaletuda, who is frightened.
- Inanna speaks to Shukaletuda. The text is frustratingly fragmented at this point. It seems that what she says to him is not altogether pleasant; the goddess appears to mention a number of animals (including a pig and a dog).
- The gardener's son replies to Inanna, and recounts the preceding events until just after the rape.
- Inanna determines that Shukaletuda must die. However, in what could be interpreted as an act of mercy, the goddess decides that the name of the gardener's son shall live on in song, and in that way, he will be remembered.
- The narrative ends with further praise to the goddess, 'because . . . destiny was determined'.

Shukaletuda, the Gardener's Son

It seems probable that the father of Shukaletuda in this text, Igi-sigsig, is the great gardener of the father of the gods, Anu, who is at times called the gardener of Enlil. Shukaletuda is depicted as a bad gardener who is said to pull out all the plants of the garden by their roots, destroying them. His speech to his father, later in the text, reveals the young gardener is aware of his horticultural failings:

> My father, I was to water garden plots and build the installation for a well among the plants, but not a single plant remained there, not even one: I had pulled them out by their roots and destroyed them.

Gardeners, in Sumerian myth, can be shifty characters, particularly in regards to sexual intercourse. Enki disguises himself as a gardener to gain access to the goddess Uttu (not to be confused with Utu/Shamash) in the myth of *Enki and Ninhursag* (ETCSL 1.1.1). Uttu then shows similar distress over her genitals after her sexual encounter with Enki that we see with Inanna following her rape (this myth is discussed with helpful bibliography in Gadotti, 2009). Shukaletuda's bad gardening foreshadows his sexual assault of Ishtar, and highlights its destructiveness. Rape was a criminal offence in all Ancient Near Eastern societies, but its definitions and punishments varied across different historical and geographical settings (Budin, 2015). Ancient literary presentations of sexual violence can be difficult to contextualise, but the myth's subtle contrast of Shukaletuda's actions against the positive sexual activities found in sacred marriage texts helps to clarify the harmful nature of his actions. Instead of promoting bounty and fertility before a loving act of intimacy, Shukaletuda destroys vegetation prior to an act of sexual violence.

The untrustworthy quality of gardeners in Mesopotamian myth is intriguing in light of the birth legend of Sargon of Akkad (IV.18), in which the ruler purports to tell of his early career as a gardener in an orchard, and how during that time, Ishtar loved him. The love of Ishtar could be interpreted as having the effect of raising Sargon to the throne, particularly in the context of other royal hymns. However, the 'uncertain character' (Foster, 2005: 912) of the text, and its likely dating to a much later period than Sargon's rule, precludes any sure conclusions from this legend. However, Sargon's status, following his rise from foundling to ruler, is a central concern of the text, and the intervention of the goddess is presented in the structure of the legend as the hinge between Sargon's two occupations. In his brief commentary on the text, Foster suggests Sargon's identity as the son of a priestess may provide him with noble associations at birth (Foster, 2005: 912).

Whether the text is meant to emphasise the role of Ishtar's love in transforming Sargon's career fortunes, as is the view here, or if it is meant to highlight Sargon's pious background, the legend shows a close causal linking of religious piety and kingship. This connection evokes a larger thematic concern of Mesopotamian myths and royal literature, where the proper religious observances of responsibilities to the goddess were closely connected to the monarch's personal fortunes. Despite the goddess' concern for status, seen in Sumerian love poetry, and the thematic exploration of status in the myth of the goddess' rape, it is not the lower status of Shukaletuda that is the primary problem in the narrative of *Inanna and Shukaletuda*. Instead, it is his incorrect treatment of the goddess.

The failure of Shukaletuda to tend to the plants of the garden is significant when considered in light of the important themes of abundance, gifting and fertility in Sumerian love poetry and royal hymns (see Chapter 1). Instead of bringing gifts and abundance to his intended lover, as would be expected, Shukaletuda destroys vegetation and creates ruin. In the place of imagery of animal and plant vitality, there is death and loss.

Shukaletuda's rape of Inanna is not a solitary act of wrongdoing; rather, it is part of a wider pattern according to which the myth reverses the traditional themes of sexual and emotional intimacy with the goddess, with their overarching concern with joy.

There can be no emotional closeness between Shukaletuda and the sleeping deity, in contrast to the 'sweetness' and intimacy of Inanna and Dumuzi's co-sleeping following intercourse, found in love poetry (*Dumuzid-Inana* T, ETCSL 4.08.20). No words are exchanged by the pair prior to the rape, and most importantly, the unwanted sexual encounter with Shukaletuda brings Inanna anger and sadness, rather than happiness and fulfilled desires. In Chapter 1 we saw the goddess' happiness resulting in blessings and 'life' – in the myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, the goddess' anger will result in curses and death.

PERSPECTIVE, STATUS, FATE AND REVERSALS

In this chapter on sexuality and gender, the question of the relationship of the goddess to power and status comes into the picture. This issue is perhaps especially significant in the analysis of this myth, due to the destructive and degrading connotations that accompany sexual violence. Inanna begins and ends the myth as a potent deity, capable of establishing order. It is her rapist, Shukaletuda, whose status is diminished by the repercussions of his actions. As soon as Inanna realises what has taken place, Shukaletuda becomes a fugitive. He experiences a loss in social status and is forced to leave his home to hide from the vengeful goddess. At the end of the myth, he loses his life – although there is some suggestion that Inanna may have transformed him into a 'dwarf' (see George, 2003: 836; Volk, 1995: 207, footnote 991), or even possibly a frog. The potential transformation of Shukaletuda gives the story an aetiological slant. As a side-note, the possible interpretation of '*dallalu*' as 'frog' (see *CAD* D, 52) holds intriguing fairy-tale associations for modern audiences, particularly in the context of a sexual encounter with a beautiful sleeping woman.

Inanna's generosity in allowing Shukaletuda's name to live on in song is, like the rest of his punishment, a matter of her choosing. The softening of the gardener's punishment by the goddess is coherent with her characterisation in broader Mesopotamian literature as merciful (see for example the Sumerian hymn, *Inana C*, ETCSL 4.07.3).

> No one but she can become enraged, relent, have mercy.
> No one but she can punish, take pity, forgive.
>
> (*Ishtar Queen of Heaven*, III.26, Foster, 2005: 594)

For Inanna to require the help of another deity to locate her attacker should not be viewed as indicative of any reduction in the goddess' status – she shows similar behaviour in several other myths, as does Enki. Instead, by enlisting Enki's help, Inanna behaves in a manner that is in keeping with her divine role as a young woman with close ties to other deities in the pantheon. She is capable of drawing upon their support and assistance, enhancing her own potency; this aspect of her character is considered in depth in Chapter 3.

The assistance of family and community is also accessed by Shukaletuda in the myth. His father's advice is temporarily successful in protecting Shukaletuda from Inanna's vengeance, and he hides among his 'brothers' in the city. The 'brothers' also share in his punishment; the city's community is damaged by the plagues sent against Shukaletuda: their water is turned to blood and their roads are blocked. Despite the danger to the city

caused by Shukaletuda, he still receives its protection. In *Inanna and Shukaletuda,* the actions of a lone individual have broader consequences for society at large, highlighting the importance of community and the at times damaging impact of personal agency. The myth emphasises the value of social bonds, but in a complex manner.

INANNA AND THE ME

The power of the goddess is variously articulated in the myth of Inanna's rape. First, Inanna's role as a dispenser of justice and keeper of the *ME* is emphasised, and Shukaletuda is shown in the story as fully aware of the goddess' potency:

> He recognised a solitary god by her appearance. He saw someone who fully possesses the divine powers.
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.3)

Although typically difficult to clearly define, the *ME* are the sacred, fundamental ordinances of the universe, which formed the basis of society and allowed the cosmos to function. The *ME* probably consisted of around 100 unalterable powers that relate to the essential qualities of universal properties. In this myth, however, and in the myth of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, there is a special emphasis on seven of them.

In the myth of *Inanna's Descent*, the goddess dresses herself in beautiful clothing and carefully applies makeup before setting out on her voyage:

> She took the seven divine powers. She collected the divine powers and grasped them in her hand. With the good divine powers, she went on her way.
>
> (ETCSL 1.4.1)

That the *ME* in the myth of the Descent are seven in number is of critical importance to the narrative flow of the story: Inanna sheds one of the *ME* at each of the seven gates of the underworld. In *Inanna's Descent*, the cosmic powers seem to be closely linked with Inanna's physical form and her attractiveness. She seems to shed the *ME* and her fine garments at the same time. Again, in *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, we see seven *ME* being singled out by the myth's composers. In this myth, we also see Inanna's physical form, particularly her genitals, literally being wrapped in the powers of the universe. Although the text is very fragmented, Inanna's vulva is covered by the divine *ME*, and becomes uncovered by the gardener's son.

> (Shukaletuda) noticed her from beside his plot. Inana . . . the loincloth (?) of the seven divine powers over her genitals. . . . the girdle of the seven divine powers over her genitals . . . over her holy genitals . . . (Shukaletuda) undid the loincloth (?) of seven divine powers and got her to lie down in her resting place. He had intercourse with her and kissed her there.
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.3)

The description of the sexual interaction between Inanna and Shukaletuda, with the couplet describing the acts of 'copulating' and 'kissing' is typical for the specialised

language in which Sumerian literary texts describe rape (Gadotti, 2009: 81–82). While the Sumerian word for 'kiss' is usually neutral in meaning, in some contexts such as this, 'kissing' can assume a negative connotation.

In both myths involving Inanna and the *ME*, sexuality, womanhood and power are presented as being deeply enmeshed with one another. Interestingly, in both myths, the goddess moves from a position of powerlessness, to a powerful one. In the *Descent* myth, Inanna returns to life and has the power to select her replacement, while in *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, she can choose the destiny of her rapist.

The ease with which the associations between sexuality, female qualities and power are made within the narrative calls into question the scholarly concern over the seeming dichotomy which has been viewed as inherent in Ishtar's role as goddess of sex and battle. While at times Ishtar's power is expressed in terms of ancient Mesopotamian 'masculinity' (such as her bearded depiction, commonly a symbol of wisdom), in myth, Ishtar's power is informed by her femininity, and her femininity is, in turn, extremely powerful.

The myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* involves several swift changes of perspective between the gardener and the goddess, as well as sharp twists of fate which highlight multiple themes, such as destiny, justice and status. The narrative is told from multiple points of view – first, there is the perspective of the goddess, then that of the gardener, and then the perspective is switched again. With the 'confession' of the gardener's son to his father, we see for the first time both perspectives of the events from the garden given at the same time, and the two tangential narratives become intertwined. The shifting of perspectives between the two protagonists at the start of the narrative may function as a satirical nod to Sumerian love poetry, in which the viewpoints of the young goddess and her divine lover are juxtaposed. Unlike in love poetry, however, the focus of the goddess is not on desire, and she is not aware of Shukaletuda's existence until after the rape. In this way, the familiar structural device of switching viewpoints highlights the lack of intimacy between the two protagonists, rather than accentuating their closeness, as in love poetry.

The changes in perspective are accompanied in the text by a role reversal following the rape of the goddess. While at first it is Inanna who is found and attacked by the gardener's son, once she awakens, it is the gardener's son who is sought by the goddess through destructive means. In Chapter 1, we noted that Inanna often appears in literature presiding over social occasions that involve rapid changes in status: the sudden role reversal between hunter and prey in *Inanna and Shukaletuda* seems well-fitted to the narrative of the famously transgressive goddess. The differences in status between the two protagonists is further emphasised by Inanna's shift in physical form – a shift that allows her to finally locate her attacker.

> With that holy Inana went out from the abzu of Eridug. She stretched herself like a rainbow across the sky and reached thereby as far as the earth . . . From fear, Šukaletuda tried to make himself as tiny as possible, but the woman had found him among the mountains.
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.3)

Earlier in the narrative, the status of the goddess and the gardener's son was reversed. Now we see a contrasting inversion of the physical statures of the two parties. Earlier, in the garden, the text describes Shukaletuda making the goddess 'lie down', so that he might assault her, while later on in the text, it is Inanna who inhabits the physically dominant position – in her transformed state. 'Like a rainbow', she is presented as inhabiting a space above Shukaletuda, as well as being much larger in size. At the same time as Inanna grows larger, stretching across the sky, Shukaletuda shrinks, becoming increasingly small and frightened.

Finally, the goddess locates the gardener. Shukaletuda's subsequent speech is very similar to his confession to his father, with the same dual perspective as in the earlier section. The similarity in the speeches of Shukaletuda to his father and to the goddess is likely to be a result of the familiar repetitive quality of Mesopotamian myth. It may also be a sign that the universal order is beginning to return to a more balanced state, with Shukaletuda showing himself to be in the subordinate position to the goddess – as he was to his father. Shukaletuda's status is an important motif in the myth, and when considered in light of the sexual connections between Inanna and Mesopotamian kings, it is a theme that is presented with a sense of irony. The sexual union with the goddess could be viewed as a means to ensuring a tremendous increase in social status. However, rather than setting Shukaletuda above his peers, he is forced to hide among them for protection. For Mesopotamian kings, sexual union with the goddess gave 'life' (as is considered in Chapter 4), yet for Shukaletuda, the rape leads to death.

THE THREE PLAGUES

The first plague sent by the goddess involves the transforming of water into blood:

> (Inanna) filled the wells of the Land with blood, so it was blood that the irrigated orchards of the Land yielded, it was blood that the slave who went to collect firewood drank, it was blood that the slave girl who went out to draw water drew, and it was blood that the black-headed people drank. No one knew when this would end. She said: 'I will search everywhere for the man who had intercourse with me.' But nowhere in all the lands could she find the man who had had intercourse with her.
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.3)

Kramer's recognition of a 'blood plague motif', used in *Inanna and Shukaletuda* and the biblical Book of Exodus, shows that the Sumerians and the Hebrews could, broadly speaking, conceptualise the magical properties of blood in a similar manner. In both texts blood is capable of being transformed by a divine power; in both narratives the bodily fluid is utilised for similarly punitive purposes by the deity involved. In both cases, a particular individual (Pharaoh or Shukaletuda) angers a deity and invokes plagues which impact the broader community. Significantly, in both cases, it is water which is transmuted into blood. The drinking of blood is stressed with threefold repetition in the Sumerian myth, as previously discussed.

It has been suggested that the blood plague created by Inanna should be viewed as representative of the breaking of her hymen or perhaps symbolising the menstrual blood of the goddess (arguments noted with scepticism in Leick, 2003). This interpretation has negative implications for Shukaletuda's virility – the goddess' menstruation would prove his failure to impregnate her, with perhaps an intertextual link between the depictions of the gardener's son in the myth's introduction, where it is established that he is incapable of making anything grow.

In Mesopotamian myth, sexual intercourse with a goddess often results in pregnancy (see for example the Sumerian myth of *Enki and Ninḫursaĝa*, ETCSL 1.1.1). Yet the rape of a goddess by a mortal is exceptional, and therefore it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which the 'general conventions' might apply. Just as the rape in *Inanna and Shukaletuda* does not result in Inanna becoming pregnant, the consensual sexual union of Inanna and Dumuzi also does not result in the creation of offspring. Sexual activity involving Inanna/Ishtar is generally less focused on reproduction, and more on the intimacy and joy engendered through the activity itself.

The identification of a 'blood plague motif' seems contrary to the assumption that the blood is analogous to menstrual blood or the blood of a broken hymen; however, it is possible that the common motif is being referenced in the myth in a unique way, due to the association with the violation of a female deity. The goddess' use of blood in a punitive fashion in other Mesopotamian compositions makes it unlikely that the blood should be viewed from this perspective. The punitive use of blood can be seen in the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Gudam*, (ETCSL 1.3.4), in which the goddess defeats the dangerous warrior Gudam, partially by feeding him his own blood. This action is not evidently preceded by a sexual encounter (although the text is extremely fragmentary). Inanna's use of a river of blood to drown an enemy of the king Sargon in a dream (*Sargon and Ur-Zababa,* ETCSL 2.1.4), similarly does not involve a failed impregnation of the deity. In *Sargon and Ur-Zababa*, it is the goddess' protective love for Sargon that inspires her utilisation of blood. When explaining the goddess' actions, Sargon describes Inanna as 'as high as the heavens, and as broad as the earth' (*Sargon and Ur-Zababa*, ETCSL 2.1.4). Coupled with the river of blood, Sargon's description of the goddess appears to hold parallels with the imagery of Inanna stretching across the sky and earth in *Inanna and Shukaletuda*. The importance of Inanna's love in protecting the king is considered in depth in Chapter 4; for the purpose of this chapter, it is the capacity of blood to cause religious pollution and its unsuitability for drinking that is most significant.

Pollution

Along with her transformative capacity, Inanna's power is elucidated in the myth by her use of dangerous plagues which threaten life on earth in response to her violation. With each plague, the goddess' power over the natural world is demonstrated, alongside her power over life and death.

Water, the consumption of which is a precondition for life, is transformed by Ishtar into a powerfully magical substance that is dangerous to drink. In other literature,

the 'water of life' is scattered over Inanna's corpse in the underworld, reviving her (ETCSL 1.4.1). It is also sprinkled on the floor of her home to welcome her lover in Sumerian poetry (*Inana H*, ETCSL 4.08.08). In the epic composition *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (ETCSL 1.8.2.3) the goddess' use of life-giving water is inspired by her love for Dumuzi.

> After the flood had swept over, Inana, the lady of all the lands, from her great love of Dumuzid, has sprinkled the water of life upon those who had stood in the face of the flood.
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.2.3)

In contrast to its life-giving quality, blood that has been poured out had connotations with death and pollution in the Ancient Near East. Similarly, in the second plague, sunlight, another precondition for life and the continuation of agriculture, is blocked by a dust-storm. This event has clear destructive implications; a dust-storm is used by the warrior deity Ninurta as part of a cosmic 'war-machine' in a hymn to the god (*Ninurta's exploits*, ETCSL 1.6.2), in a battle which also results in the crevasses of the land filling with blood. In the third plague, the goddess sends heavy traffic to block the flow of goods and provisions throughout the land, creating a lack of abundance. In the three plagues Inanna sends in response to the rape, critically important elements of the land are set against their natural purposes: the water cannot be drunk, the roads cannot be travelled, and the sun fails to shine.

At the same time, the three plagues bring pollution upon the land. The water, sky and town become 'adulterated', illustrating the divine nature of Shukaletuda's crime. Where the 'legitimate' kind of sexual relations with the goddess brings abundance and closer intimacy with the divine, the 'illegitimate' kind clearly leads to destruction and alienation. The unholiness of one kind of blood pollution is noted by the goddess herself in the epic of *Sargon and Ur-Zababa* (ETCSL 2.1.4):

> Holy Inana turned around toward him and blocked his way, (saying:) 'The E-sikil is a holy house! No one polluted with blood should enter it!'

Again, the response of the goddess to her rape reverses the outcomes that the audience would expect, based on the more common and positive results of appropriate sexual contact with the deity in Mesopotamian literature more broadly, particularly myths involving sacred marriage. Instead of improved communication and closeness with the pantheon, the earth, heavens and the city become dangerously unclean.

PUNISHMENT AND CRIME

A similar upending of the natural order, in a punitive context, is seen in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. In Ishtar's attempt to punish the hero Gilgamesh, she leads the Bull of Heaven down to earth, creating a situation in which the arrival of the intrinsically heavenly creature in the terrestrial realm leads to natural disasters. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* as well as *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*, Ishtar makes a threat to bring the dead

up from the netherworld. The traditional natural order of life is thus threatened with inversion. The dead may be brought above ground, where the living dwell, and they may consume the living, who then join the ranks of the dead.

Ishtar is presented in the narrative as having a deep awareness of how the natural world works. Yet she is also prepared to subvert the natural order to pursue her own (in each case, vengeful) ambitions. The goddess inhabits an ordered world, and she can either enforce or subvert the established order depending on her aims. The goddess' role as a dispenser of cosmic justice – emphasised from the beginning of the narrative – is reinforced through Inanna's sentencing of her attacker. Through his punishment order is re-established. The sexual assault of the goddess sets the chaotic events in motion, upsetting the universal balance. Ishtar's response first exacerbates this imbalance, through her attempts to re-establish order by punishing the initial transgression. When the initial violation has been avenged, order is ultimately restored.

The text loosely follows the structure of a legal proceeding: first there is a crime, then a type of 'hearing' or trial, a sentence is pronounced and punishment is carried out. The legalistic flavour of the text is enhanced by Inanna's question, following her rape, about how she will be compensated for what has happened.

> Holy Inana inspected herself closely. 'Ah, who will compensate me? Ah, who will pay (?) for what happened to me? Should it not be the concern of my own father, Enki?'
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.3)

The myth's representations of the goddess' power are complex, in keeping with the intricate style of the narrative. While presented as a powerful goddess, Inanna is also vulnerable and the text is clear in its portrayal of her as the victim of an unlawful act. The rape of a goddess by a mortal is an unusual event in Ancient Near Eastern myth, just as it is in the Classical world, where the rape of mortal women by gods is a frequent occurrence.

Leick views the failure of Shukaletuda to sexually satisfy the goddess as his primary mistake, and indeed, the cause of his punishment (2003: 53). She is right to consider the role of the goddess' sexual pleasure in the myth; Ishtar/Inanna's sexuality is usually depicted with an emphasis on the goddess' pleasure, consent and enthusiasm. Elsewhere, Ishtar is a willing participant in sex, and she is frequently (but not invariably) cast in the role of the instigator of sexual activities. The goddess' sexual pleasure is a key concern of many texts, including Sumerian love poetry, with potential reference to cunnilingus and allusions to female orgasm. However, there is more at stake in the myth than a lack of orgasm. The myth clearly emphasises the goddess' lack of consent rather than her lack of satisfaction. Inanna's exhaustion, leading to her sleep in the narrative, is unusual in the context of her common depiction in Mesopotamian literature as untiring and vital. Her out-of-character sleepiness emphasises the inability to give her assent to sex. Inanna is assaulted while resting and at first seems uncertain as to what has taken place. She is then unable to identify her attacker, causing her further distress. These points are critical to the narrative and stress the serious impropriety of Shukaletuda's actions – especially in light of the absence of the usual context of abundance and happiness for the goddess' sexual endeavours (discussed in Chapter 1).

Legal overtones to the narrative's structure reinforce the perspective that a crime has taken place, as does the outdoor and remote setting for the assault (for the important legal significance of the geographical setting in the 'rape' of an unmarried woman, see Scurlock, 2003: 103).

ORDER

Much has been made of Ishtar's ability to break through boundaries and behave in a transgressive, and at times paradoxical, manner. While Ishtar's power is certainly transformative, there is order to the universe she inhabits. Maintaining and enforcing order and balance on earth is an area in which Ishtar has considerable competence. The establishment of order is of critical importance to both areas with which Ishtar is primarily identified: love and battle. While lust and violence are powerful transgressive forces which can break down old modes of existence, the chaos with which they are associated requires limits for either force to be effective. Even within the context of myths involving the goddess, such as the myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, sexual lust is not an unlimited force; there are still correct ways for lust to be expressed. The myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* demonstrates the consequences of the incorrect expression of desire, when sexual activity occurs without the consent of the goddess. The gardener's son's transgression not only threatens the divine universal order and the balance of the earth's natural systems that are critical for sustaining life, it also upsets the welfare of his community. By re-establishing balance, Inanna protects the recognised cosmic order and demonstrates her commitment to the application of justice.

ANIMAL LOVE?

While Ishtar's sexuality does have boundaries, or at least can be shown to exist within a universe with limits, there is still a strongly liminal quality to her sexual activities. This is seen in references to the goddess having sexual relations with animals. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the heroic king ridicules the love life of the goddess and recounts a list of her past lovers. Among these are a bird, horses and lions. Gilgamesh's insults cover a great deal of mythic territory. The myths of Inanna and Dumuzi are certainly well known to modern audiences. The myths involving lions are unknown, but her liaisons with the horse may be referenced in the Sumerian wisdom text, *The Debate between Grain and Sheep*. This story has elements of a creation myth and involves an argument between the cattle-goddess, Lahar, and her sister Ashnan, a grain goddess. The narrative takes the form of a disputation between two parties, and is resolved with the argument being settled in favour of Grain by Enki. The formula is a common one in Sumerian 'wisdom' compositions, with well-known examples including the *Dispute between the Bird and the Fish*, *the Dispute between the Tree and the Reed*, and the *Dispute between Summer and Winter*. In the myth of *Grain and Sheep*, the goddess' love for horses is expressed as a commonly understood feature of her characterisation. George has made the intriguing suggestion that an erect stallion looks

best equipped to satisfy the Mesopotamian goddess of love (2003: 473). Gilgamesh's word on this aspect of the goddess' sexual image may not be entirely reliable, as is considered in Chapter 5. Whether or not the goddess herself took part in amorous relations with animals, it is clear that her role of personifying sexual desire was not limited to the human sphere, but also encompassed the animal world – a function seen in the myth of her descent to the netherworld.

OVERVIEW

In this chapter we considered depictions of Ishtar's sexuality and gender from a range of sources, including hymns, myths and epics. Sexuality is a primary area of competence for the goddess, and exploring her relationship to sexuality and gender is essential to the broader consideration of understanding her ancient identity. Ishtar is connected to a wide spectrum of sexual practices, and her image, while generally presented in line with Mesopotamian concepts of 'femininity', also contains masculine elements. The broadness and diversity of the goddess' connections to sexuality and gender in ancient literature assists in the expression of her power, and of her transformative abilities.

Ishtar is frequently portrayed as a sexual initiator, both in terms of her own lovers and in her potent, stimulating effect on the sexual activities of mortal humans and animals. While the goddess and her cult incorporate wide-ranging manifestations of sexuality and gender, we have seen in this chapter that there are boundaries to the acceptable expressions of sexuality in myths involving the goddess – boundaries which the deity is swift to enforce. For all of the variety in Ishtar's sexual world, there are some repeated elements in her relations to sexuality that provide a sense of coherency to the goddess' characterisation. The goddess' sexual experiences are intertwined with themes and imagery of joy and prosperity. These themes are important for contextualising the goddess' sexual experiences, and are consistently connected to her sexuality in sources that otherwise vary in terms of date, genre, and historical setting. The absence of enjoyment, coupled with depictions of agricultural ruin in the myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, clearly alert the myth's audience of the improper nature of the gardener's sexual contact with the goddess. The goddess' unhappy reaction to the assault by Shukaletuda foreshadows the dangerous cosmic consequences of the goddess' rape and reminds the audience of the close bonds between the goddess' pleasure, community happiness and positive cosmic outlooks.

3

ISHTAR AND THE PANTHEON

In Chapter 1, we saw that Ishtar is closely linked to social intimacy, and her diverse connections with other divine figures provide the focus for this chapter. The Mesopotamian pantheon incorporated a community of deities, whose individual competencies were often shared or connected in complicated ways. In this chapter, we see that Ishtar's identity is greatly informed by her interactions with other deities; yet, while her image is clearly shaped by these close relationships, the connections do not entirely define her.

In keeping with her complex nature, Ishtar's divine relationships involve diversity and depth. In her family relationships, she is often called the 'little one'; she seeks advice and help from the rest of the pantheon, and is presented in literary sources as quick to enlist their support in personal and professional matters. At times, she works peacefully alongside her fellow deities, such as in the maintenance of universal order, while at other times she tries to usurp her fellow divinities' powers and upsets the established balance of the pantheon.

Whether her relationships with other gods and goddesses are presented as harmonious or disorderly, amicable or confrontational, Ishtar's relationships with other deities shape her character and enhance the multi-dimensional quality of her image. The goddess' ability to create powerfully intimate relationships, as well as her more combative skills, see her often redefining her position in the pantheon, and increasing the sum of her powers. Due to these qualities, she can be viewed as a notably 'socially mobile' deity. Ishtar is presented relating to individual deities in different ways – yet her overarching characteristics of ambitiousness, lust and loquaciousness remain generally constant.

THE PANTHEON

As well as providing a useful contrast, studying the Mesopotamian pantheon and its relationship to Ishtar is valuable for gaining a deeper understanding of the religious context of the goddess, as well as the far broader subject of ancient Mesopotamian religious thought (both the pantheon and Mesopotamian religion have been discussed in greater detail in the Introduction of this book). While certainly crucial for the analysis of Ishtar's image in the ancient world, the subject of the goddess' inter-pantheon relations is extremely complex, with the presentation of her bonds with fellow deities

changing over time. Adding to the intricate nature of this subject is the tendency for varying genres of literature to present a subtly different side of the goddess' relations with her divine peers. The theme of the goddess' usurpation of the competencies of other deities is particularly accentuated in myth, in comparison to other literary sources. Royal hymns, praise hymns and epics show more of a weight on the complementary nature of the goddess' power, while in love poetry (seen in Chapter 1), it is the goddess' intimate connections to her divine family that are emphasised. Uniting these varied sources is the importance of family and community connections in Ishtar's role as the goddess of love and battle.

A complete overview of inter-pantheon relationships relating to Ishtar is a vast subject, beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, the analysis here explores significant themes useful for further illuminating the character of the goddess – particularly in light of her remarkable ability for social networking.

DIVINE COMPARISONS

The composers of ancient Mesopotamian literature showed wide-ranging interest in juxtaposing their deities and drawing comparisons between them, as can be seen in an Akkadian devotional composition, dating to the second half of the second millennium BCE:

> O Ishtar, you are (supreme like) Anu, you rule the heavens,
> [With] Enlil the counsellor you order the inhabited world . . .
> Who is your equal even among the Igigi-gods?
> Who is your rival even among the Anunna-gods?
>
> (*The Greatness of Ishtar*, III.43.b, Foster, 2005: 674)

Many hymns to different deities compare the divine subject of the composition favourably with the rest of the pantheon, with great diversity in the range of deities compared against one another in different compositions. The supernatural abilities of other deities may have been considered the most appropriate means of measuring the scope of a deity's power, or to express its boundlessness, as seen in Sumerian hymns:

> (Inanna) let me proclaim your magnificence in all lands, and your glory! Let me praise your ways and greatness! Who rivals you in divinity? Who can compare with your divine rites?
>
> (*Inana C*, ETCSL 4.07.3)

Divine literary comparisons did not always involve contrasting the deities in a competitive or overtly hierarchical manner. Juxtaposing different deities was also a means of expressing how their powers and competencies related to one another, and frequently illustrated the complementary nature of these abilities.

The comparison of divine powers among the pantheon is a subject that, in ancient Mesopotamian literature, was presented as holding substantial interest even to the deities themselves:

> My father gave me the heavens and he gave me the earth. I am Inana! Which god compares with me?
> (*Inana F*, ETCSL 4.07.6)

Although the comparison of divine attributes is applied in literature to many deities, there remain some features of this practice that are unique to specific divinities. The superior placing of An and Enlil in the Sumerian pantheon is shown in their frequent use as a point of reference for measuring the greatness of other deities; they themselves are never the object of an *elatio* (Metcalf, 2015: 20–21). An *elatio* is a common literary feature in Sumerian sacred hymns, defined as 'the elevation of the individual god by one or several of the chief gods' (Metcalf, 2015: 16). Among the female deities of the Sumerian pantheon, only Inanna and Ninlil receive similar praise to Enlil and An. Inanna's praise in hymns is distinctive particularly in terms of its use of hyperbole, and the number of references in hymns to her superiority over other deities – although as Metcalf notes, even for Inanna, An and Enlil remain the ultimate points of reference (2015: 22).

INTIMACY AND ACCESS

Many of Ishtar's close relationships involve personal connections which hold some degree of dependence. To immediate family members, such as her mother and brother, she appears as a young woman who is the recipient of care and support, particularly in the genre of love poetry. In Chapter 1, we discussed Ishtar's characterisation as a beloved young woman, a role binding her identity at least partially to the divinities surrounding her. While Ishtar's gender and age significantly inform her connections with others, these features do not define her completely. Her sister-in-law, Geshtinanna, is also presented as young and female, but the two goddesses have quite different relationships with their brothers, Utu/Shamash and Dumuzi/Tammuz. The different roles, statures and identities of these young goddesses mean that their close relationships are uniquely realised in Mesopotamian literature.

For Ishtar, compliance with the established familial and divine structures is assumed only when it does not interfere with her plans and activities. Instead, the closeness of the goddess to her divine peers adds to her overall potency. Her intimacy with other deities often has the significant outcome of facilitating access to their powers. Whether these powers are accessed through persuasion or conflict, the overall effect is one of increased status and influence for the goddess.

THE ORIGINS OF POWER

The birth stories of deities often provide insights to their conception and characterisation in the ancient world. Similarly, the question of how a deity acquires power is frequently a significant aspect of the characterisation of that god or goddess. The origins of divine power were an area of interest for the ancient authors of myth, and the development of Ishtar's power is also a repeated motif in royal and divine hymns.

These 'origin' type myths are useful for examining the relationships between deities. By providing a kind of 'second genesis' for the deity, myths depicting the origins of power, like most origin stories, generally emphasise the relations of the deity with those closest to them. For example, the peaceful transfer of power between Ea and Marduk illuminates the nature of the relationship between the father and son gods (Leick, 2002: 28–29).

In the Classical world, the origin of a god or goddess' power is also frequently rooted in their intimate ties to other deities, while emphasising certain aspects of the deity's character and areas of cultural interest. For example, the overthrow of Cronus by Zeus may be viewed as reflecting on anxieties over the transfer of power between generations (Bremmer, 2010: 191). The opposition of Athena and Poseidon, as they vied for supremacy in Athens, provides an illuminating contrast in the competencies of the two deities, and explains to the Athenians the roles held by both deities in Athenian society (Deacy, 2008: 47–48, 80).

As noted in the Introduction to this book, the modern understanding of the Mesopotamian pantheon is a rapidly developing area. While the various deities that make up the Classical pantheon are well recognised by audiences in the present day, the relative newness of ancient Mesopotamia as a field of academic study means that for most audiences, the deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon are entirely unknown. Despite the challenges provided by the limited and swiftly changing knowledge of Mesopotamian religion, and the modern-day obscurity of the deities involved, the exploration of Ishtar in relation to the pantheon of ancient Mesopotamia is of crucial importance to the topic overall. Ishtar's close connection to community and social bonding, and her complicated relationship with her divine peers, provides a focus for considering the interplay between divine power and social networks in the ancient evidence.

LIMINALITY AND STRUCTURE

It makes sense for Ishtar to be characterised in ancient literature with an interest in her own social mobility. As we have seen, the deity held a special role in Mesopotamian religion, presiding over occasions involving rapid changes in social status. The deity's competence in matters of the heart, and in the area of family and community closeness, makes her well suited for enhancing communal bonds during times of upheaval. In Mesopotamian narrative texts, she is presented as deftly using these skills for her own benefit.

The genesis of Ishtar's power is a subject of great interest for the composers of Sumerian myth. There are several examples in which the goddess' power is enhanced, extended, or otherwise augmented. These changes result from the goddess' ambitious self-promotion and close inter-pantheon ties (see below). To exercise her own power, once acquired, Ishtar often seeks help from other divine or quasi-divine beings, and at times she requests their permission before acting. Of course, the refusal of permission from another deity does not deter the goddess from action – for Ishtar, it would seem that asking for permission is more important than gaining it.

The combination of seeking to further her position at the expense of her fellow deities, while also calling on them for support (often within a single mythical composition) shows a kind of dichotomy to Ishtar's relationship with the rest of the pantheon which reflects the manner in which she was conceptualised in the ancient world. Ishtar's transgressive and liminal qualities are expressed through her attempts to take power from other beings, yet the chaotic force of her ambition is presented as inhabiting a structured world with boundaries. The bounds of the ordered universe are recognised by Ishtar, and she plays a crucial role in upholding the natural limitations of the cosmos. Yet, despite this role – or even because of it – the goddess has a degree of autonomy over her own adherence to the boundaries surrounding her. Ishtar navigates the boundaries of her world through varying strategic choices, and she has several tactics to deal with her fellow deities. These include the application of emotional pressure, persuasive speech, verbal threats and violent action, and she is presented as exercising judgement in her selection of which of these courses of action best fit the situation. The goddess is further capable of switching tactics in the midst of a divine confrontation if needed, a flexibility that more frequently than not leads to her victory.

THE *ME*

Central to Inanna's power is her ownership of the *ME*, those sacred, unalterable universal ordinances which are difficult to clearly define. Each of the *ME* seems (at times) to have a specific function, and collectively they are the 'grand principles' which permit the cosmos to function correctly (Glassner, 1992: 56). We have seen in Chapter 2 that Ishtar's physical beauty and feminine qualities are intimately linked to her control of the *ME*. Yet, in the myth of *Inanna and Enki*, in which Inanna initially comes to possess the *ME*, it is clear that her beauty and feminine charm are not a product of her possession of the universal power. The attractive force of her beauty pre-exists her association with the *ME*, and is a key element in helping her to acquire these powers from the god of wisdom.

The tendency of Ishtar to require approval from others prior to taking action may reflect a historical reality of women in the ancient world needing to express power and agency through others (see Gadotti, 2011, for the capacity of Sumerian literature to inform on the lives of Mesopotamian women). The pattern of behaviour is best explained as resulting from the goddess' unique characterisation, her youth and her high status. The ability to gain assistance from others, in the context of Sumerian myth, is often associated with high social standing, a concept that is explored further below.

ISHTAR AND THE PANTHEON

It was noted in the beginning of this chapter that Ishtar's relationship to the pantheon, and indeed, inter-pantheon relations in general, are an intricate subject. Inter-pantheon

relationships in Mesopotamia seem to have been a subject of fluidity and confusion even in the ancient world, as noted in a Sumerian hymn:

> The context of (Inanna's) confusing advice in the great gods' assembly is not known.
>
> (*Inana C*, ETCSL 4.07.3)

There are, however, some general trends to note in Ishtar's connections to other deities that appear with some frequency in literary sources. To begin with, the goddess is closely connected to the dispensation of justice and deciding fates, a competency shared with several other primary deities. This aspect of the deity is considered in greater detail in Chapter 6. In Mesopotamian literature, the role of decreeing divine judgments is often presented as being shared by Anu, Enlil and Ishtar (such as in *Ishtar, Queen of Heaven*, III.26, Foster, 2005: 592–598, and also *Inana* A, ETCSL 4.07.1), although the job is performed in different ways by each deity. In other texts, the council of judgment is made up of different members, with variances even between texts of the same period and genre. For example, a nocturnal prayer lists Shamash, Sin, Adad and Ishtar as members of a divine council, while in a variant of the text, Ea replaces Sin (*To Gods of the Night*, G.II.27a and *To Shamash and Gods of the Night*, G.II.27.b, Foster, 2005: 207–208).

In the role of issuing judgments, the goddess' role can at times be an intermediary one between an individual (usually the king) and the other primary deities, such as An and Enlil (*Ur-Ninurta A*, 2.5.6.1). The king is also often the beneficiary of the combined yet often distinctive martial actions of the pantheon in the field of battle (such as in *The Tukulti-Ninurta Epic*, A.III.1, Foster, 2005: 298–317), a subject considered further in Chapter 4.

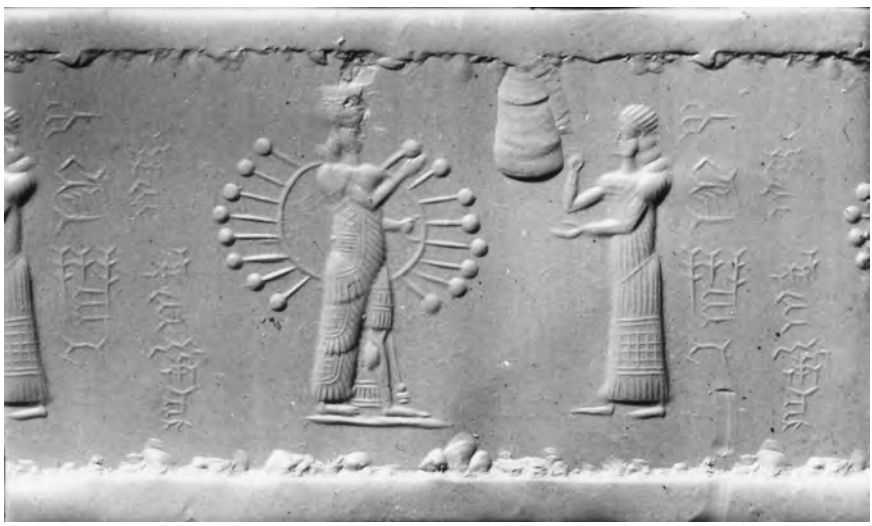

Figure 3.1 Cylinder Seal with Ishtar Welcoming a Devotee Seal (ca. 700 BCE) carved in intaglio. Courtesy of Walters Art Museum.

Ishtar's close relations to the rest of the pantheon are stressed in numerous Mesopotamian compositions from varying periods of history, and these relations are expressed in diverse ways. As well as emphasising her close familial relations to other deities, the loving relationships between Ishtar and her divine peers is featured frequently, as well as the connection between the enhancement of her powers and other gods and goddesses. At times, all three of these connections are referenced within a few lines of a single composition, such as in the Akkadian composition, *Ishtar Queen of Heaven*. This text from the Mature period of Akkadian literature is a conflation of several earlier hymns to the deity.

> Anu, Enlil and Ea made (Ishtar) important,
> The Igigi-gods cherished her.
> Her very first name . . . that her father, whom she adores, named her of old,
> Is Ninanna, 'Queen of Heaven.'
>
> (*Ishtar Queen of Heaven*, III.26, Foster, 2005: 595)

Inanna derives increased power primarily from Enki and An, but in broader genres of Mesopotamian literature, the pool of deities that contribute to the capacities of the goddess is much deeper. Several texts refer to a monthly festival for the goddess at the new moon (such as in '*Ishtar, Queen of Heaven*'), and one composition describes the gods of the land gathering around Inanna and perfecting her divine powers at this regular event (*Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1).

Different texts reflect the variety in the goddess' benefactors and in the gifts that she receives. Along with receiving divine powers from Enki (*Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1) and An (*Inana and Ebiḫ,* ETCSL 1.3.2), Ishtar was made beautiful by her mother, Ningal (*Inana E*, ETCSL 4.07.5), was given the powers of making the heavens and earth shake by Enlil and Ninlil (*Išme-Dagan K*, ETCSL 2.5.4.11). Through Enlil alone, she received her powerful 'word' with its ability to decide fates (*Inana E*, ETCSL 4.07.5) as well as the insignia of rulership (*Inana F*, ETCSL 4.07.6). At times, there is some overlap in the divine gifts the goddess receives from fellow deities: Inanna also receives royal insignia (a sceptre, staff and crook, among other items) from Enki (*Enki and the World Order*, ETCSL 1.1.3) – although presumably the Queen of Heaven is too polite to return any surplus gifts.

INANNA AND ENKI

Ishtar's insatiable curiosity makes her a natural protégé for Enki, the venerable god of wisdom. Inanna and Enki have a complicated yet deeply affectionate relationship. Enki (known as Ea in Akkadian and Babylonian sources) is the god of crafts and sweet water. The god of wisdom is one of the goddess' closest allies, along with her brother Utu. As well as being relatives, they are colleagues, both being involved in decreeing destinies and making judgments.

> Inana, when you give judgment with An and Enlil . . . when you decide destinies on earth with Enki.
>
> (*Inana D*, ETCSL: 4.07.4)

The bond between Inanna and Enki is expressed positively through his gifting her with powers and singing her praises, yet Enki/Ea is also presented as capable of perceiving the excesses of Inanna's personality in a critical manner.

THE AGUSHAJA HYMN

In the Old Babylonian 'Agushaja Hymn' (also known as *Ea and Ṣaltu*), Ea (Sumerian Enki) becomes frustrated with Ishtar's bellicose behaviour. He discusses with his fellow deities the need to create a suitable opponent for Ishtar, one who is massive in size and 'wonderfully hairy' (Foster, 1977: 80). From the dirt beneath his fingernails, Ea creates the monstrously proportioned Saltu. He sends Saltu into a jealous rage with his description of her nemesis (and seeming doppelgänger) Ishtar. Saltu goes looking for Ishtar, and is spotted by Ninshubur (Ishtar's divine assistant), who describes the creature to Ishtar in terror. Ishtar is infuriated by Ninshubur's description, but unfortunately, the further course of the story is difficult to ascertain due to the fragmentary nature of the source.

Later in the text, we find Ishtar complaining to Ea that he has created an offensive monster. She orders him to send it away. Ea replies that he would be delighted to comply, as once Ishtar's behaviour is more reasonable, the 'monster' will be gone. The audience can see that Ea has created in the monster Saltu a distorted travesty of Ishtar's worst features, the sight of this creature proving so unpalatable to Ishtar that she gives up her pugnacious ways (Foster, 1977: 84). Ea then soothes Ishtar's feelings by promising that one day in each year, the people will dance wildly in the streets, celebrating Ishtar's war-like aspect (known as Agushaja).

The text is composed of two hymns (one of which is missing and presumed lost), considered among the most difficult texts of Old Babylonian literature (Streck, 2010: 561). Ea's recognition of the difficult aspects of Ishtar's character is shown in this composition through the satirical contrast between the goddess and Saltu. Through her belligerent double, Ishtar sees her own image reflected at her, and remarkably, adapts her behaviour in response. Groneberg has observed the parallels between Ishtar meeting her 'replacement' in this myth, and her meeting with (and attempted replacement of) her sister Ereshkigal in the myth of her Descent (1997: 70). The Agushaja narrative demonstrates the agency in Ishtar's behaviour even as she is guided by Ea, with this sense of choice strengthened by Ea's compromise in creating a holiday celebrating Ishtar at her most combative and disruptive. Ea's 'creative' method of softening Ishtar's behaviour demonstrates his affection for her; it places him in the role of her mentor.

INANNA AND ENKI

The myth of *Inanna and Enki* (ETCSL 1.3.1) provides further context for the relationship between Inanna and Enki, as well as an example of how Inanna's transgressive nature applies to the development of her powers. The beauty, youth and sexuality of

the goddess are clearly emphasised throughout this very lengthy myth. *Inanna and Enki* is an extremely old Sumerian narrative – according to Kramer, it was written down as early as 2000 BCE, and based on concepts that were current in Sumerian society centuries earlier (1961: 66). The myth begins with an image of Inanna, appreciating as well as enhancing her beauty.

- The goddess gives a short speech, stating her objective to go and visit Enki.
- The *ME* are in the possession of Enki. He is located at the *abzu*, the sacred place in Eridu, an ancient southern Mesopotamian city.
- Enki hears Inanna's approach, and instructs his servant Isimud to prepare for her arrival, to receive her with generous hospitality, and for his guest to be treated 'like an equal'. Isimud follows Enki's instructions, giving Inanna water, beer and butter-cake, and treating her respectfully.
- Enki and Inanna begin to drink beer together.

> So it came about that Enki and Inana were drinking beer together in the abzu, and enjoying the taste of sweet wine. The bronze aga vessels were filled to the brim, and the two of them started a competition, drinking from the bronze vessels.

- Seemingly, the Queen of Heaven can hold her liquor, while Enki soon begins to feel the effects of the alcohol.
- Enki begins to toast Inanna, and with each toast, he gives her some of the sacred *ME*. It is clear that the god of wisdom is under the influence of alcohol; his inebriated condition is stressed later in the composition.
- Among the powers given to Inanna are kindness, deceit, lamentations, rejoicing and righteousness. The gifting of the *ME* is formulaic, with Enki announcing the gifts he will give, 'in the name of my power, in the name of my abzu!' The formula used to structure the gifting of Enki's *ME* to Inanna creates the impression of a type of binding verbal contract.
- Inanna stands before Enki, and acknowledges her new gifts, carefully listing each gift in turn. At the end of the recitation, the drunken god of wisdom instructs Isimud to help Inanna to get safely back to her home city of Uruk.
- Inanna gets in the Boat of Heaven to return home. The text is very broken at this point, yet it appears likely that the goddess is leaving despite having agreed to stay for a while.
- Enki sobers up and asks Isimud where the *ME* have gone, again listing them at length. Isimud reminds Enki that he has given the *ME* to his daughter, Inanna.
- Enki instructs his servant Isimud to go and get the Boat of Heaven, with the *ME*, back to Eridu. Showing an awareness of Inanna's nature, the god of wisdom sends monsters, the wild-haired *enkum*-creatures, with his servant to bring the Boat of Heaven back by force.
- Isimud speaks to Inanna, and tells her Enki has decreed that the *ME* must be returned. He emphasises that Enki's decree must be obeyed, but Inanna refuses, saying:

> Was it falsehood that my father (Enki) said to me, did he speak falsely to me? Has he sworn falsely by the name of his power and by the name of his abzu?

- Six times Enki's various monsters attack the Boat of Heaven, but Inanna's maid-servant, Ninshubur, comes to her rescue, sending the monsters hurtling back to Eridu empty-handed.
- Finally, the Boat of Heaven comes in to dock at the White Quay. The divine *ME* are unloaded before the people of Sumer, who celebrate.
- Enki speaks to Inanna and gives a blessing to her and the city of Uruk, emphasising the harmonious bonds between Uruk and Eridu.

MOTIVATION

At the beginning of this fragmentary text we find Inanna enhancing her physical loveliness and stating her intention to speak 'coaxingly' to Enki. Both of these pieces of information foreshadow conflict. As explored further below, Inanna's power dressing carries ambitious overtones, and her intention to use her persuasive speech also suggests an attempt to gain her desire through the help of others. Once at the *abzu*, the two deities engage in a contest, and Inanna, with her competence in games, is the easy victor. It seems clear Inanna is motivated by ambition; however, the fragmentary state of the evidence precludes any definite answer to the question of whether her ambitions result from a specific incident. There is a vague reference to the goddess feeling she has been mistreated:

> It shall never escape me that I have been neglected by him who has had sex.
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.1)

Although this comment lacks context, it raises the question of whether this myth is a variation on the Sumerian myth of *Enki and the World Order* (ETCSL 1.1.3), in which the goddess goes to Enki to complain of being neglected – resulting in an extension of her powers. It must be remembered that, in myths relating to the goddess, it is her perception of her treatment that motivates her to act, not the treatment in itself. Inanna's sense of neglect is enough to inspire her to attempt to fix the situation, yet this perception of mistreatment should not be taken as evidence of bad behaviour from Enki.

Inanna's allure, as well as her ability to capitalise on an opportunity to improve her position, is a key component of her depiction in myth. It has been suggested that it is Inanna's feminine charms, as well as alcohol, which intoxicate Enki and make him vulnerable. Unlike Inanna, the physical appearance of Enki is not commented on, but he is shown to be a generous host to the young goddess. Both Enki and Inanna are aware of the value of the *ME*, and both behave in a manner which might be viewed as morally questionable: Inanna taking advantage of Enki's drunkenness to co-opt the *ME*, and Enki going back on his promises to Inanna that she may have the many powers he possesses.

The seriousness of Enki's unintentional gifting of the *ME* to Inanna is evident from his response to the news of their loss; he instantly sets about trying to get the powers back:

> Enki spoke to the minister Isimud: 'Isimud, my minister . . . since (Inanna) said that she would not yet depart . . . can I still reach her?' But holy Inana had gathered up the divine powers and embarked onto the Boat of Heaven. The Boat of Heaven had already left the quay.
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.1)

By sending monsters, Enki shows awareness that Inanna will not easily be parted from her new possessions. Enki's response also informs the audience of the heavy ramifications of the transfer of powers that has taken place. The transfer of powers is further reflected in the geographical reversal of the two deities: initially Inanna seeks Enki out in Eridu. However, after the transfer of the *ME*, it is Enki who pursues Inanna from Eridu to Uruk. In keeping with the sudden changes of status we have come to expect in relation to the goddess, she has gone from pursuer to pursued.

While both Enki and Inanna are powerful deities, both require the help of their servants; Enki calls upon six varieties of monster and his servant Isimud, while Ishtar calls upon her assistant, Ninshubur.

NINSHUBUR

Ishtar's faithful handmaiden, Ninshubur, is an intriguing character who is described as a dispenser of wisdom as well as a warrior. She assists in the marriage of the goddess (*Dumuzid-Inanna* D1, ETCSL 4.08.30) and her image has maternal aspects.

The relationship between Inanna and Ninshubur is one of mutual devotion, a quality that is emphasised in Sumerian hymns to Ninshubur:

> I (Ninshubur) will make the young lady, Inana, born in the shining mountains, rejoice.
>
> (*Ninšubur A*, ETCSL 4.25.1)

Ninshubur is also connected to other deities, such as An, but her primary association is with Inanna, and she plays a crucial role protecting the goddess. The description of Ninshubur's relationship to An also has protective overtones, as she is described walking in front of him, traditionally a defensive position (ETCSL 4.25.1). Ninshubur is depicted as unshakably loyal, wise (*Ninšubur B*, ETCSL 4.25.2), capable of teaching and possessing the power to soothe hearts.

The combination of Ishtar's cunning audacity and Ninshubur's strength proves too much for Enki, Isimud and the monsters. Thus the primary deities choose the course of the action, yet rely on accomplices to carry through with their decisions. Enki's reliance on Isimud and monsters to try and regain the lost *ME* suggests that the use of accomplices by Inanna in several of her myths is not a product of her gender or youth. The use of assistants to carry out the plans of the deities may instead be considered as a reflection of high social status.

Although Enki and Inanna experience conflict over the *ME*, the story appears to end harmoniously. Inanna's seemingly endless ambition is an expression of her connection to desire, libido and vitality. Sexual desire, like hunger, is a fundamental urge that can only ever be gratified temporarily, and one that is perpetually rekindled with

the passage of time. In Chapter 2, we saw that the sexual desires of the goddess could be easily replenished and difficult to entirely satisfy. In several Mesopotamian myths, Inanna's ambition shows a similar resistance to satiety.

While lust and hunger are urges which are representative of underlying biological needs, important for the continuation of life, the desire for increased power and prestige are necessary to the continuation of the 'life' of the cities in the ancient world. As the citadel goddess of Uruk, Inanna may be considered to represent the city's needs. She functions on her city's behalf to make sure that its needs are, at least temporarily, sated. The contest between the needs of different cities (Eridu and Uruk) thus provides a background for the conflict between Enki and Inanna.

ENKI AND THE WORLD ORDER

The myth of *Inanna and Enki* is not, as previously noted, the only traditional narrative featuring the storyline of Inanna taking additional power from Enki. The transition of powers between the two deities is also featured in *Enki and the World Order* (ETCSL 1.1.3), a Sumerian myth, copies of which date to the Old Babylonian period (Cunningham, 2007: 53). In this myth, Inanna visits the house of Enki, weeping, and complaining of her apparent lack of divine functions. The knowledge of the vast array of competencies associated with the goddess may sit awkwardly with her suggestion that she has fewer functions than other deities; certainly, Enki seems to assure Inanna of the many important powers that she already has in her possession. Again, it is the god's love for the young goddess which leads to the improvement of her status.

Inanna and Enki begins with a description of Inanna and its narrative is focused primarily on her. In contrast, *Enki and the World Order* opens with a long prayer of praise to Enki, and it is a myth which is predominately concerned with the god of wisdom. Despite the change in focus, Inanna is again able to exploit Enki's goodwill towards her to gain further *ME* – showing her ability to use the somewhat unconventional (yet effective) method of emotional blackmail to access further modalities of power. The source of Enki's affection for Inanna is left unexpressed, although his deep concern for the goddess' wellbeing is of critical importance, as is shown further in *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld,* considered below.

In *Enki and the World Order*, Inanna demonstrates her awareness of the powers of her sisters and other goddesses, and draws a contrast with her own abilities:

> My illustrious sister, holy Nisaba, is to get the measuring-reed . . . But why did you treat me, the woman, in an exceptional manner? I am holy Inana – where are my functions?
>
> (ETCSL 1.1.3)

Faced with Inanna's description of the competencies of the other goddesses, Enki expands Inanna's powers and role. He first describes her physical potency and verbal skills. In a richly ironic dialogue, Enki lists the functions with which Inanna is already equipped – seemingly unaware that he is describing the very abilities the goddess has used to co-opt his power, on more than one occasion. Although Ishtar comes to

Enki seeking further powers, she already possesses the charms which enable her to improve her position among the Mesopotamian deities.

> Enki answered his daughter, holy Inanna: 'How have I disparaged you? . . . I made you speak as a woman with pleasant voice. . . I clothed you in garments of women's power. I put women's speech in your mouth.'
>
> (ETCSL 1.1.3)

In this myth we see an emphasis on the decidedly female nature of Inanna's power, and the close relationship between her charm, her style and her influence. The alluring powers Enki has already given Inanna are comparable to Nisaba's role as a scribe, and to mother goddess Aruru's role in giving birth to noble children. However, Enki is moved by Inanna's complaints and grants her further powers. Enki adds that Inanna will gather up human heads like piles of dust and sow heads like seeds. Her abilities in battle are closely juxtaposed with her physical qualities; Enki assures Inanna she will never grow weary of admirers looking at her. He adds an ominous promise for the increase of the goddess' destructive and creative powers – a statement that highlights her liminal and transformative capacity:

> You destroy what should not be destroyed, you create what should not be created.
>
> (ETCSL 1.1.3)

While Inanna increases her powers at Enki's expense – and even despite his wishes in *Inanna and Enki* – in this myth, he credits himself with gifting the goddess with the very charms she uses to improve her potency. Vanstiphout notes the juxtaposition of Inanna with other goddesses in the myth, and also the references to the goddess' capacity for disruption (1997: 125–128). In Enki's 'well-ordered management scheme' for the world (Vanstiphout, 1997: 128), Inanna presents a direct challenge to the established order, questioning Enki's organisation of the world and requesting a larger share for herself. Inanna's special relationship with transitional experiences and events creates upheaval in the smooth running of the cosmos, yet, as Enki observes, her abilities are already woven into the universal fabric.

The comparison that is made between Inanna and other goddesses is intriguing, as the goddess initially compares her own abilities unfavourably with her female peers. Enki responds by flattering the goddess, and noting her vast powers of creation and destruction. This response firstly demonstrates Enki's wisdom in dealing with the tempestuous young deity, but also functions to reassure the goddess of her high status; although she is unlike the 'other goddesses', her differences enhance rather than diminish her importance. Inanna's status as the 'maiden of the gods', along with her warrior aspect, makes her too important in the pantheon for her powers to be circumscribed to a particular task (Averbeck, 2003: 766). In this way, the myth cleverly accounts for the limitless capacity of Inanna to create upheaval and disorder, within the setting of a well-organised universe.

The relationship between Inanna and Enki is complicated. Inanna at times shows dependence on the god of wisdom for assistance and to further her ambitions. Despite

Inanna's success in gaining greater powers, she continues to approach other deities for support, to seek their approval and to receive their advice before acting.

Although other Mesopotamian deities, including Enki, rely on underlings to carry out their wishes, and at times also need the help of their fellow deities, the relationship between Enki and Inanna seems fairly one-sided. Inanna is continuously the receiver of favours in this relationship; Enki is always her mentor, protector and benefactor. Although the goddess receives powers and abilities from several deities, she is not often depicted to share or give powers in return, with an important exception being her relationship with the Mesopotamian king and Dumuzi (*Inana E*, ETCSL 4.07.5). Finding a coherent explanation for the unarticulated bond between Enki and Inanna is difficult, but we can at least be certain that the basis of Enki's esteem for Inanna is not purely due to their close family relations. Related deities in Mesopotamian myth do not necessarily treat one another well, as can be seen in the difficult relationship between Ishtar and her sister, Ereshkigal, considered on pp. 106–108.

Ishtar shows flexibility in the means of acquiring further competences depending on the source she is targeting, demonstrating the varied nature of her divine relationships. She does not rely on her charisma and persuasive speech, for example, in interactions with her sister, and is not forceful with Enki. It is difficult to know whether the variance in Ishtar's attempts to gain more power from her divine colleagues is due to gender differences or differences in the roles of the deities involved; one might imagine that Ishtar's more respectful approach with Enki may reflect the patriarchal order of Mesopotamian society. This explanation, however, is undermined by the actions of the goddess in the myth of *Inanna and An*.

INANNA AND AN

In the Old Babylonian composition of *Inanna and An*, the goddess sets her mind on capturing the great heavens from the sky god, An, and taking over his abode, known as *E-ana* ('house of heaven'). Brown and Zólyomi have convincingly argued that this mythical composition from ancient Sumer forms an aetiology for the transfer of daylight to night (2001: 152–153). Inanna first consults with her brother Utu, swearing him to secrecy regarding her plan. This element of the narrative conforms to a common pattern of behaviour from the goddess: she frequently seeks advice or support from an ally before acting. She appears to consult with Utu about some marital problems, although the broken state of the text makes this hard to ascertain, and she may instruct him on how to assist in her campaign to overthrow An's claims on heaven. This section contains parallels with the story of *Adapa and the South Wind* (van Dijk, 1998: 14). Utu's daily journey through the heavens gives him special relevance for assisting Inanna's plans. Not uncommonly, the goddess' plans involve a strong element of danger – the heavens are carefully defended.

Inanna then battles through several obstacles to reach An's domain; among them, an angry scorpion whose tail the goddess cuts off. Inanna is successful in her quest and An can only lament her victory, saying:

> What has my child done? She has become greater than me!
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.5)

The transfer of power from father to daughter in *Inanna and An* causes the older deity grief and frustration; he is presented as being completely taken aback by her capacity to overthrow him. Despite An's defeat, the composition (seemingly) ends harmoniously, with his acceptance of Inanna's victory.

The relationship between Inanna and An is complicated and dynamic, particularly in regard to the distribution of divine power. This tension is explored in Enheduanna's three main poems featuring the goddess: *Inanna B* (also known as the *Exaltation of Inanna*); *Inanna C* (also known as *Lady of the Largest Heart*, or *Innin-shagurra*); and *Inanna and Ebih*. In each of these compositions, the author reflects on the power dynamics between the goddess of love and An. Inanna's increase in status, through taking her father's heavenly abode and usurping his position in the divine hierarchy, is referenced most clearly in *Inanna C*:

> Great An feared your precinct and was frightened of your dwelling-place. He let you take a seat in the dwelling-place of great An and then feared you no more, saying: 'I will hand over to you the august royal rites and the great divine rites.'
>
> (ETCSL 4.07.3)

Following this section, the poet references the confrontation between Inanna and Ebih, creating a sense of contrast between the goddess' rivalry with Ebih and her supremacy over other deities and mountains.

In each of the three poems, the competition between Inanna and An (in terms of status) is presented as taking place within a close and affectionate relationship between the two deities, with the author emphasising the many diverse aspects of relationship between the pair. In *Inanna C*, the poet acknowledges the contributions of An and Enlil to Inanna's power, while at the same time, Inanna is described as keeping An unaware of the future consequences of her 'word'; he is presented as not daring to answer her or speak out against her plans. Despite the references to Inanna's usurpation of An, the goddess' affection for her father is made clear, and the poet entreats An, who Inanna 'loves' to ask her for pity.

The composition *Inanna B* also reflects the complex dynamics of the relationship between Inanna and An. The goddess speaks at An's command (in an interesting contrast with *Inanna C*), and stands ready to enact his commands. Although at times in the poem Inanna shows subservient behaviour towards An, the goddess' increase in divine status is also explored. Inanna is described as a lady 'greater than An', and as one who has from birth developed in supremacy to become 'the greatest'.

Inanna and Ebih is considered in greater detail in Chapter 6. This poem emphasises the affectionate relationship between Inanna and An, while at the same time showing the goddess acting contrary to An's advice. Inanna's ambition and capability for seizing power are underestimated by the older deity, in a similar manner to his surprise at her usurpation of him in *Inanna and An*.

PERSUASIVE STRATEGIES

In the myth of *Inanna and An*, we observe Inanna's choice to use force to capture the heavens from An. However, violence is not the only tool utilised by the goddess to increase her influence. The Standard Babylonian Version of the *Gilgamesh Epic* shows Ishtar using a different strategy – the goddess employs tears and persuasive speech to attempt to convince Anu (Babylonian An) to give her the Bull of Heaven. The Bull of Heaven is a powerful warrior, capable of causing widespread destruction on earth. Anticipating the failure of this approach, she then threatens to raise the dead to consume the living. It is this threat that results in her successfully being granted the Bull.

In the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* (ETCSL 1.8.1.2), the exchange between An and Inanna involves the sky god expressing several reasons why he cannot allow her to have the Bull. In a show of divine pragmatism, An expresses his concern that the great beast is certain to leave giant cow pats in its wake. Inanna counters each of An's caveats by sympathetically repeating his concerns, but then restates her need to borrow the creature. Eventually, she stops repeating An's reasons for not giving her the Bull, and instead makes a directly phrased threat:

> Holy Inana replied to him: 'I shall shout, and make my voice reach heaven and earth!'
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.1.2)

Inanna's warning is immediately successful; the myth describes An's fearful response, and his instant capitulation to her request. In both versions of the story, the presence of the enormous Bull on earth causes an environmental catastrophe, involving drought and destruction. In both versions, Gilgamesh and Enkidu battle against the Bull and succeed in killing it. The Bull is then butchered by the heroes, and Ishtar retreats in distress.

The dialogue between Inanna and An, as they discuss the Bull, illustrates their different approaches to the conflict. An expresses his reticence to support Inanna's plan by attempting to reason with her, while Inanna attempts to persuade the sky god of her perspective, before turning to threats. While Inanna's threat is effective, An is right in his assessment that the Bull's presence on earth will be destructive, and will not give the goddess the victory she seeks.

ISHTAR'S VOICE

The powerful quality of Ishtar's voice in a range of contexts has been noted in previous chapters. She can use speech to develop close relationships, song to celebrate feelings of joy and lamentations for mourning. As the use of the goddess' voice is significant, so too is its absence (see Chapter 1 with Dumuzi's departure in *Dumuzid-Inana B1*, ETCSL 4.08.28). Her silence is presented as notable, with a prayer ritually used to defend against evil invoking the goddess as the 'mistress of silence' (*Against cultic impurity*, III.41.b, Foster, 2005: 665). The goddess reigns over various methods

of verbal communication, including whispers (*To Ishtar*, *II.i*, Foster, 2005:86), slander and abuse (*Inana C*, ETCSL 4.07.3) and a variety of 'vivifying' or inimical words (*Enki and the World Order*, ETCSL 1.1.3).

While persuasive speech is the dominant means by which Ishtar seeks to further her ambition, she also uses her voice to make threats. In the exchange with An, she uses her voice to communicate a warning – that she will scream. Ishtar's voice could be employed as a howl or a shriek, causing the land to tremble (*Inana C*, ETCSL 4.07.3, *Self-praise of Ishtar*, II.4). Her 'resounding cry', covering the heavens and the earth, is used against a dangerous adversary (a type of noxious weed) in the Sumerian myth of *The Shumunda Grass* (ETCSL 1.7.7).

Terrifying roaring, most likely due to its similarity to thunder, was associated with storm deities, such as Adad, and it is likely that this ability is linked to this aspect of the goddess (see Chapter 4). Ishtar's howling is often used on the battlefield, as seen in royal poetry:

> You (Inanna) howl like a storm upon your enemies.
>
> (*Ur-Ninurta A,* ETCSL 2.5.6.1)

The goddess' propensity to scream has particular relevance for her relationships with other deities. As we have seen, the threat of Inanna's voice quickly causes An to submit to her demands, and this powerful quality is referenced in the frequently used literary metaphor that likens the goddess to a falcon, preying on the other deities. The characteristic screech of the falcon, combined with its speed and hunting capability, gives a vivid illustration of the goddess' power in hymns of praise:

> The gods are small birds, but I (Inanna) am the falcon.
>
> (*Inana F*, ETCSL 4.07.6)

Ishtar's conflicts with An in the narratives of Sumerian myth demonstrate the flexible approach of the goddess in her strategies to gain her desired outcome. Not only does she have a range of options at her disposal, but she can apply a variety of tactics in the course of a single conflict, or against a single divine opponent.

In the Old Babylonian myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, the goddess uses a verbal threat to get help from Enki. The nature of her verbal threat against Enki is very different to the threats she uses against An. The goddess threatens Enki with her absence, saying that she will not return to her home unless he helps her. This threat is perhaps more dangerous than it may appear at first glance – several city laments bemoan the disastrous consequences of the absence of the goddess. In the myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, we find Inanna again relying on Enki's affection for her in order to get her own way.

The goddess' bold seizure of power from her father in the myth of *Inanna and An* makes it unlikely that any deference to patriarchy is the cause for Ishtar's different choice of strategies in claiming power from Enki and Ereshkigal. An alternative explanation may be that Inanna is attempting to better each god in the field of their

competence; Enki's reputation for wisdom is undermined by his drunken vulnerability to the goddess' charms, and by her ability to manipulate him into giving her more power. Ereshkigal's inescapable underworld prison, and the reality of death, are challenged by Ishtar's physical efforts to break in (and out!). With each myth, we see Ishtar's power to turn the established order of things and places upside down. As often seen in her manifestations in love and battle, Ishtar's transgressive depictions in these myths involve a reappraisal of the established order. Once the goddess has decided to increase her prestige or follow her desires, she shows no concern for following traditional patterns of behaviour. At the same time, the goddess is clearly aware of the established structure of the world around her.

The complexity of Ishtar's choices of strategy to further her ambitions is considered in greater detail in Chapter 6, which deals with vengeance. As a general observation, however, we note that the various powers of the goddess' voice (either persuading, threatening or screaming) are more greatly emphasised than physical means in literature dealing with the relations between the goddess and her divine colleagues.

INANNA'S DESCENT TO THE NETHERWORLD

Inanna's lust for power and her attempts to co-opt it from those close to her do not always bring success. In what is perhaps her most famous myth, Inanna is killed by her sister Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld. Inanna's journey to the underworld is motivated by a desire to have a similar level of power in the underworld as she does elsewhere, in her role as Queen of Heaven and Earth. The goddess tends to rush heedlessly into dangerous situations, driven by her ambitious nature. Desire, while powerful, is not careful, patient or polite, and it stands to reason that the goddess embodying the force of libido may at times lack forbearance. Ishtar is not unaware of the possible dangers of her journey to the underworld, taking steps to ensure her safe return. Very broadly, the plot of this myth of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* (ETCSL 1.4.1) is as follows:

- Ishtar decides to travel to the underworld. She takes the *ME* with her, and carefully dresses herself and applies her makeup. Inanna's physical preparations are focused on enhancing her physical beauty, and when these preparations are complete, she speaks to her servant, Ninshubur.
- Ishtar tells Ninshubur that she is going to the underworld. She instructs Ninshubur to lament for her in specific and ritualised ways – beating a drum in the sanctuary, and lacerating her body. Ninshubur is instructed to clothe herself in her poorest garments, and to visit the temples of the gods in turn: first that of Enlil, then that of Nanna, and finally that of Enki. Ninshubur is to plead with each god to intervene on Ishtar's behalf and to rescue her from death in the underworld. Although Ishtar instructs Ninshubur to visit Enki only if Enlil and Nanna refuse to help, she seems to expect it will be the god of wisdom who will come to her aid. She tells Ninshubur:

> Father Enki, the lord of great wisdom, knows about the life-giving plant and the life-giving water. He is the one who will restore me to life.
>
> (ETCSL 1.4.1)

- Next, Ishtar sets out on her journey. She arrives at the gates of the underworld alone, pushes aggressively against the doors and shouts forcefully at the gatekeeper, Neti, demanding he open the gates for her.
- Neti warns Ereshkigal of the unexpected visitor. Ereshkigal is displeased and forms a plan to weaken her sister.

> She said to Neti, her chief doorman: 'Come Neti, my chief doorman of the underworld, don't neglect the instructions I will give you. Let the seven gates of the underworld be bolted. Then let each door of the palace Ganzer be opened separately. As for her, after she has entered, and crouched down and had her clothes removed, they will be carried away.'

- Neti first bolts the seven gates of the underworld, and then opens each one separately. He invites Inanna to enter, and then removes her turban from her head as she steps through the doorway. Ishtar asks what is meant by this, but Neti responds:

> Be silent, Inanna, a divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. Inanna, you must not open your mouth against the rites of the underworld.

- At the second gate, Inanna relinquishes the lapis lazuli beads from around her neck. Again the goddess questions the process, but Neti repeats his instruction for her to keep quiet. This pattern is repeated until Inanna has passed through all seven gates, and has crouched down naked.
- Inanna enters Ereshkigal's throne room, makes her sister get up and then takes a seat on the throne of the underworld herself. Ereshkigal's actions in relinquishing the throne despite having already weakened Inanna with the elaborate stripping plan gives some credence to the workability of Inanna's plan to overthrow the Queen of the underworld. At this point, the seven judges of the underworld, the Anuna, intervene and make a decision against Inanna:

> They looked at her – it was the look of death. They spoke to her – it was the speech of anger. They shouted at her – it was the shout of heavy guilt.

- Inanna is transformed into a corpse, and the corpse is hung upon a meat hook.
- Inanna's death immediately causes all earthly fertility to cease. After three days, Ninshubur follows Inanna's instructions and asks the gods for help in rescuing the impetuous young goddess. All but Enki refuse.

At this point in the narrative there are some notable differences between the two main versions of the myth, the Akkadian and the Sumerian. These differences pertain most clearly to the choice of agents who are sent by Enki to the underworld. We have noted that some of the other gods decline to help, seemingly in the understanding that the laws of the underworld make it very difficult for anyone to go down to try and save Inanna without also getting stuck there. Even if a return was possible, we are warned rather ominously: 'no one comes back from the Underworld unmarked.'

The emphasis placed by Enlil on Ishtar's dubious motives in descending to the underworld might imply that the other deities are reluctant to help the young goddess because they disapprove of her behaviour. This interpretation seems unlikely, however, as in several other myths, Ishtar is successful in securing help from the senior deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon, who at first express deep misgivings to her about the very plans for which their help is later required. The reticence of the other deities to intervene functions in the narrative to build suspense, allow for the consideration of Ishtar's actions, and to highlight the extreme difficulty of her situation. As Ishtar predicted, it is Ea who comes to her aid, and the solution which he devises is one coherent with his characterisation as the crafty god of wisdom.

- In the Sumerian version, Enki makes two creatures from the dirt under his fingernails, the *kurgarru* and the *galaturru*. These creatures are identified with cult personnel associated with the worship of Ishtar (for an illuminating discussion of these creatures, see Assante, 2009: 40, and more recently, Peled, 2014).
- In the Akkadian version, Ea (Sumerian Enki) uses a different assistant, this time an *assinnu*, named Asushunamir. An *assinnu* was once thought to be a male cult prostitute (see Maul, 1992), but in recent works the suggestion of prostitution has been discarded. The role of the *assinnu* is complex (see Peled, 2014) – it possibly involved enforcing Ishtar's decisions (see Assante, 2009). 'Asushunamir' means 'he is resplendent as he comes forth' (Foster, 2005: 502, footnote 3), seemingly a reference to the creature's physical attractiveness.
- In both versions, Enki's creations journey to the underworld, where they find Ereshkigal. Both types of emissary gain Ereshkigal's favour, and both subsequently exploit her good feeling towards them to request Ishtar's lifeless body. In this way, Ishtar is revived.
- Ishtar then returns through the gates and receives back her power garments as she passes through each gate.
- Ereshkigal sends a group of demons along with Inanna to find a substitute to take her place in the land of the dead. Unless a substitute can be found the demons have orders from the judges of the underworld to drag Inanna back down from the upper world.
- Having returned to the land of the living, Inanna and the demons go around to numerous cities. They meet others there, starting with Inanna's faithful servants, who are all in mourning for Inanna, and who fall at her feet when they see her. Each time the demons ask to take the respective servant as her substitute, but each time she dissuades them, saying:

  > No! This is my minister of fair words, my escort of trustworthy words. . . . she lacerated her buttocks for me.

- Finally, they arrive at the great apple tree in the plain of Kulaba.

  > There was Dumuzi clothed in a magnificent garment and seated magnificently on a throne. The demons seized him there by his thighs. The seven of them poured the milk from his churns. She looked at him, it was the look of death. She spoke to him (?), it was the speech of anger. She shouted at him (?), it was the shout of heavy guilt . . . 'Take him away.' Holy Inanna gave Dumuzi the shepherd into their hands.

LOYALTY

Ishtar's treatment of her lover Tammuz (Sumerian Dumuzi) has led some scholars to view her as fickle. Yet, considered in context, the behaviour of the goddess during the narrative proves just the opposite – Ishtar shows great loyalty to those who are faithful to her, such as her servants. The diligent behaviour of Inanna's servants is juxtaposed against the actions of Dumuzi, providing a damning contrast that demonstrates his lack of appropriate mourning behaviour. The goddess takes her decision to select a replacement seriously, rejecting several potential candidates for her replacement before meeting Dumuzi. These possible replacements are Ninshubur and Inanna's sons, Lulal and Shara, who are all lying in the dust dressed in mourning rags. Inanna commends each of them to the demons for their faithful (yet varied) service to her.

Loyalty, especially in terms of the appropriate mourning for the goddess, provides the main criteria for which Ishtar makes her selection of who will replace her in the underworld. The lower status and different genders of the servants makes no difference to her eventual decision.

The goddess' speech of condemnation of her lover is deliberately paralleled with the earlier speech of the Anunna judges against Ishtar, once again emphasising the inappropriate nature of Dumuzi's response to Inanna's death. The two speeches have more in common than condemning their hearer to the underworld. In both speeches, the wording suggests that the speaker/s are judging the behaviour of the condemned individual. The 'look of death', the 'speech of anger' and the 'shout of heavy guilt' are used in the myth to demonstrate to the audience that a serious transgression has occurred.

The theme of loyalty in the Descent myth is connected to Ishtar's divine competence in promoting strong social ties. Her important role in caring for dead loved ones is considered in Chapter 6. In the *Descent*, Ishtar predicts that Ea will come to her aid and rescue her. Although the cessation of earthly fertility is a problem, Ea also expresses concern for Ishtar's welfare. The continued care of a loved one was considered to provide protection for the deceased in Mesopotamian religion – through testing the strength of her social ties to the god of wisdom (and to the other deities who chose not to assist her), Ishtar is able to achieve an unprecedented return from the underworld. While it is Ea who creates the creatures that free the goddess, Ishtar's closeness to Ea gives her access to his power.

The presence of humour in ancient texts is not always easy to grasp. Yet, despite the heavy subject matter and high drama of the *Descent*, the narrative appears to contain intermittent humorous overtones. There is a strong sense of irony in Ishtar's furious condemnation of Tammuz for not mourning her death correctly. Although this event is undeniably a serious moment, the audience would be reminded of the goddess' recent improper response to the death of her brother-in-law, an element of the narrative considered in detail below. Ishtar's inappropriate mourning behaviour towards her brother-in-law's death contributes to her own journey to the underworld, just as Tammuz's unfaithful behaviour leads to his voyage to the 'Great Below'. The juxtaposition of the two events highlights the trope of improper mourning followed

by deadly consequences, and provides a sense of moral unity to the myth. Our limited knowledge of the myth's intended audience, as well as the lack of context for the story creates difficulties for determining possible purposes and meanings. Yet, in light of the narrative's thematic emphases on appropriate mourning and the journey to the Mesopotamian 'afterlife', it seems plausible that one function of the narrative may have been to warn the living of the inherent dangers in neglecting the dead.

Ishtar is the first individual to have broken the power of the underworld and to have managed a lasting return to the upper world; although her return to life is conditional, it remains symbolic of the transgressive power of the goddess. The condition of Ishtar's return to life is that she is required to find a replacement for herself in the lower world. This is a common theme found in myths about the underworld; the idea that once a place in the land of the dead has been created and filled, it cannot be left empty had wide currency in antiquity. The need to provide a substitute to fill an individual's place can be seen in Mesopotamian sacrificial rituals involving the magical treatment of illness, often the substitute provided would be an animal, such as a goat. At times, a 'non-animal' substitute was required, such as in the myth of *Inanna's Descent* and in the Mesopotamian ritual of the substitute king (this ritual has been analysed recently by Bremmer, 2015).

Yet there is more to the theme of improper observance of death and the consequential weighty penalties for this behaviour, as represented in *Inanna's Descent*. The myth itself parallels the confounding quality of the goddess by featuring several swift reversals of fortune. At first, Ishtar is dressed in her best clothes and alive in the upper world, before being killed, naked, in the lower world. Her husband is described rejoicing like a king instead of mourning his wife's demise, as her servants do, and so his fate is switched with that of his spouse. Ishtar's close association with changes in status and deciding of fates pervades the fabric of the composition.

The reason for Ishtar's visit to the underworld is generally attributed to her wish to extend her sphere of influence to the realm of Ereshkigal. The Sumerian myth of *Dumuzi and Geshtinanna*, a composition providing a variant of the descent narrative, opens with Inanna being goaded into visiting the underworld by demons. The demons encourage the goddess to visit the underworld that she has 'coveted', suggesting the goddess' ambitious motives are well known.

> A small demon opened his mouth and said to the big demon, 'Come on, let's go to the lap of holy Inana.' The demons entered Unug and seized holy Inana. 'Come on, Inana, go on that journey which is yours alone – descend to the Underworld. Go to the place which you have coveted – descend to the netherworld.'
>
> (ETCSL 1.4.1.1)

In the Sumerian version of the *Descent*, Inanna is asked by the gatekeeper of the underworld why she has come to visit her sister. The goddess says:

> Because Lord Gud-gal-ana, the husband of my elder sister holy Ereshkigal, has died; in order to have his funeral rites observed, she offer generous libations at his wake –that is the reason.
>
> (ETCSL 1.4.1)

The expertise of women in funerary practices and associated religious rituals in the Ancient Near East gives credence to Inanna's statements of purpose for her visits to divine relatives at the seats of their power. By stating an aim in line with traditional areas of female competence, and indeed, within her own religious sphere of influence, the goddess is asserting her authority. However, in the myth of her *Descent to the Underworld*, the other deities do not find her explanations convincing. Neti, the gatekeeper, tells his mistress, Ereshkigal, of Inanna's arrival at the gates of the Underworld. He describes the goddess' violent attempts to gain entry, and informs Ereshkigal that Inanna has the *ME*, detailing her physical adornments. Neti makes no mention of Inanna's excuse that she has come to offer libations, focusing instead on her aggressive shouting and attempts to get through the gate by force.

POWER DRESSING FOR A FUNERAL

In this context, Inanna's adornment with the *ME* and her physical preparations can be viewed as antagonistic. Ishtar's enrichment of her beauty and her choice of clothes enhance her power. Much as a male warrior may put on a breast plate before going into battle, Ishtar adorns her eyes with mascara. The potency of her physical preparations is recognised by Ereshkigal, as evidenced in her plan to literally strip Ishtar of her power. As well as removing the goddess' powerful clothing, Neti must also deal with another of the goddess' most dangerously potent qualities – her voice. The use of repetition in the section of the myth detailing Inanna's progress through each of the seven gates accentuates the focus on Inanna's clothing, with its intimate connection to her power and femininity. At each gate, Neti further instructs Inana to 'be silent'. Supporting this interpretation of the powerful and protective function of Ishtar's physical preparations is evidence from the myth of *Dumuzi and Geshtinanna*, mentioned previously. In their efforts to convince Inanna to descend to the netherworld, the demons (who clearly do not have her best interests at heart) urge the young deity not to enhance her appearance with her wig and fine clothing (ETCSL 1.4.1.1).

There is a glaring error in the credibility of Inanna's story that she has come to observe funerary rituals for her brother-in-law. As has been fastidiously described in the text, the goddess is wearing her best clothing! We have seen that Ninshubur is instructed by the goddess to wear mourning clothes when Ishtar is temporarily killed in the Underworld:

> In private, lacerate your buttocks for me. Like a pauper, clothe yourself in a single garment and all alone set your foot in the E-kur, the house of Enlil.

The meagre clothing of Ninshubur as she mourns her mistress is cleverly juxtaposed against Ishtar's sartorial splendour.

> She put a turban, headgear for the open country, on her head. She took a wig for her forehead. She hung small lapis-lazuli beads around her neck.

Ishtar, with her close connection to lamentations and funerary rituals, would certainly be aware of the expected attire for the correct display of mourning. Yet, in case there was any doubt, the goddess is presented in the myth instructing Ninshubur on the correct methods of conducting mourning in the appropriate manner (and attire).

Ishtar's choice of dress says everything about her purpose in visiting the underworld, as is shown in Neti's response to her arrival. When warning his mistress of her sister's aggressive attempts to gain entry to the underworld, Neti at once informs Ereshkigal about what the unexpected visitor is wearing, rather than relaying the goddess' verbal message. The information given non-verbally by Inanna's choice of clothes is clearly sufficient for the gatekeeper to express the goddess' purpose in visiting her sister.

The detailed description of Ishtar's clothing by her gatekeeper elicits an angry response from Ereshkigal, which she in turn expresses non-verbally; the slapping of the thigh commonly signifies frustration and anger in the Ancient Near East.

> When she heard this, Ereshkigal slapped the side of her thigh. She bit her lip and took the words to heart.

Scholars have noted that Ishtar's negative reception from Neti and Ereshkigal may result from the goddess' statement that she has arrived to pay funerary respects for Ereshkigal's husband, Gugalanna. It is certainly true that Ishtar's stated desire to lament Gugalanna's passing could be viewed as somewhat insensitive, if we accept Gugalanna's identification with the Bull of Heaven. The name Gugalanna means 'the great bull of Heaven', and he is considered to be the same creature whose untimely death in battle against Gilgamesh is caused, albeit indirectly, by Ishtar (considered in Chapter 5). It is possible Ereshkigal's unwelcoming response to her sister's visit is a partly a result of (quite validly) blaming Ishtar for her husband's death. In the myth of the *Descent*, we see Ishtar claiming she intends to give funeral offerings for her brother-in-law, whose death she may have caused, while dressed in her best attire. The combination of Ishtar's dress, speech and actions reveals a powerful mixture of audacity and ambition – qualities that are central to Ishtar's characterisation more broadly in Mesopotamian literature.

Neti and Ereshkigal are unconvinced of Ishtar's pious motivations for entering her sister's domain, and other gods in the pantheon also show awareness of the ambitious intentions behind Ishtar's voyage. Following Ishtar's death, Ninshubur, as promised, goes to houses of the gods to attempt to gain support for the goddess' rescue. The first deity visited by Ninshubur is the primary deity, Enlil. One of the chief gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon, Enlil is associated with wind and breath. Enlil was thought to be one of the most powerful of all deities; in one Sumerian composition, his splendour was said to be so radiant that the other gods and goddesses could not look upon him (Bienkowski and Millard, 2000). Enlil and Ishtar have a number of features in common: both are associated with mountains, the dispersal of authority and the deciding of fates (Leick, 1991: 46). He is also associated with rage, in the form of 'his angry word' and in lamentations and cultic songs, he brings numerous calamities upon the land (Leick, 1991: 46).

Ninshubur enters Enlil's temple and explains what has happened. As instructed by her mistress, Ninshubur makes a desperate lament for Ishtar, urging Enlil to act. Despite Ninshubur's careful adherence to traditional mourning rites, Enlil is not persuaded by her lament. Instead, his reaction is one of anger. Enlil tells Ninshubur that Inanna's journey was motivated by her having craved the 'great below' as well as the 'great heaven'. He says that the divine powers of the underworld should not be desired, as whoever holds these powers must stay in the underworld (ETCSL 1.4.1).

Enlil's speech illuminates the impetuous nature of the goddess; once she gets to the underworld and accesses its divine powers, there is no way of transporting those powers back to her usual domains. Ishtar's lust for power makes her heedless of the potential consequences of her actions, although as we have seen, she is presented as fully aware of the dangers involved in her journey.

The similarities between the story of *Inanna's Descent* and the myth of *Inanna and Enki* necessitate scepticism with regard to the stated purpose of Inanna's visit with Enki. While the goddess claims a pious motivation, the parallels with her journey to the underworld undermine her credibility. Both journeys start with Inanna paying close attention to her physical appearance, a behaviour we have seen to be closely linked to her power and protection. In both myths, Ninshubur is enlisted for practical support, and in both myths, there is great difficulty associated with getting the desired powers away from their traditional home.

The most notable difference between the two myths is perhaps not so much the motivations or actions of Ishtar, but her reception by the visited deity. Ishtar is less openly aggressive towards Enki, and he receives her very warmly and insists upon her good treatment. Ereshkigal, who as we have seen, has reason to be unwelcoming, prepares to weaken and then destroy her sister. The variances in reception are likely a result of the different relationships between the deities. Ereshkigal and Ishtar, although tied by close familial bonds, rarely appear together in Mesopotamian literature (for an exception, see *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, ETCSL 1.8.1.4). With her other sibling, Utu, Inanna enjoys a relationship of mutual love. The close relationship between Inanna and Utu is informed by their astral aspects of Venus and the sun respectively, and their identification as each other's 'twin'. In hymns and royal epics, as well as myth, Inanna and Utu employ their powers in complementary and beneficial ways, particularly in the fields of healing and justice. In contrast, Ereshkigal and Ishtar generally appear independently of one another in literature, and if their contact in the Descent is any guide, the literary separation of the two goddesses is probably for the best.

ISHTAR AND AGENCY

Having considered Ishtar's approach to increasing her powers from other gods in the pantheon, we now briefly consider the goddess' methods of using power once she has accessed it, and her capacity for agency. Ishtar's use of power is closely interconnected with her relationships with other deities in Mesopotamian literature. In love poetry, Inanna relies on her close family members for protection and support (such as using

Utu to arrange her marital bed), while also showing the capacity to make independent choices (such as selecting her husband herself in *Dumuzid-Inana Z*, ETCSL 4.08.26). This tendency of the goddess to take independent action within a supported divine framework is dominant in wider literary traditions. Ishtar commonly seeks vengeance in Mesopotamian myth, yet she rarely does so alone. Instead, she is usually assisted by an accomplice, or seeks to gain the approval or advice of an authority figure before becoming destructive. This pattern is explored in detail in Chapter 6.

We may be surprised to find one of the most powerful primary deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon being wary of upsetting her mother, or asking for her father's permission before embarking on a planned journey. Inanna's reliance on her family in love poetry is likely a reflection of historical reality, but it is also in keeping with the goddess' identification as a young woman adored by her fellow deities. As previously noted, the most frequent term used to describe Inanna's relationship with the senior gods is 'beloved' (Leick, 2003: 58). She is protected and adored by her brother, and richly gifted by Enki. Ishtar's beloved quality may also be a function of her characterisation in myth as a young female deity. Scholars have noted that, while the scope of Ishtar's identity is wide-ranging, she is never depicted as old (Harris, 2000, although for a possible extremely fragmentary exception, see *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, ETCSL 1.8.2.3). The frequently patient response of the other primary deities to the audacity and excesses of the young deity suggest an overriding goodwill towards the goddess that Ishtar is quick to exploit to her own advantage.

Ishtar frequently seeks permission and assistance from other divine beings prior to taking action. It seems reasonable to ask: how does this behaviour from Ishtar relate to the capacity for agency in the most prominent of the Mesopotamian gods? Love, community and social bonding are central to Ishtar's identity, and her frequent reliance on others should be viewed as expressing the capacity to benefit from the strong social bonds she creates. Ishtar, in her many literary incarnations, has a great deal of agency. She often seeks advice and support, yet chooses her own courses of action and consistently ignores the advice she is given. When told by other divinities that her plans are unworkable, she takes no notice and continues to seek the fulfilment of her own desires – regardless of the potentially negative consequences that may eventuate for others.

Importantly, while Ishtar is commonly presented surrounded and supported by other deities, these relationships only enhance her power, and fit coherently with her primary role as the goddess of love, expert at engendering intimacy and also greatly skilled in the art of delegation. It is interesting to consider that, as a deity of love, Ishtar seems especially capable among the Mesopotamian pantheon of using her loving relationships for her own benefit. 'Love' for Ishtar is a powerful force, but also a means of accessing even greater influence.

OVERVIEW

The Mesopotamian pantheon provides a critical context for gaining a clearer image of Ishtar, her functions and areas of competence. In this chapter, we have considered

several ways in which the goddess' image is shaped by her fellow divinities. Other deities are used as a point of comparison to assist in defining the goddess' powers, and her closeness to the primary deities enhances her prestige. Yet, the other gods do more than provide a background against which to consider the goddess. Ishtar's relationships with the other deities show the goddess using her social bonds to transform her own image. The loving relationships of Ishtar with other gods give her access to their power. This is particularly evident in the affectionate ties between Inanna and Enki. Even when the goddess' relationships with other divinities are less than harmonious (or even openly hostile!), her ability to access the powers of other deities frequently involves a familial aspect; such as we saw when, while attempting to gain entry to the underworld, the goddess uses her kinship ties as a pretext for her visit.

The complexity and depth of Ishtar's characterisation in ancient literature is expressed in the great variety of her personal relationships, and this diversification is also seen in the way the goddess approaches different divine social interactions. At times, she uses persuasive speech and displays of emotion to further her ambitions and to enlist the help of those kindly disposed towards her; at others, she may use her remarkable capacity for violence to impose her will. The choice of behaviour is made by the goddess, and the outcome is often an increased range of abilities. Ishtar's relationship to the rest of the pantheon is unique in the effective manner in which she uses her social ties to access greater power and to improve her position among the hierarchy of the other gods. In the goddess' divine relationships, the flow of benefits is decidedly (but not exclusively) tipped in Ishtar's favour. The goddess' close association with love is expressed through her intimate bonds with numerous divinities, and results in a truly exceptional capacity for social networking.

4

KINGSHIP, BATTLE AND FAMILY

In Chapter 3, we explored Ishtar's relationships with her fellow divinities, and found that the goddess was capable of accessing greater power and support through her close divine bonds. While the goddess is the clear beneficiary of her relations with other divinities, her relationship with the human king involves strong elements of reciprocity in terms of the benefits provided by the union. The relationship with the king is thus unique among Ishtar's many social connections – especially in regards to the union's more balanced nature. As well as gaining the assistance of the goddess herself, Ishtar's love for the king gives him greater access to the support of the rest of the pantheon.

The special relationship between Ishtar and the king connects both aspects of the goddess that are most commonly attested – her powerful competency in the fields of love and battle. Through considering the theme of kingship in this chapter, we see that these two primary aspects of the goddess find unity in her protective bond with the human king. Indeed, the multi-faceted nature of Ishtar's connection with the king allows for a more complete expression of the goddess' character than any other relationship; the union draws upon many aspects of the goddess, including her close divine ties, and her role in the maintenance of universal order.

Ishtar holds a distinct role in the pantheon in relation to the ruler; she is his divine spouse, but she also inhabits a maternal role. The maternal side of the goddess' relationship with the king is closely aligned with her identification as a warrior goddess. In the field of battle, and in life, the love of the goddess protected and supported the monarch. Ishtar's maternal connection to the Mesopotamian king has not been commonly recognised in modern scholarship. It must be noted that, while maternal imagery is used to express the closeness of the relationship between the goddess and the king, Ishtar should not be considered as a 'mother goddess'. Maternal symbolism is at times used as a means to relate the goddess to the king and to other deities, but motherhood does not define Ishtar, and it is not a dominant aspect of her image, unlike her connections to love and battle.

In Ishtar's links to kingship we see the goddess' competence in healing, decreeing judgments, her identification as a storm deity and her astral incarnation, while exploring themes of status, intimacy and legitimisation. In analysing the goddess' close relationship to the Mesopotamian king, we take a slightly different approach to the other chapters of this book, by shifting our focus away from the study of mythology

toward the symbolically rich field of royal hymns and epics (for the problem of the inherent bias in royal sources see Postgate, 1995: 395–411).

Following the thematic approach, this chapter explores several general features of the relationship between Ishtar and the Mesopotamian king, and also considers the symbolism used to elucidate this connection. The consideration of general themes of Ishtar's connection to the king aligns with this book's thematic approach overall, yet it must be acknowledged that specific periods would have had greater emphases on different parts of the relationship. This means that the connection of the goddess to the king would have been represented and conceived of differently over time. An example of this flexibility in the conceptualisation of the relationship between deity and monarch can be found in the inscriptional tradition of the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal. In Ashurbanipal's royal inscriptions, Ishtar is foregrounded using cosmic warrior motifs, while Marduk is concurrently marginalised (Crouch, 2013: 133). This evidence has been recently used by Crouch to demonstrate the fluidity of Mesopotamian theological traditions in light of different social and political circumstances (2013: 141).

The variability of divine imagery across historical periods reflects broader diachronic fluctuations in the conception of the Mesopotamian kingship, as well as illuminating the changing primary concerns of different periods. The changeable nature of the king's links with the divine undoubtedly adds further complexity and depth to the intricate relationship between monarch and goddess.

MESOPOTAMIAN KINGSHIP

Current evidence suggests that ancient kingship originated around the time of the development of an urban society in Southern Mesopotamia, towards the end of the fourth millennium BCE (Grottanelli and Mander, 2005: 5162). Despite continued shifts in the ideology of kingship over the millennia that followed (see for example Jacobsen, 1970a: 132–156), the theological basis of royal power in Mesopotamia is evident from the time of the earliest royal inscriptions (Westenholz, 2000: 75). It has often been observed that, in the ancient Mesopotamian cosmic worldview, humans were created by deities to perform their labours, and monarchs were made to supervise this necessary work. Among the ancient sources, this outlook is perhaps best expressed in the Babylonian Flood narrative, *Atrahasis*, where humans are created by the deities to serve them, and to carry out their menial work.

Despite the prominence of this view of human/divine relations in Mesopotamian literature, particularly in the world of ancient epic, the numerous invocations of deities by individuals in prayers and incantations would argue against the simplicity of a one-sided relationship based on human servitude. Yet, what this genesis does express is the tiered nature of human and divine relations. The worlds of divine and earthly politics were hierarchically ordered, with the gods emphatically in the dominant position over humans. Within this ordered structure, kings played an important role mediating between humanity and the divine: the office of kingship was essential in maintaining universal order. As the vertex of humanity, the king was 'the point

where the horizontal surface of the world of men (met) the vertical axis elevating to the heaven of the gods' (Grottanelli and Mander, 2005: 5163).

The monarch's role was both defined and circumscribed by heavy religious obligation, and his position was more ideologically focused on responsibility than power (Scurlock, 2013: 172). Kingship was perceived as a divine gift; the royal office was thought by the Mesopotamians to have descended from the heavens, and through this institution civilisation was made possible, with all its benefits. A small number of Mesopotamian kings were themselves worshipped as divine. This practice of deifying living kings was limited to short periods of history (Brisch, 2013), with the kings involved mostly belonging to the Sargonic, Ur III and Isin dynasties. The question of the divinity or otherwise of Mesopotamian kings is an area of great complexity, and has been the focus of much productive scholarship (see recently *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond*, 2008, edited by Nicole Brisch). The king's role in inhabiting the 'fuzzy' transitional area between the human and divine spheres (Beckman, 2008: 390) perhaps makes him a fitting partner for the transgressive goddess of love, yet doubtlessly adds to the complicated nature of their relationship.

In the human realm, authority was focused in the office of kingship, with various regional administrative offices branching out from this central role. The role was 'legitimised by the gods, demonstrated through ritual and reinforced by tradition' (Hill, Jones, and Morales, 2013: 4). In a culture where deities were the source of life and responsible for the maintenance of universal order, concepts of power and religion were tightly interwoven. Even the pantheon of the Mesopotamian deities was not beyond the reach of the hierarchically structured approach to political power; in myth, as we have seen, deities at times competed with one another for supremacy among themselves, and even expressed concern for their status in a remarkably anthropomorphic manner (for example, *Enki and the World Order,* ETCSL 1.1.3). Mesopotamian deities inhabited diverse portfolios in the realm of divine politics, yet these roles frequently overlapped in ways that are not as yet clearly understood in modern scholarship.

The primary position of monarch in ancient Mesopotamia was a masculine role; the throne was generally held by a king (for some noteworthy exceptions, see Westenholz, 2000: 89). The nature of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia was not static across all periods, and this variability resulted in changes in the relationship between the monarch and the pantheon. Indeed, even within a limited historical period, different deities had more or less prominence in the royal ideology of individual rulers, with also some variety in the aspects of the deities receiving emphasis. Despite the difficulties presented by this variability, much productive work has been done exploring the connection between Ishtar and the king, particularly in terms of the pair's spousal relationship (see especially Cooper, 1993, and Lapinkivi, 2004), and the legitimising function of the relationship (explored in depth by Westenholz, 2000).

In this chapter, we consider the complex nature of the relations between monarch and deity. In keeping with the subject of this book, we consider how the goddess' image is revealed through her relationship with the king, and how this relationship is articulated in literature through the use of imagery and narrative. Although certainly a worthwhile area of study, the capacity of the union to illuminate the role of kingship in Mesopotamian culture is not the focus here. The relationship between Ishtar and

the king is in some ways unique – particularly for the goddess – yet there remain many aspects of the king's relationship with Ishtar that are also shared with other deities, such as the use of shepherding imagery and the conferral of blessings.

BENEFITS AND BALANCE

In Chapter 3, we saw that Ishtar's personal and professional relationships have a tendency towards imbalance in her favour – to the extent that some relationships seem entirely dominated by the promotion and protection of her interests. Conversely, Ishtar's relationship with the Mesopotamian king is one of her more mutually beneficial pairings, although the benefits of the relationship are expressed in literature with considerable subtlety. The reciprocity of the loving connection between goddess and king, and its potential for the provision of mutual advantage, is a feature of numerous royal hymns. The goddess is presented promising to treat the king tenderly by decreeing a good fate for him, in return for his similarly gentle treatment of her on the bed they share in love-making (Šulgi *X*, ETCSL 2.4.2.24).

Both Ishtar and the king are enriched by their interaction. For the goddess, this enrichment takes the form of festivals, gifts, affection and intimacy with the king. These positive interactions result in the promotion of divine happiness. The goddess' heart fills with joy through her closeness to the king, and she is presented as especially enjoying the performance of song in Sumerian royal hymns. The evidence from Sumerian poetry featuring early kings is useful for illuminating the relationship between the goddess and monarch, yet this material is difficult to place in historical context, due to questions over the literature's production and consumption in antiquity. The bulk of these compositions are dated to the Old Babylonian period, and many of the rulers from the Ur III and Isin dynasties, such as King Shulgi, feature prominently. The texts consist of acclaim of early rulers and praise of Sumerian deities on their behalf, and it is unknown whether the Old Babylonian versions of these compositions reflect an even earlier tradition. It is in the royal poetry of this early period in Mesopotamian history that the strongest evidence for the uniquely close relationship between the king and the goddess may be found (Lapinkivi, 2004).

> Abundance and celebration are prepared before (Inanna) in plenty. He arranges a rich banquet for her . . . From the midst of heaven my lady looks down with joy.
>
> (*Iddin-Dagan* A, ETCSL 2.5.3.1)

> The good shepherd, the man of sweet songs, will loudly (?) sing songs for you; lady, with all the sweetest things, Inana, may he make your heart joyous!
>
> (*Išme-Dagan* J ETCSL 2.5.4.10)

Numerous benefits are encompassed in the divine union for the king, and through him, these benefits flow on to the people of the land. Perhaps most prominent among the gifts from the goddess are blessings of a good destiny, and 'life'. The connection between the deity's love and her gifts is clearly expressed in the royal poems of Babylonian kings:

> With overflowing heart, she . . . Inana blessed the king in words: 'Lord, your destiny is a good one, and will delight the beloved'.
>
> (*Samsu-Iluna* A, ETCSL 2.8.3.1)

> Many years of life for Ammiditana (the Babylonian king)
> Has Ishtar rendered to him as her gift.
>
> (*To Ishtar*, A.II.xii, Foster, 2005: 85)

Texts from a variety of periods frequently reference the capacity of the goddess to give the king 'life'; as well as the gift of abundant years (for example *Ur-Ninurta D*, ETCSL 2.5.6.4). 'Life' in this context also means vitality linked to sexual attraction, particularly phrased as the mutual bestowing of a 'life-giving look' between the goddess and ruler (*Šu-Suen C*, ETCSL 2.4.4.3). The goddess has the ability to 'grant life' (*Rīm-Sîn H*, ETCSL 2.6.9.8, *Inana G*, ETCSL 4.07.7), and wields the 'power of life' (*Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave*, ETCSL 1.8.2.1) as well as the 'light of life' (*Šu-Suen C*, ETCSL 2.4.4.3). The gift of life also carries the benefits of 'plenty' (*Ur-Ninurta* D, ETCSL 2.5.6.4) and well-being (*The Greatness of Ishtar*, III.43.b, Foster, 2005: 675).

The gift of a good destiny, either given by Ishtar, or by other deities on her behalf, is conceptually linked to the goddess' role in maintaining universal order and deciding fates. In the Neo-Assyrian period, Ishtar's protection of the king, and her concern for his 'life' are a dominant motif in oracles (Mack, 2011: 110–111). This aspect of the goddess' care for the king is also important in battle, where the deity holds the capacity to decide the outcomes of conflict in favour of her preferred combatant (Zsolnay, 2010).

Other benefits to the king involve the invocation of the protection and might of the goddess in battle (considered below), her assistance in his rulership, or 'shepherding' of the people (*Inana D*, ETCSL 4.07.4), and, importantly, her intercession on the king's behalf with other deities. The goddess also 'gives her strength' to the king (who is in the guise of Amaushumgalana – a form of Dumuzi) (*Inana E*, ETCSL 4.07.5), and in response he gives her 'radiance'. The various gifts given by Inanna to the king illustrate the uniqueness of their connection in the imagery of the goddess, when compared to her other close relationships.

It seems remarkable for a deity who, in many myths, usurps the powers of her fellow divinities, to share her power with a human individual. The goddess' love for the king is presented as the motivation behind her generosity towards him, yet, as we saw in Chapter 3, the goddess has deeply loving relationships with others, notably her brother Utu – but this does not mean she is necessarily willing to share with them. The potential identification of the king with Utu/Shamash is considered below.

As well as sharing love, the goddess and the king share religious and political responsibilities, duties which provide the most likely explanation of the uniquely reciprocal nature of their connection. In assisting the king with his 'shepherding', the goddess helps to carry the heavy burden of leadership. The use of imagery involving shepherding was a common metaphor for leadership in antiquity (Haubold, 2000: 17). Like the king, Ishtar is at times described as a 'shepherd', a term with associations of protection and loyalty. As in love poetry, the relationship between the king and Ishtar is expressed within a social context, involving other deities and the king's human

subjects. Divine favour and interest were critical for the survival of the human community, creating an emphasis on preserving and enhancing the bond between the king and the goddess. Of course, as well as providing religious benefits, Ishtar could also assist with the king's political 'life'. The king's uniquely close role to the gods in general, and Ishtar in particular, reinforced the reign of the monarch and their dynasty (Weeks, 2015: 108).

KINGSHIP AND THE GODS

The goddess is not the only deity of the pantheon to present the king with blessings involving destiny, life and kingship. For example, Ninlil, the divine consort of Enlil, decrees a good destiny and long life for the king through interceding with her husband (*Išme-Dagan A + V*, ETCSL 2.5.4.01). Enlil himself also bestows favourable destinies to rulers, as can be seen in the royal praise poetry of the Isin dynasty ruler, Ishme-Dagan:

> Enlil, great in heaven, surpassing on earth, exceptional and wide-reaching in Sumer, Nunamnir, lord of princes, king of kings! He determined a good destiny in the holy city for me, Ishme-Dagan, son of Dagan.
>
> (*Išme-Dagan A + V*, ETCSL 2.5.4.01)

Similarly, the goddess is not alone in the pantheon in receiving gifts from the king, such as offerings and festivals to nurture divine joy. The complexity of the relationship between Ishtar and the king is articulated in literature through the use of numerous motifs, such as the altering of fates, and the use of maternal imagery to express the closeness of the connection. These motifs, associated with affectionate divine/human bonds and common benefits, can be seen in numerous compositions between rulers and a variety of deities. The mutually experienced outcomes of the relationship, such as joy, blessings and emotional intimacy, are established tropes in the broader scheme of the literary representation of divine/human relations.

DISTINCTIVENESS

While noting that there are certainly common themes to the interactions between monarchs and deities in Mesopotamia, there remains a distinctive quality to the relationship between Ishtar and the king – especially on the goddess' side. Despite its contextual placement within all of the divine/human interactions noted previously, the relationship with Ishtar should not be considered as a typical pairing of monarch and deity. It is important to note that the romantic and sexual relationship between Inanna and the king, and the usage of symbolic imagery involving her mythical courtship with Dumuzi, gives a distinctive quality to Ishtar/Inanna's interaction with the monarch. Further adding to the personal quality of the bond is the frequent use of allusions to mythopoeic representations of the goddess in royal hymns and praises, such as her destruction of mountains, and her more distinctive individual qualities.

The connection with the king gives manifestation to a wide range of the goddess' competencies, perhaps more than any other relationship. Through her bond with the king, Ishtar's identifications as a goddess of love, storm deity, warrior, healer, divine judge, mother and astral body all find expression.

DUMUZI

Intertextual connections are seen in the use of imagery between different compositional works involving the goddess' love life. Imagery of the Dumuzi–Inanna courtship is integral to defining the relationship between the goddess and king, and allusions to royalty and its associated responsibilities and blessings are referenced in the Inanna–Dumuzi love poetry. The two 'genres' show considerable overlap, across several interpretive levels.

The Inanna–Dumuzi love poetry shares a great deal of thematic territory with royal hymns and epics; these include the prevalence of gifts to the goddess, abundances of plants, animals and wealth, sexuality, intimacy and shepherding. Like Dumuzi, the king's relationship with the goddess involves the significant cachet of bringing him closer to her divine family, with all the associated prestige and benefits entailed through this bond. In light of the identification of the Mesopotamian king with Dumuzi (see Scurlock, 2013 for detailed analysis), the similarity in imagery between love poetry and royal hymns of praise to the goddess is perhaps to be expected. The excerpt from a royal hymn below, featuring the Ur III ruler, Shulgi, presents a courtship scene with close parallels to the love poetry between Inanna and Dumuzi considered in Chapter 1.

> (Inanna speaks:) Speak to my mother and I will give myself to you; speak to my father and he will make a gift of me . . . I know how to bring heart's delight to your heart –sleep, lad, in our house till morning. Since you have fallen in love with me, lad, if only you would do your sweet thing to me.
>
> (Šu-Suen B, ETCSL 2.4.4.2)

Love poetry, however, generally gives greater emphasis to the image of the goddess as a young woman on the verge of marriage, while royal hymns, praise poems and epics incorporate her wide range of competencies more broadly. This subtle difference in focus may result from the more mixed nature of the compositions involving the Mesopotamian king and the goddess, and the influence of different genres. Yet, even with these issues in mind, the goddess' relationship with her human spouse shows greater thematic variety than the portrayal of the goddess with her divine lover, and allows for the fuller expression of fundamental aspects of her image, such as her identification as a warrior deity.

The closeness and importance of the relationship between monarch and goddess is expressed using a variety of literary tropes, with the overall effect of emphasising the depth, breadth and significance of the relationship. The multiple motifs used to illustrate the link between Ishtar and kings articulate their bond in different ways.

STORMS AND BATTLE

Inanna/Ishtar is a rain goddess (Abusch, 1999: 453), and in the same tradition of many other deities associated with storms, she is a war goddess, personifying the battlefield. The similarity of the loud noise and accompanying vibrational resonance between an ancient chariot of war and the rumble of thunder has been noted by several scholars. The power of thunder and lightning in antiquity was considered one of the most potent natural forces, perhaps well exemplified in the role of Zeus as the head of the Greek pantheon. A crack of lightning, in an instant, can turn night into day and then disappear just as quickly, a quality that suits the transgressive capacity of Ishtar (see the reference to dark turning into light and its reverse in the excerpt from *Išme-Dagan* K, ETCSL 2.5.4.11 below).

The rain associated with storms is necessary for the growth of vegetation – but storms can be powerfully destructive as well as bringing abundance, through the causation of damaging winds, floods and fires. The combination of destructive and expansive power, seen in the natural power of storms, is also present in the field of battle. The chaotic force of warfare creates a new reality in its wake, but the outcomes can be vastly different depending on which combatants prevail in the conflict. In this area of battle, the goddess has a special area of competence.

In her role of decreeing destinies, Ishtar was able to decide which side of a conflict would prevail in battle. As well as deciding on the victor, she was accredited with the power to cause the destruction of the side not blessed with her favour. This expression of the goddess' military power is found in the Babylonian law code, the *Code of Hammurabi* (dated to the eighteenth century BCE), where the goddess is entreated to confuse and destroy enemy warriors, and to turn good into evil for the king's opponent. As well as being able to strengthen the king she loved, Assyrian royal inscriptions credit the deity with the power to weaken enemy rulers and make them ineffectual – an ability that played a decisive role in the outcome of battle (Zsolnay, 2010).

Despite the capriciousness and unpredictability of warfare, battle requires the establishment and reestablishment of order, both in the midst of a conflict, and in its aftermath. The goddess was invoked to assist the king to exercise sovereignty over rebellious lands (*To Ishtar of Nineveh and Arbela*, IV.c, Foster, 2005: 819). The cyclical nature of storms is also present in warfare, as battle in the Ancient Near East was a seasonal activity.

Warfare, like sex, is an activity common to mortals and the divine. Mesopotamian deities participated in battle during human conflicts. The relationships between Mesopotamian gods were generally harmonious, although with some exceptions. The famous Babylonian creation account, *Enuma Elish*, involves an intense battle between a number of divinities, with the mother goddess Tiamat presented as a kind of 'monster' to be slain. In *Enuma Elish*, it is through the killing of Tiamat that Marduk, the head of the Babylonian pantheon, is able to ascend to kingship over the other gods. From Tiamat's body, Marduk creates the heavens and the earth, and he provides structure and order to the pantheon. In this way, *Enuma Elish* shows a focus on structure, order and division that is a common feature of many Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts.

Enuma Elish, with its battle between deities, is unusual in several respects. Foster has noted in particular that it is the only example from Mesopotamian literature where a hero-god slays a female antagonist (2012: 21); the narrative also lacks the shaping role of the mother goddess in the creation of humans seen in the Babylonian Flood narrative *Atrahasis*. However, in both *Atrahasis* and *Enuma Elish*, the benefits to the deities of creating humanity are presented as coming at the cost of a divine life. The myths show the manner in which destruction and creation, as well as warfare and kingship, can be presented as tightly connected to one another. Foster has compared the violent gender warfare between Marduk and Tiamat with the contests between Ishtar and Ea in a number of myths (2012: 22), noting that the competition between Ishtar and Ea remains non-violent (although not entirely free from monsters, as can be seen in the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Enki*). The violent 'battle of the sexes' in *Enuma Elish* creates a strong contrast with the literary contests between Inanna and Enki, which frequently involve a battle of wits, verbal jousting, or the use of threats and emotional blackmail from the goddess. While doubtlessly unique, the close emotional bonds between Inanna and Enki can be considered as a more typical depiction of relationships between Mesopotamian deities – who are frequently presented working together – than the violent clash of divinities in *Enuma Elish*.

Territorial expansion was a common product of human warfare. Cities were considered to house sacred as well as political powers, so the conquest of new territories contained a strong element of religiosity. Cities throughout Mesopotamian history were home to various deities, in a reciprocally connected relationship between urban and divine forces. Each city was home to a particular deity, and every prominent deity of the Mesopotamian pantheon was also a citadel deity. Cities and deities were so closely wedded in Mesopotamian thought that the decline of a city was viewed in religious, rather than political or military terms, and believed to be related to the town's 'abandonment by the patron deity' (Van de Mieroop, 1997: 47). The absence of a deity was disastrous for the life of a city, and could prove fatal for the king as well.

The composition *The Death of Ur-Namma* (ETCSL 2.4.1.1) details the premature demise of one of Sumer's great early kings. Ur-Nammu is known for his great building works, the legal text, *The Code of Ur-Nammu*, and also for being the founding ruler of the Ur III dynasty. Although death was unavoidable for the human kings of Mesopotamia, and important in delineating them from immortal deities, an early death 'before one's time' could be viewed as a sign of divine displeasure (Potts, 1997: 220). The composers of the text of Ur-Nammu clearly present the goddess as being away from the city while the king receives ill treatment from the other deities:

> While I was so treated, foremost Inana, the warlike lady, was not present at my verdict. Enlil had sent her as a messenger to all the foreign lands concerning very important matters.

Upon returning to the city and discovering Ur-Nammu's fate, Inanna becomes greatly distressed. In an intriguing reversal of her shepherding role, she first expresses her anger and grief for the king's fate by smashing sheepfolds and cattle pens. The goddess then appears to grant blessings to the king (Böck, 2004: 30). The bestowal of blessings seems to counter the unhappy events that have happened in her absence; the return

Figure 4.1 Brick of King Ur-Nammu, with cuneiform inscription. Courtesy of LACMA: http://collections.lacma.org/node/244451. Gift of Robert Blaugrund, Art of the Ancient Near East.

of the goddess means an improvement in circumstances for the monarch (despite his death) (Kramer, 1967: 112).

Inanna personified the military prowess of her home city of Uruk, and her reach on the battlefield was extensive, stretching even into the heavens. The most common epithet for Inanna given by Sumerian kings was *nin-kur-kur-ra* ('Mistress of (all) the lands'), referencing her authoritarian power on earth, but also *nu-gig(-an-na)*, a term thought to signify her dominion in the astral realm (Westenholz, 2009: 336).

The deity's association with combat was once considered in academic circles to be a later development, originating with Semitic Ishtar; this view has continued to be put forward despite strong evidence to the contrary. It must be noted, then, that the aspect of warrior deity is undoubtedly part of the representation and identity of Sumerian Inanna. Inanna's capacity for combat is represented in several of her myths, such as *A Mythic Narrative about Inanna*, where she storms the heavens inhabited by An, and the myth of *Inanna and Ebih*, where the goddess battles and annihilates a powerful mountain. At the conclusion of her attack, she gives a speech describing her abilities in conflict, and its connection to kingship:

> You have placed me (Inanna) at the right hand of the king in order to destroy rebel lands: may he, with my aid, smash heads like a falcon in the foothills of the mountain, King An.
>
> (*Inanna and Ebiḫ*, ETCSL 1.3.2)

In these two myths, the goddess battles supernatural creatures in the astral realm, and then challenges the might of the natural world on earth – with both conflicts resulting in her victory. Despite the varied locations and adversaries, the conquests add to the goddess' status and dominion. As well as being a part of Inanna's mythical representation, Old Sumerian personal names pay homage to the goddess' martial nature. Personal names such as *Inanna-ur-sag*, meaning 'Inanna is a warrior', reference the deity's skill in battle (Westenholz, 2009: 336), and Sumerian hymns praising Inanna describe her terrifying fury, and her capacity to destroy enemy cities.

The field of battle is a fitting arena for the display of Ishtar's drive and lust: in this case, her bloodlust. The goddess' involvement in war shows her in terrifying splendour, where she glories in conquest and violence. The warrior aspect of Ishtar's image, as previously noted, is an essential part of her character. Ishtar's identification as a warrior deity can be seen in the *Tukulti-Ninurta Epic*, which describes the battle between the Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I, against the Kassites, led by the Babylonian king, Kashtiliash. The *Epic* describes the various Assyrian deities, including Adad and Ninurta, fighting on behalf of Tukulti-Ninurta's army, with the Assyrian warriors praising the goddess in battle, and asking for her protection. Ishtar's actions in the conflict are described in some detail: she is said to flail her 'jump rope' and throw the enemies into confusion. Machinist has noted the literary complexity of this work, with its use of language and imagery reflecting Mesopotamian epic, combined with stylistic features of royal inscriptions and historical treaties (1976).

Ishtar in her warlike aspect is also seen in numerous artistic representations of the goddess. She is often presented carrying a diverse array of weapons and is sometimes shown leading manacled prisoners of war. Frequently she carries a quiver on her back, and at other times she holds a club in her hand. Although at times she is accompanied by the king in visual sources, it is the power and divine status of the goddess which is most clearly emphasised, through devices such as placing the goddess on raised platforms or thrones, and showing her in elaborate clothing. Even the goddess' posture demonstrates her elevated importance; in depictions of the warrior Ishtar during the Akkadian period, she is generally shown frontally, an artistic device that enhances the power and authority of her presentation in battle (Hansen, 2002: 99).

At other times, works of art may emphasise the special closeness between the king and the warrior goddess, as can be seen in an Akkadian plaque of unknown provenance, which depicts Ishtar in her warrior aspect, alongside the king Naram-Sin (grandson of Sargon). The scene from the limestone plaque shows the king and goddess on a raised platform, and Ishtar is holding the lead to nose-ropes connected to four prisoners. The king wears a horned crown but is partially unclothed, perhaps suggesting his sexual closeness to the goddess. Hansen (2002: 99) observes the closeness between the king and deity, noting that the king is presented as Ishtar's consort; it is only through her assistance that he is able to achieve victory for the empire. The 'world view' of the artistic scenes involving Naram-Sin and Ishtar present a universe that is 'organised, ordered and maintained' by the king, not only through his own heroism, but also through the power of Ishtar's love (Hansen, 2002: 104).

Cylinder seals showing Ishtar alongside kings from the Old Babylonian period also highlight the intimate relationship between the pair. The goddess is shown sharing in

Figure 4.2 Akkadian-period seal impression of armed Ishtar. Oriental Institute A27903. The goddess is depicted frontally in her warlike aspect. The multi-tiered, fringed robe of the goddess is a signifier of divinity. Weapons are visible behind each of the goddess' shoulders, and she holds a further weapon in her left hand. Drawn by/image by Paul Butler.

the king's victories, and he fights on her behalf, with the connection further emphasised through depictions of the deity touching the king's shoulder (Ornan, 2014: 582–583). Statues of lions, the goddess' sacred animal, are symbolically linked to the king's protection, and his martial success over rivals. Inscriptions from the Ishtar temple at Mari describe the functions of a pair of metal lions, erected for the temple by the Assyrian king, Shamshi-Adad. The lions are named 'the one who strangles the enemy of Shamshi-Adad by the command of Ishtar', and 'the one who drinks the blood of the enemy of Shamshi-Adad by the command of Ishtar' (Braun-Holzinger, 1999: 156–157).

Returning to literature, Inanna is described receiving praise for her effectiveness in battle by the Mesopotamian king, as well as his warriors. In the royal praise poem for the king Ishme-Dagan, from the First dynasty of Isin, we see the stormy aspect of the goddess referenced, as well as her bloodthirstiness, and the wide scope of her power.

> Holy Inana was endowed by Enlil and Ninlil with the capacity to make the heavens shake, to make the earth tremble, to hold the four directions in her hand and to act grandly as their lady, to shout with wide open mouth in battle . . . to make the earth drink the blood of enemies like water and to pile up their bodies . . . and to turn light to darkness and darkness to light. They made her without rival in heaven and on earth.
>
> (*Išme-Dagan* K, ETCSL 2.5.4.11)

Battle is presented as mutually beneficial for Ishtar and the king, further illustrating the reciprocal nature of their relationship. The goddess expresses to the king her desire for him to go to war; she encourages him not to leave her axe and weapon in a corner, unused (*Naram-Sin, King of Eshnunna*, II.9, 124).

The king's desire for protection and mercy from the goddess is significant in light of the consideration of the nature of the relationship between the pair. Ishtar's association with the king, when in battle, has a strong maternal element.

ISHTAR AS MOTHER

We have seen that the role of motherhood is one of the less frequently attested female roles associated with the goddess Ishtar in literary texts – perhaps surprising given the importance of this role for everyday Mesopotamian women. Goddesses are often seen as 'godwomen', whose concerns reflect those of the people who venerated them (Frymer-Kensky, 1992: 14–31). Although not dominant in her image, Ishtar's two sons, Lulal and Shara, are shown inhabiting roles close to the goddess. Lulal stands by his mother in battle (seen in *Inana D*, ETCSL 4.07.4), and shows similar loyal behaviour towards the goddess in *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, (ETCSL 1.4.1), while Shara has a role in allotting her divine powers (*The Temple Hymns*, ETCSL 4.80.1).

While at times overshadowed by her other qualities, Ishtar's maternal aspect is a significant element of her identity. Ishtar's maternal role is closely related to her primary identification as a goddess of love, particularly in terms of the familial and protective sides of love (Foster, 2015: 138). The connection between the goddess and maternal, protective love can be seen in the tradition of name-giving. The use of theophoric names has a long tradition in ancient Mesopotamia, through which emphasis was given to a small number of deities and their powers, status or valour, within the individual's personal name (Foster, 2009: 164). Roberts' detailed analysis of personal names involving divinities in ancient Mesopotamia has shown that Ishtar was among the most commonly employed names among the Old Semitic pantheon – a finding that Roberts relates to having a high level of religious importance, perhaps particularly due to her astral connection (1972: 57). Personal names from the Presargonic and Sargonic periods show the goddess' connection to family and protective love, in names such as 'Ishtar-is-My-Mother', 'Ishtar-is-a-Warrior', 'Ishtar-is-Protection', and 'Ishtar-is-my-Clan' (Roberts, 1972: 37–38). This means that these aspects were present – and indeed, prominent – in the image of the goddess at an early stage.

Although Ishtar's maternal role is referenced in numerous literary sources (for example, the praise composition, 'To Ishtar', II.i, Foster, 2005: 85), it is most clearly articulated in relation to kingship, as can be seen in a hymn of praise from the great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal:

> The Lady-of-Nineveh, the mother who bore me,
> Has given (me) an unrivalled kingship.
>
> (*To Ishtar of Nineveh and Arbela*, IV.c, Foster, 2005: 821)

The role of the mother had strong associations in ancient Mesopotamia with intimacy and, especially, protection. Assyrian queens were linked to scorpion imagery in iconography. The connection is thought to be due to the animal's reputation as a defensive mother, known to protectively carry her babies on her back (although one

must be aware that the scorpion mother at times eats her young). Ishtar is frequently described as the protective deity of the king. Harris notes that at the same time as repeatedly stressing the goddess' love for battle, blood and carnage, her deep and maternal love for the Mesopotamian kings is also emphasised (1991: 269–270). This protective, nurturing love is not always presented as specifically involving the goddess as the king's biological mother. Instead, a variety of caring maternal archetypes are employed, as in the prayer of the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon:

> I am Ishtar . . . I give long days and eternal years to Esarhaddon, my king . . . I am your great midwife, I your good wet nurse.
>
> (*Esarhaddon and Ishtar of Arbela*, IV.3, 814)

Ishtar's maternal love for the Mesopotamian king is at times elucidated with physical imagery. This physical symbolism contrasts with the imagery of the royal hymns, where the goddess and the king are sexually intimate and presented in a marital relationship, and the physicality of the goddess' holy lap and thighs are clearly emphasised.

> In order to find sweetness in the bed on the joyous coverlet, my lady bathes her holy thighs. She bathes them for the thighs of the king . . . After the lady has made him rejoice with her holy thighs on the bed, after holy Inana has made him rejoice with her holy thighs on the bed, she relaxes (?) with him on her bed: 'Iddin-Dagan, you are indeed my beloved!'
>
> (*Iddin-Dagan* A, ETCSL 2.5.3.1)

When protecting the king in battle, the goddess' thighs are less of a literary concern; instead, she uses her arm to hold the king kindly 'like a child' (Harris, 1991: 270) and embraces and protects his whole form in her loving bosom. The breasts of the goddess, with their maternal import, are thematically linked to the protection and support of the king, particularly in battle, as shown in the praise poetry of Shulgi, of the Ur III Dynasty.

> 'In battle I (Inanna) will be the one who goes before you. In combat I will carry your weapon like a personal attendant . . . You are worthy to delight yourself on my holy breast like a pure calf. May your love be lasting!' . . . Thus Inana treated him tenderly.
>
> (*Shulgi* X, ETCSL 2.4.2.24)

The difference between the emphases on the goddess' body parts demonstrates how closely the image of her physical form, and in particular her biologically feminine physical aspects, relates in literature to her bond with the king and her own expressions of power and love.

While perplexing for a modern audience, Ishtar's combined role of mother and spouse to the king expresses the intimacy and multi-layered nature of the relationship. In the ancient literary sources, such as royal hymns, the goddess' two roles are at times referenced within a couple of lines, suggesting the two roles caused no confusion in the ancient world.

> May my spouse (Inanna), a ewe cherishing its lamb, be praised with sweet admiration!
>
> (*Ishme-Dagan* J, ETCSL 2.5.4.10)

The imagery of ewes and lambs in Mesopotamian literature was used to express gentle love and affectionate ties, with a maternal focus, as seen in a Sumerian hymn to Ninshubur.

> As if you were a fecund ewe caring for its lambs, a fecund goat caring for its kids, or a fertile bearing mother caring for her children, through your powers folds are erected and pens are fenced off.
>
> (*Ninšubur* A, ETCSL 4.25.1)

The usage of a variety of maternal imagery in literary compositions expresses the closeness of the bond between goddess and king, but especially emphasises its protective quality. For this reason, Ishtar's maternal bond with the king can be seen to unite her primary competencies of love and war, with her affection for the king directly assuring his success and safety in battle.

WIFE, MOTHER AND SISTER

While we have seen that the Mesopotamian kings were associated with the shepherd deity, Dumuzi, kings were also identified with Shamash (Sumerian Utu), the sun god who also has links to shepherding (see Charpin, 2013 for a close analysis of the connection between the monarch and the solar deity). A king's role in assisting with the establishment of justice perhaps makes his identification with Shamash unsurprising, yet it does add a further layer of complexity to the already crowded group of roles relating Ishtar to royalty. The king's identification with Dumuzi demonstrates that, when taking on a divine role, he may also adopt the deity's relational statuses with other gods; for example, as Dumuzi he is the husband of the king and brother-in-law of Shamash. If the king is, at times, identified with Shamash, how does this affect his relationship with Shamash's twin, Ishtar?

Imagery involving a sibling connection between Ishtar and Shamash is a less prominent feature of texts linking the king to the goddess; it is the goddess' spousal and maternal role which is most clearly emphasised. Of course, the use of imagery involving a motherly or wifely role for the goddess may be more conspicuous than a sisterly connection, due to the author's choice of imagery. While symbolism involving nursing or sexual contact can be analogously connected to particular family roles, the presence of imagery used to express a sibling bond may be more difficult to distinguish among the various literary tropes articulating the closeness of king and deity.

Woods has compellingly argued that the kings of Uruk and Ur were identified with Inanna's twin, Utu, as well as Dumuzi, so that the king's relationship to Inanna would be doubly affirmed (2012). The sun-god's identification with the king provides a 'mirror reality' to the dynasty's relationship with Inanna through Dumuzi (2012: 84). Woods' analysis provides a coherent explanation for the blurring of imagery and roles

related to Dumuzi and Utu centred on kingship. Through the king's identification with Inanna's brother and her lover, the crucial importance of the monarch's connection to the goddess is highlighted, along with the beneficial nature of divine kinship ties – through a multiplicity of bonds.

INANNA/ISHTAR AS VENUS

In the introductory lines of a praise poem for the Isin dynasty king, Iddin-Dagan, the astral qualities of the goddess receive close attention:

> I shall greet her who ascends above, her who ascends above, I shall greet the Mistress who ascends above, I shall greet the great lady of heaven, Inana! I shall greet the holy torch who fills the heavens, the light, Inana, her who shines like daylight, the great lady of heaven, Inana!
>
> (*Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1)

Inanna/Ishtar was worshipped in antiquity as the planet Venus, the morning and evening star (Beaulieu, 2003: 21). In iconography, she is represented as an eight-pointed star (Seidl, 1976–1980: 87) and her identification as this heavenly body is referenced in Iddin-Dagan's sacred marriage hymn (Reisman, 1973: 189). *Inanna-hud* (Inanna of the morning) and *Inanna-sig* (Inanna of the evening) are two known forms of the goddess to receive offerings (Westenholz, 2009: 335). The knowledge of these two forms of the goddess have made scholars more certain of the connection between Inanna and Venus, as for a time some considered this link to be a modern approximation, borrowed from Aphrodite. Rather than being a Greek tradition included into the goddess' image at a later stage, the astrological perception of Venus' exaltation had its origins in Mesopotamia (Parker, 1974: 52). Indeed, the veneration of Inanna as Venus began as early as the fourth millennium BCE. For Westenholz, the dualistic astral dimension of the planet Venus seems likely to have influenced the goddess' dimorphic characterisation in myth, known for spanning the extremes of behaviour (2009: 335–6).

The astral aspect of the goddess is given emphasis in the poetry of Enheduanna. The goddess is described bringing forth 'beaming rays', 'wearing daylight and brilliance' and coming forth at dusk (*Inanna and Ebiḫ*, ETCSL 1.3.2). She is 'the great lady of the horizon and the zenith of the heavens', who exudes delight 'like the light of the rising moon' (*Inana B*, 4.07.2). Inanna's identification with a heavenly body is used by the poet to illustrate her beauty, power and radiance, all of which have a superlative quality well suited to the transcendence connected with a divine being. At the same time, the goddess' astral identity powerfully demonstrates the timeless quality of her family relationships, particularly in her relationships with the moon and sun gods:

> Your divinity shines in the pure heavens like Nanna or Utu. Your torch lights up the heavens, turning darkness into light . . . Your numerous people pass before you, as before Utu, for their inspection.
>
> (*Inana C*, 4.07.3)

Figure 4.3 Line drawing of engraved shell, thought to be depicting the goddess Ishtar. The figure wears a horned crown with an emblem of the eight-pointed Venus star. Ca. 2,500–2,400 BCE, Mari. Drawing by Kerry Pryke.

Kinship ties, reflected in the imagery of the goddess' astral aspect, make the heavenly quality of the goddess well suited for poetry relating to marriage. The emphasis on the heavenly aspect of the goddess in sacred marriage literature is important for considerations of the meaning of these texts. Both Ishtar and the Mesopotamian king held critical roles in maintaining universal order, and it is likely that the union of goddess and monarch, believed to have been annually celebrated and re-established, played a role in protecting cosmic order. Further, with the strong celestial associations of the king's divine spouse and his family-in-law, the king would be connected to the fabric of the cosmos in a unique and intimate way.

The obscurity of the sacred marriage makes the sure knowledge of its purpose somewhat unlikely; however, the similar elements of sacred marriage texts with the Sumerian love poetry of Inanna and Dumuzi suggests some similarity of purpose. While Lapinkivi (2004) is right to propose several purposes for the genre, if in Sumerian love poetry the audience gains an intimacy with the goddess, then enhanced intimacy is a likely goal associated with sacred marriage texts for the king. As the Mesopotamian king was the pinnacle of humanity, his role in the love scenes between Inanna and Dumuzi goes

beyond the experience of the wider audience; instead of engaging with the young lovers as an observer, the king takes on the central role of one of the union's participants.

ISHTAR AS WIFE

There are few areas of Ishtar's image which have caused such scholarly consternation as her links to the Mesopotamian concept of sacred marriage (often noted in scholarship borrowing the Greek term '*hieros gamos*'), particularly in terms of a possible ritual element to this concept. In the Mesopotamian context, the term 'sacred marriage ritual' is intended to refer to the ritual enactment of the marriage of two deities, or between a human and a deity. Ishtar is not the only Mesopotamian deity to engage in a sacred marriage; the deities Ba'u, a healing goddess, and the city god Ningirsu (identified with Ninurta) are thought to have celebrated a sacred union at the ancient city of Lagash in the Classical period (Cooper, 1993: 84). In this chapter, the 'sacred marriage' in question is the union between a Mesopotamian king, and Ishtar/Inanna, or one of her hypostases (such as Nanaya). The king is either referred to by his proper name in sacred marriage texts, or identified as the shepherd god Dumuzi (at times called Amaushumgalana), Inanna's lover from Sumerian sexual lyric (Lapinkivi, 2004: 1).

In the not-so-distant past of scholarship on the sacred marriage tradition connecting Ishtar and the Mesopotamian ruler, it was a more or less established fact in the minds of scholars that the divine union involved the physical enactment of the rite through copulation between the king, and a priestess representing the bodily presence of the goddess. Largely due to the influence of Lapinkivi, scholars are now much less certain as to the historicity of this ritualised physical consummation of the marriage, if indeed there was a physical enactment involved in the union at all. It is the literary nature of the evidence for sacred marriage which makes difficult work of ascertaining whether the marriage, at any stage in its history, involved an associated ritual that was physically acted out.

SACRED MARRIAGE AND RITUAL?

Much ink has been spilled over the question of whether the sacred marriage genre of texts was associated with a connected physical ritual, with emphasis on whether this supposed ritual may have involved sex between the king and another person (such as a priestess), whose role was to embody the goddess (for an extensive overview of this issue with detailed bibliography see Lapinkivi, 2008). Generally, the term 'ritual' can be understood as referring to physical acts with symbolic, often religious, meanings. In this book, the very broad definition of a ritual as a ceremonial action with symbolic religious significance is used (Porter, 2005: 5–6). While strong arguments have been made on both sides of the issue, there is not sufficient evidence available to ascertain in a definitive manner whether the literary references to sex in the sacred marriage texts relate to a ritual tryst between the king and a partner, carried out in tandem with the symbolic marriage (for an appraisal of this issue, see Cooper, 2013).

In light of the lack of evidence, the predominant view among scholars now is that if indeed there were a physical enactment of a sacred marriage ritual, it would have been conducted on a symbolic level rather than a carnal one. Despite the ambiguity, the sacred marriage literature should be viewed as containing an emphatically sexual component. The texts accentuate the sexuality and intimate connection of both partners in the union. It is the capacity of the marriage with the king to inform the goddess' characterisation that is the interest in this chapter, rather than questions of historicity surrounding the sex that the texts describe.

MARRIAGE IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

Evidence for the symbolic union between Ishtar/Inanna and Mesopotamian kings is associated with very early periods, with the literary evidence for the marriage occurring between the Early Dynastic and Old Babylonian periods. The societal institution of marriage is fraught with rich symbolic overtones. During sexual intercourse, two individuals transgress their physical limits to become one, creating an intimate connection. Similarly, in the institution of marriage, two separate identities become legally and symbolically connected; in the eyes of society, they have become a single unit. The bonds of marriage, once ritually enacted, can only be escaped through death or further symbolic ritual; while sexual unions are, by nature, temporally limited, the passage of time has no effect on the legitimacy and recognition of the marital union.

In both the ancient and modern world, marriage is closely aligned with status; it is a ritual in which social status can be rapidly gained or lost, and one of many possible '*rites de passage*' that underscore the transitioning of an individual through life events (Roth, 1987: 716). Changes in social standing relating to marital unions are not limited to the individual couple forming the original partnership; instead, the loss or gain of status can be further transferred onto any resulting progeny of the union, and also to extended family members.

For the purpose of contextualisation, it is perhaps useful to briefly explore the concept of marriage more generally in Ancient Near Eastern thought and culture. Although we have considered the divine marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi in Chapter 1, we have not considered what the institution entailed for mortal Mesopotamians.

Family was the basic social unit structuring Mesopotamian life. Although our knowledge is limited, it is clear that in Mesopotamian society, marriage was the socially accepted practice for the production of progeny, and also functioned in the provision of emotionally satisfying relationships (Leick, 2008: 130). As ancient Mesopotamia was a patriarchal society, marriage was a male-dominated practice; marriages were negotiated by the guardians or eldest brother of the couple (Greengus, 1969: 512, 520; Mathews, 2003: 7). The female partner in the marriage was often younger than the male (Roth, 1987), and marriages were widely arranged (Stol, 1995: 125). Although Mesopotamia was a male-dominated society, women held a relatively high legal status, and could own and dispose of property, engage in economic trade and perform as witnesses (Kramer, 2007: 312).

Marriage in the Ancient Near East was a cultural institution which existed within defined legal boundaries. Most knowledge of Mesopotamian matrimonial practices

comes from written evidence taken from marriage contracts, or from ancient law codes. This creates problems for the understanding of marriage in the Ancient Near East, as these sources were not intended to elucidate the nature of marriage, more to define its structure within Mesopotamian society – something that changed over time. Stol notes that written marriage contracts would have been unusual in antiquity, where most marital arrangements were transacted through oral means (1995: 125). Indeed, it would appear that written contracts were commonly associated with exceptional or legally complex unions rather than 'normal' marriages (Greengus, 1969: 513–4). Thus marital agreements did not have to be written to be considered binding, and the Sumerian marriage contract was legally recognised as soon as the groom presented the bride's father with a bridal gift (Kramer, 1997: 312). It seems likely that the marital process involved the recitation of vows by both the bride and groom (Greengus, 1969: 505, 515).

MARITAL STATUS

Status was a prime concern in marital unions, with the arranger of the marriage having to consider social parity, economic benefits and the expansion of kinship ties when organising a match (Mathews, 2003: 7). Marriage presented a significant opportunity for the involved parties and their families to produce legitimate heirs who might inherit property and other family assets, but also functioned to consolidate social ties and economic relations (Mathews, 2003: 7). Westbrook (while focusing on evidence from the Old Babylonian period), has compellingly argued that marriage was conceptualised in terms of a change of status rather than a legal contract, with the contractual side of the union completed at the betrothal (Westbrook, 1988). Westbrook draws parallels with the change in status of adopted children, who first legally dissolve a prior (in both cases, parental) relationship, before entering into a new legal arrangement defined in terms of a change in status. A further distinction is drawn by Westbrook between the formation of a marriage and its consummation, noting a marriage could be viewed as legally complete without having been consummated. This view, however, is not universally accepted, with consummation considered in some scholarly circles as having functioned as the final seal on the marital union, either through the physical act of sex or through representative symbolism (Malul, 1991: 281). Scurlock, in her analysis of rape and adultery in the Ancient Near East, provides the example of the woman who can divorce a man who has not consummated their marriage, and who may receive the return of her *sheriktu* or dowry (2003: 78). This example demonstrates that marriage, at least in some cases for which we have historical evidence, could be legally binding without consummation – even if the financial consequences for this lack of consummation for the male partner could be significant.

Gadotti has demonstrated that Sumerian literature is an important tool for understanding the historical role and function of women in society (2011). When considering the divine experience of marital unions in particular, Vanstiphout has sensibly pointed out the numerous similarities between the divine 'marriage machine' and historical courtship between mortals, while also noting the limits of our understanding for

where the similarities between the divine and mortal experiences may begin and end (1987: 175–177). This point has been further illustrated by Scurlock, who shows evidence of a complex combination of realistic and fantastical elements in the myth of *Enlil and Ninlil* (2003: 60–103).

From the above survey of marital customs in Mesopotamia, mortal unions can be viewed as holding several aspects in common with the divine marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi, depicted in Sumerian love poetry. The involvement of Inanna's parents and brother seems to reflect general societal marital customs (Roth, 1987: 724). The substantial emphasis on status and gift-giving (or receiving, in Inanna's case) can be observed in the Sumerian love poetry of Inanna and Dumuzi, as well as in the historical evidence of everyday marital unions in Mesopotamia. Even the goddess' active role in the arrangement of her own marriage (such as her choice of husband) is not unprecedented in historical sources; in some exceptional cases from the Neo-Babylonian period, women were involved in contracting their own marriages (Roth, 1989: 5). Despite these parallels, the focus on sexual pleasure in Sumerian love poetry, particularly from the female perspective, seems to be much less prominent in the sources on everyday Mesopotamian marriages, but of course, the legal context of much of our evidence makes this unsurprising.

The lack of emphasis on sexual enjoyment and intimacy is unlikely to reflect a general lack of interest in this area of marriage – despite many areas of patriarchal privilege in ancient Mesopotamia, both genders were entitled to the enjoyment of sexual pleasure (Bottéro, 2004: 95). As Bottéro notes (2004: 95), the woman, in love, was the man's true equal, and his genuine 'partner'. This 'equality' in the field of love, noted by Bottéro, is intriguing when considered in light of the question among scholars of Inanna/Ishtar's continuing influence, despite the apparent decline in authority of other goddesses (see Frymer-Kensky, 1992).

THE DIVINE IN-LAWS

Marriage, as we have seen, can involve changes for the families and communities of the involved parties. Community provides an important context for a marital union. The interconnectedness of community, resulting from a marital union, is a frequently referenced motif in the relationship between the goddess and the king. In Chapter 3, it was observed that Ishtar uses her close connections to the rest of the pantheon to increase her own sphere of influence and her power. These relationships were fairly one-sided, with Ishtar inhabiting the role of beneficiary, and the other deities her divine benefactors.

Through his relationship with Ishtar, the king accessed greater intimacy with the rest of the pantheon, further demonstrating the distinctive reciprocity of their relationship. It is the increased closeness of the king with the goddess' family that is emphasised, with less of a focus on her relationship with his family; whether in terms of his identification with Dumuzi and his family, or the king's mortal relatives.

The goddess is presented as accessing the support, blessings and goodwill of other deities on behalf of the king in numerous texts from a variety of genres, such as Sumerian royal hymns.

> (Inanna speaks:) 'Great An, your commands are great indeed: who can revoke them? Father Enlil, no one knows how to dissipate the great destinies that you determine. Both of you, bestow permanently the role of shepherd of living beings, of the numerous people, upon Ur-Ninurta, the youth who knows how to carry out your orders'.
>
> (*Ur-Ninurta* A, ETCSL 2.5.6.1)

She also assists the king in following the demands of other deities (for example, bringing back the kingship to Sumer in *The Victory of Utu-hegal*, ETCSL 2.1.6). As well as her mediating role with the senior deities of the pantheon, Ishtar is presented as capable of protectively surrounding the king with a host of divinities.

OVERVIEW

Ishtar inhabits multiple roles in her association with Mesopotamian kings; she is represented as spouse, lover, sister and mother, sometimes within a single composition. Although her role shows flexibility, textual evidence is thematically linked through an emphasis on the goddess' physicality, especially her feminine form. The affections of the goddess held a legitimising function for kings, with the concept of 'king by love of Inanna' able to be traced back to the earliest origins of political hierarchy (Westenholz, 2000). The relationship provided the king with numerous benefits, including closer ties to the pantheon. While Ishtar also benefited from the relationship, the balance of the connection between the king and the goddess is unusual when compared with her other relationships. The union of goddess and king was a reciprocal relationship, and the depth of their connection required the use of numerous literary tropes for full expression. While her unions with Mesopotamian kings, sexual or otherwise, are difficult to clearly categorise, the goddess and the monarch's shared religious and political roles suggests a serious partnering – an impression that is further supported by the imagery of close family connections between the pair. By identifying with Dumuzi in literary compositions, the kings were able to take part in a powerfully intimate exchange with a primary deity.

Dumuzi, in love poetry, provides sexual fulfilment for Inanna but also, importantly, provides a nexus for swift changes in status for the young goddess – from marriageable young woman to widow. In her marriage to the king, it is the goddess who confers status, along with increased divine closeness (with herself and the pantheon), and also legitimisation upon the monarch. The king's religious and political responsibilities are reflected in his duties to the goddess who represents the city, in an unequal yet undeniably intimate wedding of sacred and social interests.

5

ISHTAR AND THE HEROES OF MESOPOTAMIAN EPIC

From considering Ishtar's complex connections to human kings in Chapter 4, we now move to the deity's relations with legendary heroes – particularly the most famous Mesopotamian hero of them all, Gilgamesh. The structure of these two chapters is purposeful; heroes of epic literature, along with Mesopotamian kings, inhabit a kind of 'in-between' space that touches upon the divine world while inhabiting the human sphere. Considered in this way, kings and heroes hold a great deal in common, despite the significant differences between them.

The similarities between the heroes of Mesopotamian literature and the kings of Mesopotamian history are not random. Indeed, imagery from epic literature underlies the historical ideology of early Mesopotamian kings, and in Sumerian king lists, rulers who feature as the heroic subjects of epic are listed along with later historical kings. Heroic kings of the Uruk I dynasty, especially the character of Gilgamesh, form a 'cornerstone' of Ur III royal ideology (Woods, 2012: 79), and this connection involves the sharing of divine family bonds. In royal hymns from the Ur III period, maternal imagery, including the claim of being the royal progeny of the goddess Ninsun (mother of Gilgamesh), is used to symbolise the closeness of the human king with divinities. The nature of this association was protective and legitimising, and involved significant political and religious currency.

Gilgamesh, the legendary hero of Mesopotamian epic, and Ishtar, goddess of love and battle, are two of the best-known characters in Ancient Near Eastern myth. The energy, combative skills and ambitious drive of both figures has led to the observation in modern scholarship that 'they seem to be male and female counterparts' (Abusch, 1999: 453). Abusch notes that Ishtar, with her insatiability and ceaseless initiative to improve her position, reminds us of Gilgamesh and his yearning to transcend the boundaries of mortality.

Ishtar and Gilgamesh are both powerful individuals who seem to be perpetually dissatisfied with the established roles or portions allotted to them in the context of Mesopotamian myth. The motivating force of their discontentment, and the pair's individual efforts to change the established order in their favour, make Gilgamesh and Ishtar both disruptive and transgressive figures. Their excessive personalities and divinity (or quasi-divinity in Gilgamesh's case) provide them with the necessary skills and abilities to reshape their worlds – but the changes they enact are not always universally beneficial. Ishtar's close association with kingship, and her role as the

patron goddess of Gilgamesh's home city of Uruk, perhaps makes her contact with the legendary ruler inevitable, and to be expected. What *is* surprising is the disharmony between the goddess and the hero – a conflict that is central to the narrative of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The interactions between Ishtar and Gilgamesh involve numerous texts from a variety of periods and genres, and their relationship encompasses complicated themes and meanings. The earliest known literature involving Gilgamesh comes from Ancient Sumerian narratives, in the form of five poems: *Gilgamesh and Humbaba*; *Gilgamesh and Agga*; *The Death of Gilgamesh*; *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*; and *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*. The extant copies of these texts date to the eighteenth century BCE (in the Old Babylonian period), but it is generally thought that they originate from the Ur III period (George, 2010: 3).

In keeping with the subject of this book, the focus here is on the role of the goddess in the *Epic*, rather than its hero. In this chapter, we consider the interaction between Gilgamesh and Ishtar particularly within the context of the goddess' competencies of love and kingship. I show that the goddess' deep connections to kingship, vitality and love provide a critical sphere of reference to the elements of satire in Gilgamesh's refusal, and give context to the changeable connections between these two powerful characters.

The modern academic focus on Ishtar's relationship with the heroic king, Gilgamesh, might create the misleading impression that Gilgamesh is the only legendary king of epic to be connected with this deity. To counter this, and to provide a better context for the relationship of deity and hero, in this chapter the legendary Mesopotamian heroes Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Etana are also considered. All of these legendary kings are the subject of Mesopotamian epics, and all are presented as having meaningful interactions with the goddess of love. The emphasis here is on the literature surrounding the character of Gilgamesh, but by exploring the goddess' relationship with other literary heroes, the unique aspects of Ishtar's interactions in different epics is shown to reflect the depth and complexity of her characterisation in ancient Mesopotamian religion.

THE HERO AND THE GODDESS

The word 'epic' is used here in the sense of 'a story with a hero as a protagonist'. Heroes inhabit a special role that sits in between the human and divine spheres. The ability to span the extremes of human experience, and also to reach toward the other world, gives heroes unique importance when considering the interplay between humanity and divinity in Mesopotamian literature. Heroes in literature are capable of some supernatural deeds and have the ability to access divine assistance, qualities that are most in line with the capacities of deities rather than humans. Yet even quasi-divine heroes, such as Gilgamesh, remain mortal, and their mortality leads them to contend with the limits of the human condition. The mortality of heroes combined with their extraordinary abilities means that their appearance in Mesopotamian literature often involves the exploration of themes of humanity, divinity and mortality.

The legendary heroes of epic are not the only literary protagonists to exist in between the mortal and divine spheres. Mesopotamian rulers are at times presented in literature as capable of achievements of exaggerated scale on the battlefield and other areas of expertise, or as having adventures containing a supernatural element. Like heroes, Mesopotamian kings can present themselves as having special and unusually close bonds with the divine, and even belonging to the immediate family of the primary deities. Royal epics show a hybridity of genre which makes them difficult to categorise neatly, as seen, for example, in the *Tukulti-Ninurta Epic* (Machinist, 1976).

The blending of historical writing and fiction further blurs the already indistinct line between Mesopotamian literary styles. Royal biographies of historical kings can include mythical elements, while the stories of legendary heroes such as Gilgamesh may have developed from famous historical figures, as suggested by Gilgamesh's appearance on the Sumerian king list as the fifth ruler of Uruk, reigning around 2700 BCE (Tigay, 1982: 13–16). Indeed, some royal epics contain motifs very close to those that appear in the epics of legendary heroes. The Akkadian epics of King Sargon (ca. 2300), such as *Sargon in the Lands beyond the Cedar Forest* and *Sargon and the Lord of Purushkhanda* (also known as the *King of Battle* epic), hold several features in common with well-known episodes from *Gilgamesh* (Noegel, 2005: 242). The composition known as the *Epic of Sargon* involves the king's ability to avoid a trap set by Ur-Zababa of Kish by reading a cuneiform document, possibly alluding to the invention of cuneiform referenced in the Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (Noegel, 2005: 238).

The blending of history and myth in legendary and royal epic gives the 'genre' a mixed quality that is well suited to exploring themes of religion and humanity. The compositions, like their heroic protagonists, contain elements of human historical reality juxtaposed with supernatural features (also noted in Sasson, 2005: 220).

ENMERKAR

The protagonist of the *Enmerkar* epics is a deified early king (ca. 2700 BCE), with the epics thought to be written around the time of King Shulgi of Ur (ca. 2000 BCE). The relationship between Inanna and Enmerkar in both epics is portrayed positively – she is able to elevate his status and competency with her favour.

In the Sumerian composition *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta* (ETCSL 1.8.2.3), King Enmerkar benefits from divine wisdom owing to his special relationship with the goddess Inanna. Enmerkar is not the only ruler in the epic who has a close relationship with Inanna – the king of Aratta is a rival for her affections. Although the lord of Aratta is described as placing on his head 'the golden crown for Inanna', the narrative makes it clear that there is more to winning the deity's favour, and the blessings that result from this favour, than simply inhabiting the office of kingship.

Enmerkar is the favourite king of the goddess; this favour is presented as resulting from Enmerkar's superior ability to please her, and the lesser quality (or lack of) the lord of Aratta's building works in her honour. Due to his position as Inanna's favourite, Enmerkar is able to ask Inanna for assistance in conquering Aratta. In a

speech marked by its emphasis on her divine wisdom, Inanna accedes to his request. Enmerkar is an obedient lover, and he also faithfully follows the goddess' advice, leading to his victory over Aratta. The process of his victory involves Enmerkar besting his rival in several 'battles of wits'. This contest culminates in Enmerkar's effort to send a message to his enemy. Enmerkar's speech is so long and complex in nature that his messenger cannot repeat it, so Enmerkar invents the art of writing to send a written message. (For the problem of how the lord of Aratta is then rather conveniently able to read this newly invented writing, see Vanstiphout, 1989). Noegel has noted that this myth echoes several aspects of the royal propaganda of the historical ruler, King Shulgi, who also claimed mastery over the written arts (2005: 235). As well as increasing his territory, Inanna's love brings blessings upon Enmerkar and, through him, to the people of the lands over which he reigns.

The bond between king, deities, and the success and superiority of the city is also central to the plot of the Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and Ensukheshdanna* (ETCSL 1.8.2.4). This story also features two kings competing for the divine favour of Inanna. Their contest culminates in a battle of wizardry fought by two human proxies, with the wise woman Sagburu (on the side of Enmerkar) defeating the sorcerer representing the rival king, Ensukheshdanna of Aratta. The battle of wizardry shows the two opponents conjuring various animals, with the sorcerer's animals no match for those of Sagburu; the actual fighting in this epic occurs through the animal proxies. The victory of Sumer's white magic over the black magic of Aratta shows its moral superiority, and the focus on food supply shows the critical nature of divine favour.

In both epics, the king's rule over his people and territory is clearly dependent upon the favour of the divine. The significance of Inanna's love for securing a superior position of kingship is neatly expressed at the close of the narrative, where the king of Aratta concedes the contest to Enmerkar:

> You are the beloved lord of Inana, you alone are exalted. Inana has truly chosen you for her holy lap, you are her beloved. From the south to the highlands, you are the great lord, I am only second to you . . . I cannot match you ever.
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.2.4)

In the *Enmerkar* epics, Inanna's favour is crucial for the king's success, but he is not presented as a passive recipient of her love. Enmerkar actively cultivates the deity's affection, and then uses his cleverness and superior magical powers to defeat a potential usurper.

LUGALBANDA

Lugalbanda is another legendary Mesopotamian king who greatly benefits from his connection to Inanna in Sumerian epic. The question over the historicity of the early kings Enmerkar and Lugalbanda is one which evades a definitive answer, due to a lack of evidence (Michalowski, 2010). Literary tradition places Lugalbanda as the father of fellow-hero Gilgamesh, and historical Sumerian kings, Shulgi and Ur-Nammu, claim to be his offspring; if the legendary Lugalbanda is based on an historical person, it is thought that his reign would have occurred around 2800–2700 BCE (Noegel, 2005: 235).

The heroic literary figure of Lugalbanda is the recipient of divine healing in *Lugalbanda and the Mountain Cave* (ETCSL 1.8.2.1). The prayers of Lugalbanda are shown to be effective in gaining the support of the primary deities Utu, Inanna, and Nanna (the Sumerian moon god, father of Utu and Inanna). In Lugalbanda's prayers, he touchingly refers to a seemingly universal and timeless human experience – the ability of illness to inspire profound homesickness. Lugalbanda prays that he could be with his loved ones, and at home. The king also makes it clear that it is not the grandeur of his home that causes this longing, but its familiarity:

> Inana, if only this were my home, if only this were my city! If only this were Kulaba, where my mother bore me . . . ! Even if it were to me as the waste land to a snake! If it were to me as a crack in the ground to a scorpion!
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.2.1)

As the deity primarily identified with love and social connectedness, Inanna is particularly well placed to answer this lonely prayer. Unlike Utu, who sends divine encouragement to Lugalbanda, or Nanna, who gives the king strength, Inanna helps Lugalbanda to go to sleep, and '(envelopes) him with heart's joy as if with a woollen blanket' (ETCSL 1.8.2.1). Inanna's provision of peaceful sleep and 'heart's joy' seem especially well-suited to addressing the heartache and restlessness of homesickness. The reference to being enfolded in a 'woollen blanket' may be viewed as having maternal overtones, considering the ancient Mesopotamian connection of women and craftwork, such as spinning and weaving flax and wool. Through the divine interventions, Lugalbanda soon recovers, and he makes sacrifices of thanksgiving.

In the Sumerian epic *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird*, the kindness of Lugalbanda is rewarded by the bestowal of supernatural speed (he rejects offers of wealth, power, and high status). Vanstiphout views Lugalbanda's choice of reward as a product of his desire to return to his community (2003: 133). This view is supported in the text by the hero's immediate use of his new ability to reunite with his comrades, which emphasises the importance of social connections for the hero. Lugalbanda's supernatural ability gives him improved access to the Mesopotamian deities, and he is advised by Inanna how to manage his enemy, Aratta. The text also relates the king Enmerkar's anxiety, when he suspects he is losing Inanna's favour and being supplanted by usurpers. The king gives a long speech where he voices the fear that the deity no longer finds him attractive. Inanna, as in the *Enmerkar* epics, is presented as wise and capable of finding solutions to problems, and she gives advice to Enmerkar (through Lugalbanda) on how to regain control, seemingly by providing a special form of sacrifice to one of her prized weapons.

ETANA

The Legend of Etana is known to have enjoyed great popularity in Mesopotamian literary tradition, with manuscripts dating to the Classical and Mature Akkadian periods

Figure 5.1 Lion Relief from the Processional Way. Rosettes, associated with Ishtar, are also featured on the Ishtar Gate. Yale University Art Gallery, No. 130.372.

(Foster, 2005: 533). In the epic, which has survived in several versions, the king Etana is the beneficiary of divine favour, owing to his kindness to animals. At the beginning of the narrative of *The Legend of Etana*, the gods build a city for humans to live in. Ishtar is looking for a 'shepherd' to lead the people, and it is decided the Etana will be the ruler. Later in the narrative, Etana assists a starving eagle on the advice of Shamash, which then helps him in his attempt to retrieve a special plant. Etana recounts a dream where he visits Ishtar in heaven. His description of Ishtar provides a literary portrait of the deity, containing several features that are commonly seen in her iconographic representations – she is beautiful, wearing a tiara, and seated on a throne. Beneath the throne are crouching lions, Ishtar's sacred animal.

The heavenly plant sought by Etana would give the king the heir he desires, but unfortunately it is unknown whether his journey to the heavens was successful – although the presence of Etana's son in the historiographic tradition has encouraged the assumption that his efforts were rewarded.

GILGAMESH AS EVIDENCE

After exploring Ishtar's connection to the heroes of Mesopotamian epic more broadly, the focus of this chapter shifts to her at times troubled relationship with Gilgamesh – the most famous Mesopotamian hero of all. The kings from other Mesopotamian epics are presented showing kindness to animals (also sacrificing them!) and fighting for Inanna's favour, but contrastingly, Gilgamesh's interactions with Ishtar in the *Gilgamesh Epic* involves his killing of animals, and his spurning of the deity's romantic advances.

The wide currency of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in antiquity gives it significance as a source for shedding light on the characterisation of Ishtar in the Ancient Near East.

In the Introduction, various obstacles to gaining a clear view of the world's most ancient goddess were acknowledged; here, we note a further problem. While the evidence for Ishtar is often fragmentary and difficult to place in context, it is also hard to be certain which myths and literary genres were most closely associated with the goddess in the perception of her ancient audience. It is possible that searching for clues to find the dominant literary tradition involving Ishtar may be an exercise in futility – different traditions may have had more or less weight in different historical periods, perhaps even more so even among diverse areas and audiences. The issue is an important one, however, considering the great variety of historical sources available on the goddess, and the complex nature of her image. Our approach has been to consider a wide variety of literary material with an emphasis on thematic analysis, yet one problem with this approach is that variegated sources are given a relatively similar weight in adding to our assessment of Ishtar, perhaps not providing a sure reflection of the relative dominance of the diverse sources in the ancient world. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* helps to even the balance in this regard, as the epic text was widely known throughout the Ancient Near East, both in the time of its literary genesis, and among later audiences throughout the ancient world.

The diversity of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, available in numerous versions, is testament to its popularity in the ancient world, as well as to its lasting cultural impact. In this chapter, the contentious relationship of Ishtar and Gilgamesh is considered in the broader context of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and also through the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. To limit the scope of this extremely broad topic, the emphasis here is on the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Gilgamesh Epic*; this version developed from the editorial work of the master scribe, Sin-leqi-unninni ('Sin is the one who accepts a prayer'), who is thought to have lived around 1100 BCE. The story of Gilgamesh's legendary journeys was widely known in the ancient world, and it follows that Ishtar, as she appears in the *Epic*, held similar fame. This leads to the question – what kind of image of Ishtar is presented in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and how well does this image fit in with the goddess' presentation in other literary sources?

ONE GODDESS, TWO WAYS

The Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* presents two images of Ishtar: one from within the broader reach of the narrative, and the second description given by the hero himself, when he describes the goddess in his speech of rejection that follows her proposal. There is vivid detail in Gilgamesh's famous rejection monologue from Tablet VI, but his speech has a satirical aspect which gives emphasis to Ishtar's worst features, and provides the audience with a somewhat distorted view of the goddess. The intention of this speech is to insult and degrade the goddess, rather than to provide a clear-eyed account of her character. While there is truth in Gilgamesh's verbal portrait, his description does not fully reflect the complexity of Ishtar's image elsewhere.

In the rest of the *Epic*, Ishtar's preoccupation with vengeance, her family closeness, ability to cause upheaval and the powerful use of her voice are more in keeping

with the richer and more balanced image of the goddess in the broader context of Mesopotamian literature, and with other Mesopotamian epics featuring legendary heroes. Gilgamesh twists Ishtar's image through the skilful application of rhetoric, showing the composers' sophisticated use of literary techniques to enhance narrative complexity.

Scholars such as Volk (1995: 53–64) have noted the discord between Gilgamesh's account of myths involving Ishtar, and the myths themselves. It has been suggested that this dissension may be caused by unknown variations of the myth forming a basis for Gilgamesh's account, or being related to political aims by the ancient composers. While neither of these explanations can be positively ruled out, it appears likely that the incompleteness of Gilgamesh's description of Ishtar is a literary device in keeping with the legendary hero's characterisation. In his adventures, Gilgamesh displays a persistent tendency to underestimate his opponents, miscalculating the complexity of matters in his rush to capitalise on his voracious appetite for conquest – this pattern of behaviour is repeated in Gilgamesh's refusal of Ishtar's proposal.

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH, TABLET VI

Our analysis begins with a summary of the narrative. Gilgamesh is the story of one of the world's first literary heroes. Sumerian poems detailing the hero's epic adventures were probably first written down around 2100 BCE (George, 2010: 3), with the Standard Babylonian Version, our main focus here, dated to the first millennium BCE (2010: 5). The use of the *Epic* in scribal schools and its links to royal patronage are significant elements in the story's longevity.

Gilgamesh is Uruk's arrogant young king who goes on a dangerous journey. He is accompanied by his close companion, Enkidu, and together they fight a series of battles. Enkidu's death devastates Gilgamesh, who sets off on a voyage to the edge of the world in an ultimately unsuccessful quest to find immortality. In this chapter, a certain familiarity with the main features of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*'s narrative is assumed, as well as some knowledge of the legendary hero's character, his companions and adversaries. A brief recap of the main plot points of Tablet VI of the *Epic* is provided below:

- At the beginning of Tablet VI, Gilgamesh is bathing and cleaning his weapons. Ishtar sees his beauty, and looks at him with desire. The goddess proposes marriage, offering him some nice inducements to sweeten the deal. Gilgamesh, it seems, has heard of Ishtar, but he does not want to marry her.
- Gilgamesh assures Ishtar that he will not take her as a wife, due to her numerous bad qualities. In a long speech, he compares her to a drafty back door, a faulty battering ram, and a shoe which bites the feet of its owner.
- Ishtar is hurt by Gilgamesh's insults. In response, she travels to the celestial realm of her father, seeking the Bull of Heaven. After some conflict with Anu, she brings the Bull to earth to attempt to destroy the legendary king. The Bull's presence on earth leads to destructive consequences. Gilgamesh, with the help of his

companion Enkidu, uses his heroic strength to slay the giant creature, and offers its heart to Shamash.
- Ishtar and the women of Uruk mourn for the slain Bull, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu feast and celebrate.

The interaction between Gilgamesh and Ishtar is contextually placed within the goddess' important romantic and maternal connections to Mesopotamian kingship, with frequent referencing of the associated themes of intimacy, adornment, protection and abundance that accompany these themes in broader literature. In keeping with *Gilgamesh's* intricate exploration of the concepts of kingship, humanity and divinity, romantic and maternal themes that are common in broader literary compositions involving the goddess are employed in creative and subversive ways in the *Epic*.

BATHING AND BEAUTY

Tablet VI begins with five lines describing Gilgamesh bathing. The narrative in this section focuses on Gilgamesh's physical attractiveness; he is described shaking out his hair over his back. This physical gesture carried strong sensual overtones in Mesopotamian literature, suggesting impending nuptials or sex (or both). Along with Gilgamesh's beauty, the narrator also portrays the young king's majesty, by describing his clean clothes, fresh sash and 'kingly diadem'. Ishtar's response to Gilgamesh is focused primarily on his physicality; she sees him in purely corporeal terms, like an animal. The text expresses the cause of her desire in simple, direct terms:

> The lady Ishtar looked covetously on the beauty of Gilgamesh.
>
> (VI.6)[1]

Throughout Ancient Near Eastern literature, the bathing scene is a common erotically charged motif. In Mesopotamian myth we see this motif employed in the narratives of Enlil, Enki and Ereshkigal (see the analysis of Walls, 2001: 35). The bathing motif is also familiar from Egyptian myths involving Hathor, and several biblical stories, such as David and Bathsheba. Ishtar's lusty response to the bathing Gilgamesh has been recognised by Walls as an inverted type scene; usually in this literary trope, it is the bathing female who attracts the covetous gaze of the male, but here the gender roles are reversed.

In the context of Ishtar's broader image, we have seen the goddess herself ritually bathe in preparation for her marriage to Dumuzi/Tammuz, and to the Mesopotamian king. The connection between bathing and courtship is clearly presented in a Sumerian hymn known as a *shir-namursaga* (translated as 'song of warrior quality', Black et al. 2004: 262).

> In order to find sweetness in the bed on the joyous coverlet, my lady bathes her holy thighs. She bathes them for the thighs of the king.
>
> (*Iddin-Dagan* A, ETCSL 2.5.3.1)

The introductory setting of Ishtar and Gilgamesh's encounter references common tropes involving the goddess' courtship from Sumerian love poetry. Instead of focusing on the beauty and bathing of the goddess of love, familiar motifs are employed in a unique way – in a manner that reverses expectations.

GIFTING AND ABUNDANCE

In Sumerian love poetry, speech is employed to draw the lovers together and create intimacy. Ishtar is skilled at acquiring the objects of her desire through the persuasive use of words, and she wastes no time in speaking to Gilgamesh, making him a proposal. The text moves directly from describing Gilgamesh's physicality to the resulting desire of the goddess. While the description of Gilgamesh's beauty is carefully detailed in the text, the physical splendour of the goddess is conspicuously omitted from the narration. In love poetry, descriptions of the goddess' adornment, beauty or physical preparations would be expected to accompany the transformative event of a marriage proposal. Yet Ishtar's admiring gaze upon Gilgamesh is not reciprocated by the object of her desire in the narrative, and instead the story moves to her speech.

> Come, Gilgamesh, you be the bridegroom!
> Grant me your fruits, I insist!
> You shall be my husband and I will be your wife.
>
> (VI.7–9)

Following these three lines of proposal, there are twelve lines where Ishtar details the fine treatment Gilgamesh can expect as the spouse of the goddess. She promises Gilgamesh a chariot made of lapis and gold, with golden wheels and fittings made from gemstones. Storm demons will be harnessed to the chariot, and the threshold of their new home will be scented with cedar. Kings, nobles and princes will bow down before Gilgamesh if he marries Ishtar, and they will bring him tribute from the mountain and the lowland (and presumably all the territory in between, through the traditional poetic use of two extremes of an area to represent its whole). Ishtar promises special fecundity to Gilgamesh's flock, saying that his goats will bear triplets and his ewes will have twins. His donkey will outpace a mule, and his ox under its yoke will be beyond comparison.

Here, we can see the importance of flock animals to the establishment of wealth and prestige in the ancient world. Ishtar is promising that the natural limitations of flock animals can be contravened with her help: a donkey foal can outpace a mule. As well as giving insight into desirable qualities for flock animals, the *Gilgamesh Epic* expresses the influence of Ishtar in a creative and complex way – with more than a hint of the transgressive power of the goddess. Ishtar's abilities in this area are not to be doubted; although poorly preserved, there seems to be a reference to the goddess increasing the fecundity of domestic animals (sheep, goats and cows) for the king in *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta* (ETCSL 1.8.2.3).

While there is diversity in Ishtar's promises to Gilgamesh, each inducement can be thematically related to the acquisition of wealth and status. The use of speech to

create intimacy, as well as the imagery of abundance, gifting, and the references to entering the goddess' house are all strongly reminiscent of the Inanna–Dumuzi corpus of love poetry. The goddess' promise to grant her husband sovereignty over other kings and lands is commonly seen in hymns and epics involving the marriage of the goddess with the Mesopotamian king (noted in Tigay, 1982: 248). Indeed, Gilgamesh himself relies on Ishtar's support in a Sumerian composition where he battles a rival king (*Gilgamesh and Agga,* ETCSL 1.8.1.1), and this support is central to the narrative of the Enmerkar epics.

> Inana, the lady of all the lands, from her great love of Dumuzid, has sprinkled the water of life upon those who had stood in the face of the flood and made the Land subject to them.
>
> (*Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta,* ETCSL 1.8.2.3)

> Lady whom no one can withstand in battle . . . (the king) who for you stands complete in his manhood rejoices in battle as at a festival, and for you he destroys the rebel lands and houses.
>
> (*Inanna* E, ETCSL 4.07.5)

References in the proposal to entering the house of the goddess, in the marital context, carries implications of the increased status that can be gained by joining Ishtar's divine extended family. The predicted joyous greeting by the home's structures again alludes to romantic courtship (such as *Ishme-Dagan* J, ETCSL 2.5.4.10), intimacy, and the happiness that usually results from these endeavours in love poetry. Familiar imagery is used in unusual ways in Tablet VI – Inanna is generally presented as being on the receiving end of material gifts, rather than giving them in the love poetry genre. Once again, the expected roles of the two 'lovers' in the *Gilgamesh* epic are subverted, using common courtship themes.

There is a structural imbalance in Ishtar's speech between the brief first section containing the proposal, and the much more detailed later section which lists the inducements for Gilgamesh to accept the goddess' offer. This imbalance suggests that Ishtar suspects Gilgamesh needs convincing to accept her proposal, causing her to stress the benefits she sees for him in their union. In Sumerian love poetry, the goddess emphasises how her physical attributes will delight her intended spouse (*Dumuzid-Inanna* C, ETCSL 4.08.03) but here, her focus is emphatically on the material gains to be had from the marriage. This may be an example of Ishtar's use of persuasive rhetoric being targeted specifically towards the interests of her subject, indicating that the goddess knows something of Gilgamesh's ambitious nature. A further possibility is that the ancient authors used the longer, second section to create a more powerful contrast with Gilgamesh's refusal, which follows immediately after Ishtar's speech.

GILGAMESH REFUSES THE PROPOSAL

As soon as Ishtar finishes speaking, Gilgamesh launches into a speech of rejection. In addition to reversing expected gender roles, the narrative subverts the expected outcome for the seemingly romantic scene. Earlier in the narrative in Tablet I, there

was another use of the type scene involving a romantic encounter by a body of water, when Enkidu met Shamhat. Like Gilgamesh, Shamhat's physical attractiveness and clothing are described in the text (I.188–191). In this case, the meeting of Enkidu and Shamhat results in a week of sex for the pair, and the civilising of Enkidu.

In refusing Ishtar, Gilgamesh (unlike Enkidu) does not become more civilised; instead, a chain of events is sparked that will result in his animalistic regression (after Enkidu's premature death). Speech is used by Gilgamesh, not to create intimacy with Ishtar as we would expect in love poetry, but to increase the emotional (and physical) separation between himself and the goddess. The audience's expectations are being subverted on multiple levels while the narrative explores the transgressive characters of Gilgamesh and Ishtar, in the context of the traditional close relations between the goddess and the king.

The question of why Gilgamesh refuses Ishtar's proposal has been the subject of a great deal of lively scholarly debate (for an insightful overview of this topic, with bibliography, see Walls, 2001: 34–50, and also Ackerman, 2005; while the approaches and conclusions of Walls and Ackerman differ, both emphasise the important role of Gilgamesh's close relationship with Enkidu in his refusal – undoubtedly a significant element in Gilgamesh's choice of action). This is a larger issue than can be dealt with in a comprehensive manner here, but some potential answers are considered later in this chapter. First, we unpack the speech of rejection in greater detail, to consider how it informs Ishtar's image, and the themes of love and kingship.

Gilgamesh's long speech of rejection can be divided into three sections (Abusch, 1986: 145). The first section, lines 24–32, is very fragmentary but seems to concern the wonderful bridal gifts which Ishtar would bestow upon him if he did accept her as a wife. Gilgamesh appears to suggest Ishtar would give him food fit for a deity if she were to become his wife. In this section, the genre of love poetry and its association with gifting is once again referenced. Despite his refusal which follows, Gilgamesh shows awareness of the importance of gifting in marital courtship.

Although due to the damaged state of the text it is hard to be sure of the wording here, it seems Gilgamesh is using rhetoric to set Ishtar up, along with the *Epic*'s audience, for a sharp change in tone in the next section (VI.33–41), where he begins to insult the goddess.

TO LOVE AND PROTECT?

In this second section of the refusal, Gilgamesh compares Ishtar unfavourably with nine objects, with each allegory united by the theme of supposedly useful items which behave in a way contrary to their expected purpose:

> (You are) an arkabinnu-door [that does not] block breeze and draft . . .
> A shoe that bites the foot of its owner!
>
> (VI.34, 41)

It is important to note here that the items chosen by Gilgamesh are thematically linked by their protective natures. The brazier and the back door are expected to protect

from cold, the sandal protects the foot from the road, the palace and the battering ram are important for providing military defence, and the tar and the water skin defend against wetness. Gilgamesh, through wordplay, is suggesting Ishtar will behave contrarily to her expected protective function – but what kind of protective function does Gilgamesh have in mind? The answer to this question is made clear in the final section of Gilgamesh's speech, lines 42–79, where Gilgamesh recounts his version of Ishtar's dealings with six lovers. The section begins with Gilgamesh saying:

> What bridegroom of yours endured for ever?
>
> (VI.42)

Gilgamesh's focus on faulty items used for various types of defence, prior to listing Ishtar's failed loves, supports the interpretation that the goddess is expected to protect those she is linked to romantically. Gilgamesh's examples show that he believes Ishtar's lovers will be destroyed by her, a fate made more ironic by her protective image and associations, which are especially closely related to her romantic connection to kings. The closely linked spheres of sex and death are hinted at in Gilgamesh's refusal, as well as the goddess' transgressive ability to change fates. For Jacobsen, Gilgamesh's refusal made him a Mesopotamian 'Peter Pan' – he rejects marriage and therefore adulthood (1976: 218–219). While this interpretation is compelling, it can perhaps be taken further: Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar shows him refusing to adopt the full responsibility of Mesopotamian kingship, rather than rejecting adulthood more generally. This view is supported by the epic's frequent employment of themes from love poetry. By juxtaposing Ishtar and Gilgamesh's encounter against expected poetic motifs from the Inanna–Dumuzi courtship, the relationship of the king and the goddess in *Gilgamesh* is grounded in the legitimising context of sacred marriage.

MYTHIC BACKGROUND

The lovers listed by Gilgamesh in his refusal are the horse, the *allallu* bird, the lion, Dumuzi, Ishullanu and the shepherds. Gilgamesh's romantic refusal covers a great deal of mythic territory, and while some of the allusions to myths seem familiar, others, such as myths involving the *allallu*-bird and the lion, do not. While it is generally accepted that the six 'victims' (Volk's '*Opfer*', 1995: 62) belong to older, individual stories, Volk has emphasised that it is difficult, if not impossible, to know how many variants of myths would have been known to the authors of Gilgamesh (1995: 62–63). This makes it hard to decide on an important question – how much of the depiction of Ishtar given by Gilgamesh is due to choice by the authors? The heroic king gives an undoubtedly clear, yet overwhelmingly negative view of the goddess, at odds with the more positive and balanced image of the goddess presented in other literary compositions, particularly texts involving the connection between the Mesopotamian king and the goddess in royal poetry, hymns and other epic narratives.

Gilgamesh presents an image of the goddess seen *through his eyes*. Gilgamesh is not presented in the text 'gazing' at Ishtar in response to her lustful 'gazing' upon

him as he bathes. Instead, Ishtar is made subject to Gilgamesh's verbal perspective through the focalising description of his refusal. Gilgamesh is not ignorant about Ishtar; his misleading description results from the careful crafting of rhetoric, rather than a lack of knowledge. As Gilgamesh mocks and belittles the goddess, many aspects of the refusal touch upon well-known tropes of the goddess' identity, such as her marriage to Dumuzi, and her connections to gardeners. Gilgamesh's references to known myths of the goddess affirm the intentionality of the use of love poetry imagery employed in this scene, with its allusions to bathing, beauty, intimacy, joy, gifting and protection. In keeping with the literary sophistication of the epic text, Gilgamesh twists the knowledge he has of the goddess into a condemnatory polemic, one that is specifically well suited for the rejection of a marriage proposal. The outcomes of the goddess' 'love' in Gilgamesh's speech are presented as a clear reversal on what is usually seen in love poetry and royal compositions. In place of 'life', joy, and increased status, there is death, mourning and diminishment.

In Chapter 3, we saw Ea produce the domineering creature, Ṣaltu, to create a kind of caricature that exaggerated Ishtar's militant aspects. In the *Epic*, Gilgamesh also 'creates' a condemning reflection of the goddess. If Gilgamesh's portrayal is taken as a kind of humorous caricature, this does not undermine its accuracy. In the ancient world as well as in the present day, successful satire requires sufficient truth that the subject is immediately recognisable to the audience. Ishtar is certainly destructive, lusty and impulsive, as Gilgamesh suggests. However, the pattern identified by Gilgamesh is incomplete, in that it negates the more complex image of the deity seen elsewhere.

DUMUZI IN GILGAMESH'S REJECTION

The list of Ishtar's lovers is bookended by two figures that are known from other Mesopotamian literary traditions; Dumuzi and Ishullanu. Gilgamesh makes the assertion that Ishtar has destroyed both of these characters, but he gives no account for the goddess' motivation in doing so. Ishtar's motivation for destroying Dumuzi is a key element of the narrative of *Inanna's Descent to Underworld* (ETCSL 1.4.1), as seen in Chapter 3. In the myth of her journey to the underworld, Dumuzi is not the only choice for Inanna as her substitute. Several acquaintances of Inanna are targeted first by the *gala* demons, only to have Inanna intervene on their behalf. Inanna's intervention is due to the acquaintances' faithful behaviour to the goddess. In this myth, Inanna is presented protecting those who are faithful to her, but the clearly disloyal Dumuzi is punished. The literary device of repetition is used to give strong emphasis to this point – Inanna, in perhaps her most famous myth, does not destroy her lover carelessly.

Of course, Gilgamesh may be referring to an alternative tradition associated with Dumuzi's death; as we saw in Chapter 1, there are many versions of this tragic event from which to choose. However, myths which involve Inanna in Dumuzi's death tend to also contain the concept of substitution (such as in *Inana's Descent to Underworld,* ETCSL 1.4.1 and *Dumuzid and Geshtinana*, ETCSL 1.4.1.1). The lamentations genre,

which provides the main focus for Gilgamesh's criticism of Ishtar's treatment of Dumuzi, overwhelmingly presents the goddess in a favourable light, with emphasis on the loyalty expressed through her grief and the search for her husband.

ISHULLANU AND SHUKALETUDA

Ishullanu is not a well-known figure in Mesopotamian myth, but his story contains some very familiar elements; it seems probable that Ishullanu, the gardener's son from Gilgamesh's speech, is the same character as Shukaletuda, the gardener's son who rapes the goddess in the myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* (ETCSL 1.3.3). The two narratives feature several points in common; both stories involve the son of a gardener, a man connected to Ishtar's family. In both myths, Ishullanu's youth is emphasised by his close identification with his parents, and both stories end with the goddess transforming the gardener's son as a kind of punishment. Some sort of sexual interaction between gardener's son and goddess is a further common feature in both myths. The identification of the character of Shukaletuda with Ishullanu is based on the parallels in the two stories, as well as similarities in the language of the myths (Volk, 1995: 62).

The likely overlap between the two stories has been recognised in scholarship, and the question has been raised over the causes of the differences between the narratives (Volk, 1995: 62–64). It is difficult to provide a clear answer to this question, as the two myths are obscure, fragmented and difficult to contextualise. It is possible that the similar features of both myths are due to the stories drawing on another, as yet unknown, version of the narrative of Ishtar and the son of a gardener, or other unknown literary or oral traditions. The two versions of the stories may have changed over time, and the changed narrative is reflected in the differences seen in Gilgamesh's account of the episode.

With these problems in mind, it appears likely that Gilgamesh is taking an established, complex story about the goddess in the final section of his speech, and stripping it down to broad satire. Gilgamesh's version of the story of Ishtar and the gardener's son differs from the text of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* in several ways; most importantly, the role of the sexual aggressor is reversed in Gilgamesh's story about Ishullanu.

> You looked at him covetously and went up to him:
> 'O my Ishullanu, let us taste your power!
> Put out your hand and stroke our vulva!'
>
> (VI.67–69)

The description of the 'covetous look' of the goddess parallels the hero's own introduction to the goddess earlier in the scene (VI.6), and suggests Gilgamesh is using the story of the gardener rhetorically to present his own case.

In *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, the goddess does not desire the gardener's son (who is himself a gardener, although not a very able one). Gilgamesh's telling of the story ends with the gardener's son being unable to fulfil his duties in the garden. The final

mention of Ishullanu recounts his failure to tend to the garden (VI.77–78). In contrast, in *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, the narrative introduces Shukaletuda with mention of his inability to tend to the garden, due to a lack of aptitude:

> Not a single plant remained there, not even one: (Shukaletuda) had pulled them out by their roots and destroyed them.
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.3)

In the Sumerian myth of the rape of the goddess, the narrative makes it clear that the gardener's failings are due to his incompetence, and he is also to blame for the instigation of unwanted sexual relations between himself and Inanna – the sleeping goddess is conspicuously unable to give consent. The very elements of Gilgamesh's story which are most damning of the goddess – her attempt to seduce Ishullanu and her prevention of his ability to tend the garden – are expressed in a manner that is sympathetic to the goddess in *Inanna and Shukaletuda.*

FOOD, WOMEN AND GILGAMESH

Food and consumption are themes that tie the main female characters together in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. The *Epic*'s over-arching focus on food and consumption has special import when linked to Ishtar, due to the primacy of the trope of abundance in Sumerian love poetry. In texts celebrating the love of Mesopotamian kings and Inanna, feasting and food offerings are commonly linked to joy, plenty and dutiful religious observance (for example, in *Ur-Ninurta E*, ETCSL 2.5.6.5 and *Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1). In the epic of *Lugalbanda and the Mountain Cave*, the goddess' associations with battle and sexual intimacy are described alongside her connection to food:

> (Inanna) who makes the bedchamber delightful, who is food to the poor man.
>
> (*Lugalbanda and the Mountain Cave*, ETCSL 1.8.2.1)

In Tablet I, prior to meeting Ishtar, Gilgamesh appoints the beautiful *harimtu*, Shamhat, to seduce Enkidu and to civilise him.

The word *harimtu* was once given as 'prostitute' but this definition now seems unsuitable to adequately express the complexity of the word. Through the influence of Assante, *harimtu* is now generally (but not universally) considered to mean a social class of women, who had left their ancestral homes and not all of whom were engaged in paid prostitution (Steele, 2009: 305). '*Harimtu*' may mean different things in different contexts (see Assante, 1998, with specific reference to how this term differs in the literary setting of *Gilgamesh*). While arguing in support of the traditional interpretation of *harimtu*, Cooper makes the sensible observation that using the modern word 'prostitute' for *harimtu* carries cultural connotations that would not align with the conception of ancient Mesopotamian position, a subject that is at best dimly understood (Cooper, 2006b: 20). Most scholars consider Shamhat to be a prostitute (despite the lack of clear reference in the text to payment).

In any case, Shamhat engages – upon Gilgamesh's instruction – in a marathon sexual encounter with Enkidu, beginning the process of his civilisation. Part of Enkidu's civilisation process involves Shamhat introducing Enkidu to shepherds who provide him with baked goods and drink, which he learns to eat (II.44–51). In comparison to Gilgamesh's depiction of Ishtar, the sexuality of Shamhat, and her provision of food and drink, are all presented in a reasonably positive (though complex) manner, and these features lead to Enkidu's civilisation.

After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh's search for eternal life takes him on a long journey. At the edge of the world, he meets the goddess Siduri, who provides the hero with her wisdom. Even in her role dispensing knowledge, the goddess' image is connected to consumption and satiety. In the Old Babylonian Version of the *Epic*, Siduri gives Gilgamesh seemingly practical advice with a strongly esoteric underpinning:

> You, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full!
> Keep enjoying yourself, day and night! . . .
> Gaze on the little one who holds your hand!
> Let a wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
> Such is the destiny [of mortal men].
>
> (OB VA + BM iii.6–7, 12–14)

Siduri and Shamhat, through the theme of food and eating, voice and uphold the social norms of Mesopotamian society. Both women are presented as dispensers of wisdom (Harris, 2000: 124). Even Utanapishtim's wife, who in the rest of the narrative silently shadows the activities of her husband, is given an activity tied to food production. Utanapishtim's wife expresses concern for Gilgamesh's welfare, and her husband instructs her to bake bread to show the hero that time has been passing (XI: 220–224). Indeed, Ishtar herself is positively linked to abundant food supplies in the wider epic – Enkidu blesses Shamhat with prosperity, and invokes the goddess Ishtar to provide Shamhat with a man; one who has storage bins 'heaped high' (SBV VII: 159–160).

The positive and sympathetic associations linking food production to women in the broader context of the *Epic* are contrasted with the negative theme of consumption in Gilgamesh's refusal in Tablet VI. The doomed lovers of Gilgamesh's speech are associated with the provision of food. Dumuzi's involvement with dairy production is well known, and there are references in the *Epic* to shepherds and the production of milk and ghee in Tablet XIII: 27–30. The next human lover of Ishtar is another keeper of herds, a grazier:

> You fell in love with the shepherd, the grazier, the herdsman,
> who regularly piled up for you (bread baked in) embers,
> slaughtered kids for you every day.
>
> (VI.58–60)

Of course, Gilgamesh is describing a religious offering, but one that is focused on consumption. The next line of the *Epic* emphasises both Ishtar's transgressive nature and the theme of ingestion:

You struck him and turned him into a wolf.

(VI.61)

The protector of the sheep has been transformed through Ishtar's power into the creature that stalks, kills and consumes the sheep. This kind of reversal of fortune seems well fitted to the goddess, while also playing on Gilgamesh's preoccupation of objects that are meant to guard or protect, such as the shoe, turning and instead behaving in a damaging manner.

Finally, Gilgamesh comes to Ishullanu. He describes this 'lover' as the gardener of Ishtar's father, and then describes how he relates to the goddess' appetite for food:

(Ishullanu) who regularly brought you a basket of dates,
Daily making your table gleam.

(VI.65)

Dates feature in royal hymns as divine offerings (*Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1), and are given by Dumuzi to Inanna in love poetry (*Dumuzid-Inanna T*, ETCSL 4.08.20). When Ishtar is reported by Gilgamesh as propositioning Ishullanu, she asks for a 'taste' of his delights.

Ishullanu asks Ishtar:

Me? What do you want of me?
Has my mother not baked? Did I not eat?
Am I one that eats bread of insults and curses?
Shall I let rushes be my covering against the cold?

(VI. 71–74)

In the above lines, Gilgamesh appears to be using the gardener's son to voice his own concerns about Ishtar's destructive potential, and her insatiable appetite. Gilgamesh creates a revealing contrast between Ishtar and Ishullanu; while the goddess is perpetually full of desire, as seen in Gilgamesh's long list of past loves, Ishullanu emphatically declares himself to be satiated.

Ishtar's role as the patron goddess of Gilgamesh's home city of Uruk makes his rejection problematic. The theme of kingship is central to the narrative of *Gilgamesh*, and this theme is foregrounded in Tablet VI by Gilgamesh's dressing in his royal attire after his bath (Walls, 2001: 42). The maternal and protective functions of the goddess, seen in texts involving her relationship with the Mesopotamian king, are a central concern of the refusal by Gilgamesh.

FOOD AND LIFE

Abusch notes Gilgamesh's discomfort in providing Ishtar with food in the first section of his refusal (Abusch, 1986: 153, footnote 20). The giving, receiving and consumption of food are allegorically linked to marriage, life and sex in the *Epic*. Food delivers the

energy to produce life and its continuation, while at the same time providing nourishment and pleasure. Food in the context of Tablet VI represents the source of life and its power; Gilgamesh describes Ishtar's human suitors as laden with foods to offer her, which creates an image of these suitors as full of the creative potential and vivacity of life. This potential is then destroyed by the ceaseless appetites of the goddess, in Gilgamesh's framing of the myths.

While Gilgamesh links himself and the other human suitors with the provision of life-giving food to goddess, Ishtar herself is only linked to food by the hero in a negative sense; food that is offered by the goddess is presented with associations of decay rather than vitality. This negative comparison between the goddess and her lovers, through the theme of food and consumption, is especially intriguing when we consider it is usually Ishtar who is depicted with all the positive associations noted as being ascribed to food products in this tablet – such as marriage, sex and the life-force. Gilgamesh's fear of death through a romantic association with the goddess is richly ironic in the context of the goddess' links to kingship, and his role as the king of Uruk. The significant role of the goddess in providing the historical Mesopotamian kings with 'life' (explored in Chapter 4) is entirely at odds with Gilgamesh's assessment of Ishtar's 'fatal' allure.

The suggestion that Gilgamesh fears decay and death will follow from Ishtar's offer is supported by the analysis of the theme of food and consumption in the refusal. Further, it seems that Gilgamesh is trading traditionally positive associations with the goddess for negative ones. Gilgamesh's refusal shows him subverting familiar aspects of the goddess' image to build a critical caricature of her character.

ISHTAR RESPONDS

Ishtar has no verbal rejoinder to Gilgamesh's insults; instead, she runs to her father. In previous chapters, Ishtar's influential skill with words was noted, yet in Tablet VI, Gilgamesh is the winner of the verbal joust. Silence from the goddess, as we have also observed, can indicate confusion and danger (but note a seemingly more positive divine silence in the description of the goddess' orgasm, in *Dumuzid-Inana D*, ETCSL 4.08.04. Perhaps orgasm suggests happiness and intimacy have been achieved?). Words between lovers in Sumerian love poetry create emotional intimacy, but Gilgamesh's speech has the opposite effect, resulting in alienation and the unhappy cessation of dialogue.

Yet, Ishtar's words retain some of their persuasive force. She convinces her father Anu, the Mesopotamian sky god, to give her the Bull of Heaven, through speech (and with the judicious use of threats). While in other mythical compositions, even the Sumerian god of wisdom, Enki, is not immune to Ishtar's powers of oratory, Gilgamesh dismisses Ishtar's words easily – they have no positive effect upon him, and serve only to make him angry.

Gilgamesh's extraordinary immunity to Ishtar in the narrative is twofold; he is not attracted to her physical charms, and he is not drawn under the power of her words. Gilgamesh's rebuttal shows his cleverness and independence, yet at the same time,

demonstrates a characteristic failure to consider the full consequences of his actions. Despite his victory, and his deft reworking of Ishtar's image in his speech, Gilgamesh underestimates the repercussions of his words.

Within the hero's speech of rejection it is Ishullanu's *refusal* to make love to the goddess, rather than his being her lover, which results in his unfortunate transformation. The last example of the listed lovers, then, breaks with Gilgamesh's established pattern of doomed paramours and becomes instead a kind of foreboding oracle of future events for the king of Uruk. Like the Ishullanu of the hero's speech, the rejection will result in Gilgamesh's transformation – physically and emotionally. The sequence of events triggered by Gilgamesh's refusal will lead to the death of Enkidu. This loss causes Gilgamesh to clothe himself in the skin of a lion, and seek a remedy for his mortality. By rejecting and insulting Ishtar, Gilgamesh attempts to avoid becoming what he considers to be the next in a pattern of victims of Ishtar's love. In doing so, he becomes a victim of Ishtar's pursuit of vengeance (a theme considered in more detail in Chapter 6).

SACRIFICE AND DIVINE CONNECTIONS

After killing the Bull of Heaven, Gilgamesh offers the creature's heart as a sacrifice to Shamash (Sumerian Utu) (VI. 147–150). The offering of a sacrifice to Shamash, using part of the dead Bull, shows Gilgamesh and Enkidu attempting to give appropriate religious observance to the gods, behaviour which ideally leads to an increased intimacy and favour with the divine. There is irony in the heroes' conduct, however, as increased divine intimacy was exactly what was on offer to Gilgamesh from Ishtar; their union would have made him the sun god's brother-in-law.

Juxtaposed against this offering to Shamash, in the next few lines, is the description of Enkidu throwing the Bull's haunch at Ishtar (VI. 151–157). The contrast of the usage of the Bull's body parts, linked to the heroes' relations with the twin deities Shamash and Ishtar, makes Enkidu's throwing of the haunch darkly humorous – it functions as microcosm of the heroes' improper treatment of the goddess, by offering a kind of parody on 'illegitimate' sacrifice.

ISHTAR IN THE *GILGAMESH EPIC*

The depiction of Ishtar in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, outside the speech of rejection, is more balanced and closely aligned with the presentation of the goddess in other Mesopotamian literary traditions. Within the *Epic*, Ishtar is presented as a more complete character with motives for her actions and is shown to grieve the loss of the Bull (VI. 158–159). The image of a grieving Ishtar may also be referenced in Tablet XI, preceding the description of her fellow goddess, Belet-Ili, to the destruction of humankind in the Mesopotamian Flood (XI. 117–124).

Ishtar's commonly seen thirst for vengeance and the positive presentation of her grieving are present in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, but absent from Gilgamesh's description.

Her sadness at the Bull of Heaven's death shows emotional depth, an aspect of the goddess that is absent from the refusal, but present in the narrative. Ishtar's sadness also foreshadows trouble ahead for Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Whether distressed over the lamentation of a city or lover, or even during an emotional display to enlist support in times of crisis – Ishtar's tears are powerful. In seeking to avenge her brutal rejection by Gilgamesh, Ishtar conforms to the expectations of an audience that would be familiar with her broader identity in myth (Gadd, 1966: 117).

ISHTAR AND GILGAMESH

The relationship between Gilgamesh and Ishtar provides a significant opportunity to consider the interaction of two powerful figures of different genders, associated with strong literary traditions, and recognised as being widely known in antiquity. Individually, Ishtar and Gilgamesh have much to inform modern audiences on conceptions of power, gender, divinity, humanity and heroism in the Ancient Near East. The appearance of Gilgamesh and Ishtar in the world's earliest written records, and the acknowledgement in modern scholarship of the hugely influential role both characters have played in shaping Western thought and culture, means these two figures are uniquely placed to illuminate the cultural world of antiquity.

As useful as it is to consider Ishtar and Gilgamesh separately, considering the nature of their interactions with one another provides a strong basis for further insight into both characters – as well as the opportunity to explore the literary representation of relationships between kings and deities, men and women, and mortal and immortal beings. With this in mind, we move to analysing the depiction of the relationship of Ishtar and Gilgamesh seen in the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*.

GILGAMESH AND ISHTAR IN SUMERIAN MYTH

In contrast to the large volume of scholarship devoted to considering the relationship of Ishtar and Gilgamesh within the *Epic,* research of corresponding size and depth has not been done on the portrayal of Inanna's interactions with Gilgamesh in the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* (ETCSL 1.8.1.4), a composition also known as *The Huluppu Tree*. The discrepancy in scholarly attention between the two sources for the Ishtar/Gilgamesh relationship can be largely attributed to the gap in time between the publications of the two narratives. The text of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is temporally placed at the beginning of the modern academic field of Assyriology, with the first modern translation of the ancient composition published by George Smith in the nineteenth century (Maier, 1997: 1–2). In contrast, translations of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* did not become widely available until the twentieth century.

The most influential early study of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* is the contribution of folklorist Diane Wolkstein, with Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer,

in *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth* (1983). Wolkstein considered the significance of the imagery used in the myth, and how this use of imagery may inform the desires, fears and ambitions of the goddess, as a young woman on the verge of adulthood. In Wolkstein's analysis, the Huluppu tree functions in the narrative as a mirror both for the larger world and for the goddess' interior life.

Due to the obscurity of the myth in terms of modern audiences, and the narrative's usefulness in illuminating further the Ishtar/Gilgamesh relationship, an outline of the myth's plotlines is given below.

GILGAMESH, ENKIDU AND THE NETHERWORLD

The myth begins in the style of a creation account. There is a preoccupation with time, seen in the repetition and parallelism of the first lines of the composition (a detailed analysis of the poetic structures of this text can be found in Gadotti, 2014: 53–59). The emphasis on creation continues in the next several lines, where there is a description of the ordering of the heaven and earth, and their separation from one another; of course, time and order are both common motifs in ancient creation narratives. This ordering occurs under divine supervision:

> When An had taken the heavens for himself, when Enlil had taken the earth for himself, when the nether world had been given to Ereshkigal as a gift.
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.1.4)

This period at the beginning of history seems to have been a time of plenty regarding the supply of food; we are told that bread was being baked at all the shrines of the land, and bread was tasted, and things were 'properly cared for'. The opening of this myth draws easy comparisons with the biblical Creation account from the Book of Genesis, with the ordering of heavens and earth, and the 'goodness' of early life.

The first deity mentioned in this myth is the sky god, An, followed by Enlil and Ereshkigal. Next, Enki is described, somewhat perplexingly, as setting sail in a boat bound for the underworld. From this introduction, we can see the world being divided up by the dominant Mesopotamian deities, and much like in the myth of *Enki and the World Order* (ETCSL 1.1.3) the other deities are able to establish a share of the world and its contents. Inanna's portion of the world is not clearly delineated in the myth's opening lines. The presence of Ereshkigal, and her dominance in the underworld, prevents the simple assumption of Inanna's exclusion being a reflection of gender politics in the ancient world.

Next, the Huluppu tree is introduced. Inanna's initial action in the story is to take possession of the Huluppu tree, to nurture it, and to set in motion a plan to transform the tree into a throne and a bed, fashioned out of its wood, for her own use. The 'chair' and the bed can be considered as having reference to the goddess' widely attested connections to love and leadership in antiquity.

> (Inanna) said: 'When will this be a luxuriant chair on which I can take a seat?' She said: 'When this will be a luxuriant bed on which I can lie down?'
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.1.4)

The goddess' care for the tree allows it to mature. The plant is described growing for ten years, but is still not ready to make the goddess' required furniture. At this point in the text, three unwanted creatures take up residence within the tree. They are a snake 'immune to incantations' in the roots of the tree, the *anzu*-bird and its young among the branches, and the 'phantom maid'. In response to the unwanted guests in her holy garden and her tree, Inanna cries.

The description of Inanna's display of grief, and the lack of response to her tears from the creatures, suggests an expectation in the audience that the creatures *should* have been moved by Inanna's weeping. Despite the tears of the goddess, the creatures stay in their dwelling places within the Huluppu tree.

Next, the deity appeals to her brother, Utu, to remove the unwanted guests from the tree. The arrival of the sun god, Utu, on the scene is described poetically, and in keeping with his characterisation as a solar deity.

> When dawn was breaking, when the horizon became bright, when the little birds, at the break of dawn, began to clamour, when Utu had left his bedchamber.
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.1.4)

Although Inanna (with the usual repetition typical of Sumerian myth) gives a speech recounting the whole sequence of events to her brother – starting her story at the dawn of creation – Utu does not wish to help with her problem.

> Her brother, the young warrior Utu, however, did not stand by her in the matter.
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.1.4)

Faced with Utu's lack of compliance, Inanna next turns to Gilgamesh for assistance. The hero is described as arriving at the same time as the bird-song of dawn, when Utu had left his chamber. This similarity may be a reference to the hero's connection to the sun god, a narrative device to express the passage of time in the myth, or most likely, a means of intensifying the close parallel between Inanna's two potential heroes.

Inanna gives the very same speech to Gilgamesh that she used the previous day to try and win her brother's assistance. In contrast to his reaction to Ishtar's speech in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the young king is instantly moved by the words of the goddess and prepares to go into battle against the creatures on her behalf. He is described pulling on his heavy armour, which although it is 50 minas in weight, burdens him as little as the weight of 50 feathers would. He takes a bronze axe and readies it on his shoulder, before entering the sacred garden of the goddess. The battle is described in three short lines, suggesting an impressive ease to the hero's victory:

> (Gilgamesh) killed the snake immune to incantations living at its roots. The Anzud bird living in its branches took up its young and went into the mountains. The phantom maid living in its trunk left (?) her dwelling and sought refuge in the wilderness.
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.1.4)

Gilgamesh, with the aid of the young men of Uruk who accompanied him, cuts down the tree, strips it, and carves a throne for Inanna, as well as a bed. From its roots, he makes a ball and a mallet. It is not entirely clear what the purpose of Gilgamesh's wooden creations might be; however, he seems to play with them in a destructive manner that disrupts the harmony of the community, before losing them by dropping them into the netherworld.

HARMONY AND CARPENTRY

In *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, Gilgamesh is Inanna's champion, fighting dangerous creatures on her behalf, and crafting furniture to improve the goddess' status. This first section of the myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* functions as a kind of coming-of-age story for the goddess, and another in a series of myths preoccupied with explaining the origins of the goddess' power, her means of acquiring increased potency, and her usage of power once she has acquired it.

Inanna is not the only character shown in the myth to have a developmental arc; Gilgamesh too undergoes challenges which are traditionally associated in ancient epic with the hero becoming a more powerful man. In addition to his battle against dangerous opponents, Gilgamesh cuts down and strips timbers. This part of the myth is reminiscent of Tablet X of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where Gilgamesh must cut down and strip timbers prior to embarking on his journey across the waters of death (*Gilgamesh*, SBV X.165). It is after this brief episode of carpentry in *Gilgamesh* that the legendary king finally achieves his objective of meeting the Flood survivor, Utnapishtim.

Another well-known hero of epic who cuts down and strips timbers is Odysseus, who must use his skills in carpentry before departing from his immortal lover, Calypso (Dalley, 1997). Fashioning a bed out of timber in the *Odyssey* is a gesture with erotic and romantic overtones; Odysseus crafts the marital bed that he shares with Penelope from a tree. With Gilgamesh making a bed for Inanna from the wood of the Huluppu tree, a strong suggestion of sexual intimacy is raised between the two characters.

In this Sumerian narrative, the combination of hero and goddess creates a productive, powerful union. How can we begin to account for the vastly different relationship between the goddess and the hero in this myth?

UTU AND GILGAMESH: BROTHER AND HERO

In the myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, Inanna once again faces the problem of having a request of hers denied, but this time it is her divine brother, Utu, who refuses to accede to her wishes. The reason for Utu's refusal to help his sister is,

again, not clearly elucidated in the narrative. Inanna's strategy of appealing for help from Gilgamesh using the same speech which failed to win over her brother is (somewhat surprisingly) a success. This sequence of events suggests that the goddess has chosen the wrong individual to approach in Utu, rather than the speech she uses to ask for help causing the problem. It is Utu who, in Sumerian love poetry, willingly helps the goddess to find a husband, and most intriguingly, assists her in preparing her marital bed – an activity better suited for a lover than a blood relative. Utu does not craft the bed itself from wood, but does assist in making linens to dress it. It was noted above that making of the bed from the wood of the Huluppu tree by Gilgamesh holds sexual and marital overtones; these are the implications of Inanna's request which Utu is attempting to avoid.

In Sumerian poetry involving the courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi, Utu assists his sister with all of her many requests, except one – he will not go to bed with her (*Dumuzid-Inana A*, ETCSL 4.08.01). Utu tells Inanna it is her bridegroom who will share her bed, and describes him as one born on the sacred marriage throne – seemingly an allusion to her partner's royalty. In his answer, Utu breaks the poetic composition's established pattern, which sees Utu personally tend to each of Inanna's previous demands. The number of requests granted by Utu in the genre of Sumerian love poetry, and his generally close and supportive relationship with the goddess, leads the audience to take note when Utu refuses to help his sister. It seems only when Inanna is inferring Utu may move from brother to lover that he is able to resist her persuasion.

> There shall lie down with you your bridegroom! Amaushumgalana (Dumuzi) shall lie down with you . . . the issue of a noble womb.
>
> (*Dumuzid-Inana A*, ETCSL 4.08.01)

Utu and Gilgamesh, in their relation to Inanna, are juxtaposed in the myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. The goddess' attempt to get help is mirrored later in the myth by the attempts of Gilgamesh to find someone to help him free Enkidu from the netherworld – an effort that also succeeds with his second choice of helper. After unsuccessfully attempting to get help from the storm god Enlil, Gilgamesh secures assistance from Enki – who assigns the task of aiding Gilgamesh to none other than Utu.

The sense of comparison between Inanna's two potential champions, Gilgamesh and Utu, is enhanced by both characters being described in the text as 'warriors'. While Utu and Gilgamesh are both given the title of 'warrior' and 'brother' to Inanna in the text, out of the two, only Gilgamesh is described as 'king'. In describing Gilgamesh in relation to his primary role as Uruk's leader, the authors of the narrative help to consolidate Gilgamesh's identity, and perhaps give a clue as to why he is a more suitable candidate for assisting the goddess than her brother. The myth may be providing a kind of aetiology for the relationship between the goddess of Uruk and its king. Although Utu's royalty is noted in the narrative, he stands outside this special relationship between Uruk's goddess and ruler, and cannot transform his sister's status, either through marriage in the Inanna/Dumuzi narrative, or through supporting her claim to the Huluppu tree. The myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*

does not end with Gilgamesh's use of carpentry to benefit himself and Inanna, but this scene does signal the end of the goddess' active role in the narrative.

GILGAMESH AND AGGA

Gilgamesh's positive connection to Ishtar, again in his capacity as a warrior, is seen in the Sumerian composition *Gilgamesh and Agga* (ETCSL 1.8.1.1). In this myth, Gilgamesh 'places his trust in Inanna' before leading the young men of Uruk to victory in battle. The contrast between Gilgamesh and Ishtar's relationships across various versions of mythical compositions suggests that his embrace or rejection of the goddess is closely related to the hero's identification as the king of Uruk, with its related religious and military responsibilities. Considering the extremely varied nature of the relationship between Ishtar and Gilgamesh requires a deeper analysis than can be attempted here, but whether the two are fighting or friends, the themes of love and kingship are deeply involved, providing an important sub-text for their interactions.

GILGAMESH'S DESTRUCTIVE LOVE

The myth of *Gilgamesh and Agga* has the important distinction of being one of the few compositions involving Ishtar and Gilgamesh where Enkidu manages to survive. In the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Gilgamesh Epic* and *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, Gilgamesh's impetuous and reckless behaviour is at least partially responsible for the death of his companion – although Enkidu himself has a significant (and arguably central) role in his own early demise.

In *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, Gilgamesh warns Enkidu of the important rules he needs to observe to avoid becoming trapped in the underworld; he must not eat or drink. Enkidu's failure to follow Gilgamesh's instructions results in his death – or perhaps, his unwilling residence in the netherworld; the question of whether Enkidu really 'dies' in this myth or is merely a captive in the netherworld has been the subject of several recent works (see especially Cooper, 2013, and Gadotti, 2014). For our purposes here, we can say that Gilgamesh's love has unhappy consequences for Enkidu, which result in his unwilling residence in the netherworld – indeed, Enkidu's (natural) aversion to death forms a large part of Tablet VI of the *Gilgamesh Epic*.

Enkidu's incautious actions again lead to his residence in the netherworld in *Gilgamesh*. In the epic, Enkidu antagonises Ishtar while she is mourning the Bull of Heaven, and even threatens her with violence; his arrogant performance following the death of the Bull eclipses even that of Gilgamesh. Enkidu's sacrilegious behaviour precedes his selection by the gods to be punished by death.

Enkidu's early death in both myths results from his love for the heroic king. Gilgamesh causes Enkidu to turn away from his animal-loving ways to become a killer of beasts, leading to his alienation from his own identity and death (Barron, 2002: 390–391). It is the weeping of Gilgamesh that causes Enkidu to offer to travel to the netherworld to find his lost gifts, recalling Ishtar's persuasive tears from earlier in the narrative.

In his rejection of the goddess' proposal in Tablet VI, Gilgamesh ridicules Ishtar for apparently destroying those who love her. Ironically, Gilgamesh's love has similarly fatal consequences, strengthening the ancient composers' parallels between goddess and hero. In both myths, the death of Enkidu provides a lens through which to explore the humanity of the *Epic*'s great hero. Gilgamesh is greatly affected by the death of his beloved companion in both stories, and he is shown to learn the nature of life and death through the loss of his friend. It is intriguing to note that Gilgamesh appears to consult Enkidu over the nature of the underworld in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, even though earlier in the same myth Gilgamesh demonstrates a sophisticated knowledge of the rules of the Great Below. In both stories, Gilgamesh is preoccupied with death and his own mortality.

OVERVIEW

Gilgamesh and Ishtar are larger than life characters, who display similar desires, and can both, at times, behave recklessly. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the goddess' characteristic use of impassioned speech to achieve her desires has negative consequences, as does the hero's characteristic use of force to respond to antagonism. This pattern of unexpected consequences for characteristic behaviour is reversed in the myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*; Inanna's speech to Gilgamesh is successful in gaining her a champion, and his use of force on her behalf results in a positive outcome – if only temporarily. For Ishtar, the cooperation of Gilgamesh results in a desired outcome. She gains her throne and bed, with strong implications of associated sexual relations in the text. This result strengthens her identification with royalty and sensuality, which are crucial to her identification, and reverses the outcome of the rejection in Tablet VI, where her connection to royalty and sensuality are negated by Gilgamesh.

In this chapter, we have seen that Ishtar's presence in the *Gilgamesh Epic* provides an important reference point for measuring the success with which Gilgamesh inhabits the role of king. The loving relationship between Ishtar and the Mesopotamian king, with its related blessings and benefits, is an important sub-text for the *Epic*'s exploration of the themes of kingship, divinity and mortality. Ishtar traditionally offers the king love and life: while Gilgamesh wants both things, his journey does not end in the embrace of the goddess.

NOTES

1 Translations of *The Gilgamesh Epic*, unless noted, are taken from A.R. George (2003) *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6

VENGEANCE AND DEATH

Vengeance and death both involve transformative processes, with the capacity to reshape the world and its contents. This chapter explores the theme of vengeance in many of the myths surrounding Ishtar, and the complex connection between the goddess and death in Mesopotamian thought. How does Ishtar's frequent pursuit of revenge in mythic narratives shape her characterisation? In what way do we see the vivacious goddess of love connected to the realm of death? In considering possible answers to these questions in this chapter, we further explore the themes of love, intimacy, order and justice in the goddess' image.

The dual concerns of vengeance and death are not randomly aligned in this chapter; both areas can be considered to involve some conceptual overlap in their links to the goddess. Ishtar's pursuit of vengeance commonly results in the death or utter destruction of her enemies. There is a deeper connection between the two tropes than one of cause and effect however – through her connections with vengeance and death, we see the destructive, frightening side of the goddess, while at the same time exploring the boundary between the mortal and divine spheres.

The goddess' desire for vengeance and her role in mourning are both contextually placed within the framework of intimate community and personal relations. Both areas involve the goddess' transformative and transgressive qualities. When pursuing revenge, Ishtar draws upon the support of her family, as well as other divine and quasi-divine beings. The goddess' quest for revenge is larger than life; she frequently uses tactics and accomplices in service of vengeance that are entirely beyond the scope of humanity. The use of supernatural elements in the depictions of the goddess' pursuit of vengeance reinforces her position as a deity closely involved in the maintenance of universal order and the decreeing of destinies.

In her associations with death, the goddess is involved in the expression of appropriate mourning, important for the strengthening and maintenance of community ties. Her presence in lamentations is a subject often noted in modern scholarly works, yet the goddess' connection to death does not end with her role in assisting the bereaved. Instead, Ishtar's continuing love for the deceased extends beyond the frontier of death – several aspects of her connection to death involve caring for the dead person, particularly in the transitional phase from life to death. The establishment of appropriate mourning behaviours and the safe transitioning of the deceased are both areas involving the institution of order during a dangerous time of upheaval, making this a fitting sphere of influence for the goddess.

REVENGE AND ORDER

First, we consider Ishtar's association with revenge. As a warrior goddess, it is perhaps to be expected that Ishtar displays the qualities of rage, vengeance and combativeness, yet the theme of revenge in Ishtar's ancient characterisation has received little scholarly attention. A notable exception is Jacobsen, who comments on Inanna's 'demand for retribution, for revenge', in more than one mythical composition (1970: 84). The pursuit of vengeance is closely related to concepts of justice and order in Mesopotamian myths involving the goddess. While the goddess' connections to divine judgement and the deciding of fates are presented in many different literary sources – a subject to be considered further below – her active seeking of retribution is most clearly seen in myth, due to this genre's emphasis on narrative.

Justice in ancient Mesopotamia, as in the Classical world, was a divine quality. Yet, notions of vengeance, and the relationship of retribution and justice, existed in a distinct social, legal and divine context that was specific to differing cultural environments in antiquity. For this reason, the modern perception of vengeance is probably different to that of the ancient Mesopotamians. In Mesopotamian thought, justice was conceived

Figure 6.1 Line drawing of the Ishtar Stele of Til Barsip. The drawing depicts Ishtar standing on the back of a lion in her war-loving aspect. She holds the lion's leash in one hand. The stele is thought to date around the eighth century BCE. Drawing by Kerry Pryke.

as combining the ideas of straightness and stability, and had the critical function of reproducing cosmic order in the terrestrial world (Démare-Lafont, 2011: 335).

KINGSHIP AND JUSTICE

Justice and order were complex concepts in Mesopotamian thought, involving blessings and curses, order and judgement, and the deciding of fates. Mesopotamian concepts of revenge transformed over time; in earlier times, homicide was conceptualised as a loss to a family or clan, requiring financial compensation (Jacobsen, 1970: 209). The legal concept of compensation can be found in the oldest written law code, the Sumerian *Code of Ur-Nammu* (ca. 2100 BCE). This text is preoccupied with the concepts of balance and equity, although homicide, even at this early stage, is listed as a capital crime. The penalties listed in *the Code of Ur-Nammu* for various crimes reflect a sense of order and proportionality in their degrees of severity. A more 'developed' sense of revenge can be found in later Mesopotamian law codes that introduce the concept of retribution, where vengeance could be enacted within a limited scope. In this perception, homicide takes on a personal aspect, with the deceased party viewed as having a dangerous grievance requiring legal redress.

It is significant that the *Code of Ur-Nammu*, as well as the most famous Mesopotamian law code, the *Code of Hammurabi* (ca. 1760 BCE) is attributed to a Mesopotamian king. Justice and legal order were within the sphere of royal influence; it was the king's role to uphold justice and righteousness, using his divinely sanctioned power to bring order to his land and people. By nature, a system of law is hierarchical, imposing order and circumscribing behaviour in line with a particular worldview; concepts of justice are inherently enmeshed with notions of status. Kings issued decrees of social reform and their names were invoked to create binding legal documents; even the earliest law codes record the Mesopotamian kings' adherence to enforcing social justice, protecting disadvantaged members of society, such as the widow and the orphan. While the commitment to justice demonstrates adherence to the sacred universal order, enforcing justice is also an expression of power.

As the vertex between the human and divine spheres, the king was the ideal candidate to transfer sacred practices into the mortal world. The king's relationship to justice stemmed from his close ties to divinity, but was also a function of his extensive political and administrative powers. The favour of Ishtar was important in granting a good destiny to the king, and in turn, the people of the land. The connection between the favourable relations of the goddess to the king, with its beneficial import for the people, is clearly expressed in the royal composition for a Babylonian king, *Samsu-ilana and Inanna* (ETCSL 2.8.3.1).

> Inanna blessed the king in words: 'Lord, your destiny is a good one, and will delight the beloved . . . Samsu-iluna, it is your power to possess strength, lord of all people!' . . . Standing joyfully beside the king, (Inanna) granted a good destiny to the people for the sake of the king.
>
> (*Samsu-iluna* A, ETCSL 2.8.3.1)

Divine favour from the goddess was linked to intimacy with her, but also with the goodness and righteousness of those who received the blessings:

> (Inanna) judges the evil as evil and destroys the wicked. She looks with favour on the just and determines a good fate for them.
>
> (*Iddin-Dagan A*, ETCSL 2.5.3.1)

The more intimate the relationship of the king with goddess, the more she would bestow him with her favour. This concept is central to the contest of the two rival kings in the epic composition, *Enmerkar and Ensukheshdanna* (considered in Chapter 5). The competition results in a victory for Enmerkar, with his rival admitting that Enmerkar, alone, has been chosen for the holy lap of the goddess.

Ishtar's commitment to righteousness and good government of the people of the land is expressed at times in emotional and desirous terms; she 'yearns' to give justice to the people of the land (*Ur-Ninurta A*, ETCSL 2.5.6.1), and 'loves' righteousness (*Psalms to Ishtar for Assurnasirpal I*, III.4, Foster, 2005: 327). To assist in fulfilling her desire for justice, she selects the king as a 'shepherd of living beings'. Again, the relationship between Ishtar and the Mesopotamian king is presented as one with mutual benefits (a subject explored in more detail in Chapter 4) as the king helps the goddess to fulfil her desire for good governance.

DIVINE JUSTICE

The king is not the goddess' only partner in the maintenance of cosmic and earthly order. In the Mesopotamian pantheon, Ishtar's twin brother, the sun god Utu/Shamash, is the deity most commonly linked to establishing justice, fighting iniquity and restoring order (see for example *Protector of the king* 2, IV.51.h, Foster 2005: 738). Many other deities, such as Marduk, Enlil and Anu, share his concern for righteousness and cosmic balance. Like her brother, Ishtar is presented as having a zealous commitment to justice and upholding universal order, and at times the twin deities work together in the deciding of fates (*The Lamb*, II.b, 212). The goddess' transformative capacity can be seen in her ability to change established fates, at times improving destinies through the absolution of sin (*Great Prayer to Ishtar*, III.27.b, Foster, 2005: 604). As well as decreeing destinies by herself and with her brother, the goddess 'finalises' the verdicts of the other great gods (*Inana C*, ETCSL 4.07.3).

In several other aspects of the goddess' image, such as her marriage to Dumuzi and her role in battle, we have seen the primacy of Ishtar's close personal relationships with those around her, and this trend continues in her connection with cosmic order. While it is hard to be certain what is meant by 'finalising' verdicts, the term may perhaps be a reference to her role in enforcing order and fate, once divinely decreed. The role of re-establishing order is an important aspect of the goddess' pursuit of vengeance in several myths, to be considered in detail below.

COMPLEXITY AND VARIETY IN MYTHS INVOLVING VENGEANCE

Vengeance in Mesopotamia was closely linked to justice, order and 'straightness'. Ishtar's retribution in myth is complicated: social and cosmic elements are embedded in the nature of the perceived crimes, the type of revenge enacted, and the contextual setting of the narratives. Ishtar's vengeful acts often contain supernatural elements, and many of the transgressive acts that she avenges occur in a religious context. The combination of religious transgressions and supernatural redress in myths involving Ishtar emphasises the divine significance of universal order.

The pursuit of vengeance is a key narrative element of many mythical texts involving the goddess, and this theme illustrates her commitment to upholding justice and order. Although, as previously mentioned, it has not been the recipient of a great deal of scholarly attention, the goddess' vengeful and 'vindictive' aspect have been noted by Kramer, who associated this part of the goddess' character with her identification as a war deity (1979: 75–76). Kramer is right to stress the link between the warrior Ishtar and revenge: Ishtar's vengefulness, like her abilities in the field of warfare, is conceptually joined to her authoritative influence on cosmic order. However, it is not only military conquests that draw her retribution – romantic conquests, too, can inspire the dangerous wrath of the goddess of love. We will now consider the theme of Ishtar's pursuit of retribution from narrative compositions, including her best-known myths of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

A mixture of social and cosmic elements to the goddess' vengeance can be seen in the narrative of *Inanna's Descent* (ETCSL 1.4.1), where the death of the shepherd god Dumuzi is shown as a direct consequence of his disloyal behaviour following his wife's death (considered in Chapter 3). Inappropriate mourning is as an action with everyday aspects, yet the goddess' retaliatory condemnation of her husband is enacted by supernatural creatures. In the *Gilgamesh Epic*, Ishtar's decision to (attempt to) kill Gilgamesh with the use of the Bull of Heaven is framed in the narrative as a response to his brutal rejection of her proposal. As with Dumuzi, the goddess' desire for revenge is sparked by what she perceives as antagonistic behaviour from the target of her vengeance – yet a romantic rejection may perhaps be viewed by the myth's audience as an unhappily mundane occurrence. In response to this provocation, Ishtar aims to destroy Gilgamesh using the celestial warrior, the Bull of Heaven: an inflated and supernatural retaliation to a crime with everyday aspects.

While the goddess' ill treatment at the hands of Dumuzi and Gilgamesh contains commonplace aspects, both 'crimes' also involve a significant sacred element. Mourning was a serious religious duty in Mesopotamia, one closely associated with Ishtar herself, and Gilgamesh's role as the king of Uruk encompasses divine obligations – again, particularly towards Ishtar. The combination of social and religious aspects in the 'crimes' against the goddess is reflected in the similarly complex nature of her choice of punishments, to be explored in more detail below.

Over half of the content of the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* is concerned with the goddess' angry response to her violation by the gardener (considered in detail in Chapter 2). The sexual violation of the goddess works as a literary hinge

which shapes the direction and content of the second half of the narrative. Again, we see the goddess' response to a crime which contains a combination of sacred and regrettably commonplace aspects, and her retribution involves the summoning of dangerous supernatural forces.

INANNA AND EBIH

The Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Ebih* demonstrates that the goddess' revenge is not limited to individuals, but can extend even to features of the natural environment. In this myth, Inanna becomes angry with the mountain (the eponymous Ebih) for not showing her the appropriate amount of esteem and respect. In response to the landmark's crime, the goddess destroys the mountain. This myth is one of several Sumerian compositions featuring the goddess that are thought to have been authored by the priestess and poet, Enheduanna, whose work is known from copies dating to the Old Babylonian period. In this myth, Inanna clearly explains the cause of her choice to destroy the mountain, giving a morally based cause for her vengeful behaviour:

> (Inana announced:) 'When I, the goddess, was walking around in heaven . . . as I approached the mountain range of Ebiḫ it showed me no respect.
>
> Since they did not act appropriately on their own initiative, since they did not put their noses to the ground for me, since they did not rub their lips in the dust for me, I shall fill my hand with the soaring mountain range and let it learn fear of me.'
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.2)

The goddess' next move in the story is to dress herself in her best clothes and carefully adorn herself with her jewellery, before setting out to visit An. In previous chapters, Ishtar's efforts to enhance her physical beauty were seen to focus the goddess' powers prior to a time of upheaval, and the myth of *Inanna and Ebih* provides a further example of the powerful quality of the goddess' grooming.

After visiting An and explaining what she is about to do, as well as presenting the cause for her actions, the goddess then goes to battle against the mountain. The goddess destroys the mountain, in a passage that is rich with violent imagery:

> My lady (Inanna) confronted the mountain range. She advanced step by step. She sharpened both edges of her dagger. She grabbed Ebiḫ's neck as if ripping up esparto grass. She pressed the dagger's teeth into its interior. She roared like thunder.
>
> The rocks forming the body of Ebiḫ clattered down its flanks. From its sides and crevices great serpents spat venom. She damned its forests and cursed its trees. She killed its oak trees with drought. She poured fire on its flanks and made its smoke dense. The goddess established authority over the mountain. Holy Inanna did as she wished.
>
> (ETCSL 1.3.2)

In the above excerpt from the text, we can see Inanna's assault of the mountain involving physical, verbal and cosmic elements. With her powerful voice, the goddess

gives a terrifying war cry, before using her capacity to change fates to curse the mountain's trees. The myth ends with Inanna's proud recitation of her own deeds, and a comment of praise from the narrator.

INANNA AND BILULU

The Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Bilulu* shows the deity avenging the murder of her husband. In a storyline that involves several unique features, Inanna is presented in this text as taking revenge *on behalf* of Dumuzi, rather than seeking vengeance upon him. Discovering that her husband has been killed by the old bandit woman (Bilulu) and her son, Inanna hunts down the killers and punishes them. The text emphasises that Inanna's actions are to benefit her husband, meaning that this text departs from the usual 'pattern' of a direct, personal provocation of the goddess. In avenging her husband, Inanna is motivated by love, as well as anger, and her actions have the crucial benefit of allowing Dumuzi to find peace in the afterlife. Ishtar has access to a wider array of options for channelling her vengeance than would be available to mortals; in this myth, she uses physical transformation in a punitive capacity, striking down Bilulu and her son, Jirjire, as well as changing both their form and their function (*Inanna and Bilulu*, ETCSL 1.4.4).

A 'PATTERN' OF REVENGE

Concern for justice and equity could be viewed as something of a divine family hobby in the Mesopotamian pantheon. The roles of the various deities in respect to destiny, righteousness and order show some variance, and were presented differently in different periods and sources. Despite this uncertainty, Ishtar's role in establishing justice is most often enacted alongside her fellow deities.

In her efforts to exact revenge in Mesopotamian myth, the goddess shows a similar combination of independent and collaborative action as seen in her broader identification with the establishment of destiny and justice. The complicated nature of Ishtar's vengeance lends her depiction in myth a human quality. She is frequently described as angry prior to enacting revenge, yet she is often presented as aware of the consequences of her actions on the characters she targets, and at times shows sympathy for them.

Ishtar's retribution often involves the support of other deities or supernatural beings. The goddess decides on the need to exact vengeance herself, yet once this decision is made, she seeks the help and support of other deities to pursue her retributive goals. In this regard, the mythical representation of Ishtar's attempts to redress a perceived imbalance can be viewed as forming a general pattern, adding a sense of coherency to her characterisation across several ancient literary sources. As noted in Chapter 3, the goddess' ability to access divine assistance (in all of its many forms) should be viewed as a sign of her high status and social connectedness.

Although not every act of vengeance contains each step of the pattern described in this chapter, and despite the admittedly small sample size of the myths involved, these narratives generally involve variations on the following steps; first, there is some

provocation, then an emotional response from the goddess. Next, she asks for advice or support from another supernatural being, before gaining assistance to carry out her plan. Once revenge has been enacted, there is often a short section of the myth where the goddess celebrates, or explains the choice or import of her own actions. We will now look at this pattern and its variances in more detail, to explore the connections between the goddess, order and retribution. Several aspects of this pattern, such as the enlisting of divine assistance and the emphasis on the goddess' provocation, are important for placing the goddess' unlimited scope for vengeance into a defined context.

A Cause for Vengeance

The first common feature among a variety of mythic narratives featuring Ishtar is the initial delineation of a cause for the goddess' search for retribution. The cause is presented overtly at an early point in the narrative. Ishtar is provoked, or at least, she considers herself to have been provoked; at times her fellow deities express misgivings over her assessment of the situation (for example, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, SBV, VI.89–91). Common means of antagonising the goddess include acts of disloyalty, slights to her status, romantic missteps, and acts of violence, either against the deity herself or her loved ones.

The contrast in divine perceptions of the necessity for vengeance is of interest in regards to the often community-spirited approach of the goddess to retribution. The difference in views between deities may be due to the goddess having a quick temper – perhaps a side effect of her embodiment of lust and vivacity. In any case, the perception by different deities of the same events in individual ways demonstrates the sophisticated literary style of ancient Mesopotamian myth narratives. In this aspect of the goddess' identification, we see that although Ishtar is closely connected to her fellow deities, she makes decisions independently; her relationships are complicated and not always harmonious.

An Angry Goddess

Next, the goddess becomes angry or upset. Although Ishtar inhabits an important role in maintaining cosmic order, of which her vengefulness is a part, this does not mean she undertakes her pursuit of redress against offenders in an entirely cool and detached manner. Ishtar's initial reaction to provocation is usually a strongly emotional one – she shows anger, distress, or a combination of both. When faced with the disloyalty of her husband Dumuzi in the myth of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* (ETCSL 1.4.1), Inanna's emotional response adheres to the formula used previously in the myth by the Anunna judges: she shouts at Dumuzi with the 'speech of anger'. Inanna expresses anger and dismay in her response to her rape by the gardener in *Inanna and Shukaletuda* (ETCSL 1.3.3), and she weeps before avenging Dumuzi in *Inanna and Bilulu* (ETCSL 1.4.4). The goddess also sheds tears in response to Gilgamesh's insults, and is described as 'furious' (*Gilgamesh*, VI.80–83).

The emotional response of the goddess is an important narrative device in these myths; it emphasises the transgression that has occurred and foreshadows her attempts to gain retribution for her perceived injury. Mesopotamian myths, as we have seen, often involve multiple perspectives. By showing the negative consequences of the provocation on Ishtar's mood, the composers of the myth privilege the perspective of the goddess, and draw the audience's sympathies to her cause. The structuring of the emotional response following the transgression is not a feature of all myths involving the goddess' vengeance. In *Inanna and Ebih*, the goddess' anger is only described just prior to her assault on the mountain, after requesting help from Anu.

Once the emotional response of the goddess has been described, she then instigates the process of retribution. This entails taking decisive action, and the goddess often has a specific (although variable) plan for the type of action required. Ishtar's selection of punishments demonstrates her capacity for agency as well as her considerable creativity.

The Request for Permission or the Seeking of Counsel

In several Mesopotamian myths, the next step in the process of Ishtar's vengeance is to seek permission for her intended actions, or sometimes support from a relative or divine authority figure. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, we have seen Ishtar asking the sky god, Anu, for the Bull of Heaven; she is described pleading her case and explaining why she needs the services of the cosmic warrior (*Gilgamesh*, VI.94–100, also in *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, ETCSL 1.8.1.2). Not all authority figures approached by the goddess are male; in *Inanna and Bilulu*, the goddess asks for and receives the permission of her mother before setting out to avenge Dumuzi's death (ETCSL 1.4.4).

In the story of *Inanna and Ebih*, it is once again An who is approached by Inanna in consultation before she attacks her enemy. In this myth, and in *Gilgamesh*, An seems unwilling to support the angry young goddess when approached for assistance. However, it seems the 'necessary' element in this step is the goddess actively seeking support and advice, rather than successfully gaining permission for her activities. In *Gilgamesh*, the goddess uses threats to get Anu to agree to help; in *Inanna and Ebih*, she proceeds with her plan despite his concerns.

The myth of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* (ETCSL 1.4.4) is possibly an exception to the more usual pattern; Inanna does not travel to visit with a relative or authority figure on her way back from the underworld after learning of Dumuzi's disloyalty. The text moves immediately from the description of Dumuzi enjoying himself to his punishment, a sequencing that is probably necessary for the coherence of the narrative. Yet, this case is also exceptional in that the goddess is acting under the instructions of the Annunaki (judges of the netherworld), which may possibly explain the divergence from the more usual pattern of narrative events:

> As Inana was about to ascend from the underworld, the Anuna seized her: 'Who has ever ascended from the underworld . . . If Inana is to ascend from the underworld, let her provide a substitute for herself.'
>
> (ETCSL 1.4.1)

In instructing Inanna to find a replacement for the space she is leaving in the netherworld, it is likely that the Annunaki collectively inhabit the role of the authority figure who sanctions (or at times, does not sanction) the taking of revenge.

The seeking of advice and support prior to attempting to redress the imbalance of justice (as perceived by the goddess) carries several functions in the narratives. The importance of giving a community context to retribution is considered below. A further outcome of this behaviour is the creation of greater intimacy between the myth's audience and the goddess; the request for assistance usually involves the goddess revealing her plans for revenge prior to their enactment, giving the audience a preview of the action to come. This 'preview' also allows the audience to gauge whether the goddess' plans are unfolding in the narrative as expected; when Gilgamesh kills the Bull of Heaven, rather than being killed by the beast, it is clear to the audience that Ishtar's plans have failed (*Gilgamesh*, VI.125–146).

Enlisting Assistance

The next move for Inanna in gaining retribution is to find an accomplice, frequently one with considerable cosmic heft. While not a feature in every myth where the goddess seeks retribution, the step of enlisting an assistant forms an important element in several narratives. In *Gilgamesh*, of course, we see the Bull of Heaven helping the goddess in her pursuit of vengeance, and in *Inanna's Descent*, the *gala* demons work with Inanna to punish Dumuzi. In the myth of *Inanna and Shukaletuda* (ETCSL 1.3.3), Enki, the god of wisdom, appears to function both as the authority figure and the accomplice, in that he gives the goddess the necessary advice she requires to successfully fulfil her quest to hunt down and kill Shukaletuda.

The diverse nature of Ishtar's vengeance raises the question of whether there is any observable connection between the type of provocation that motivates Ishtar's vengeance, with the type of revenge chosen, as well as with the identity of the selected accomplice. Although perhaps beyond the scope of this chapter, it is curious to note that the size or 'toughness' of the opponent does not appear to correspond clearly with the choice of accomplice. In *Inanna and Ebih* (ETCSL 1.3.2), Inanna does not seem to require an accomplice to destroy the mountain, although she does use several tools to attack the landmass, including a dagger, a towering flood, an evil wind, fire, drought, smoke and curses. The mountain is a natural feature of the landscape, and the goddess uses natural elements in her destructive assault against it, although, as is frequently observed in myths of the goddess' vengeance, these natural elements are unusually grand in scale.

For a landmark, Ebih seems to be a particularly dangerous opponent. Inanna is warned off attacking it by An, who fears for her safety:

> An, the king of the deities, answered (Inanna): 'My little one demands the destruction of this mountain – what is she taking on? . . . It has poured fearsome terror on the abodes of the gods . . . The mountain range's radiance is terrible – maiden Inanna, you cannot oppose it.' Thus he spoke.
>
> (*Inanna and Ebiḫ*, ETCSL 1.3.2)

This is a stronger warning from An than Ishtar receives when she is about to take on Gilgamesh, where she has the considerable advantage of being accompanied by her bovine collaborator. Unlike the mountain, which is annihilated by Inanna, Gilgamesh manages, at least temporarily, to forfend against the dangers presented by the goddess.

While the particularly serious warning from An probably means that the mountain is a highly dangerous enemy, the possibility remains that An, in these myths, may not be the best judge of the relative dangers posed by the goddess' adversaries. Delnero has observed that the close parallels of the exchanges between Inanna and An in these two myths function to reinforce the sense of coherency to their relationship in myth (2011: 139). Considering the myth of *Inanna and Ebih* in a symbolic manner may shed light on An's concerns; mountains were closely associated with death in Sumerian thought (Jacobsen, 1987a: 47). The Sumerian word for mountain – *kur* – also means 'netherworld' (Katz, 2005: 69). It seems likely that the myth plays upon this symbolism, in light of the goddess' experience of death in her descent to the underworld (ETCSL 1.4.1).

If we accept that the mountain is related conceptually to death, this provides further unity to the goddess' characterisation in myth. In *Inanna and Ebih*, and *Gilgamesh*, the deities perceive the events of the narrative differently, revealing some sense of their priorities. While the threat of death is taken very seriously by An, Ishtar – the love goddess – is more concerned by a romantic snub.

In the narratives of *Gilgamesh*, *Inanna and Ebih* and also in the myth of *Inanna and An* (ETCSL 1.3.5), An consistently underestimates Inanna's capabilities and her determination. At the same time, the sky god is shown to treat the younger deity with concern and admiration; he responds with 'delight' at her presence (ETCSL 1.3.5), adding complexity and depth to the personal dynamics between the two figures. Inanna's eagerness to rush into action, juxtaposed with An's hesitancy, reinforces the paternalistic dynamic between the pair.

Revenge is Taken

Next, the actual act of vengeance takes place. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero notes the goddess' inclination to physically transform those who oppose her (*Gilgames*h, VI.58–78). With the clear exception of the failed attempt at revenge on Gilgamesh, Ishtar's retributory actions often involve a change in the physical appearance or state of her adversaries. For the 'disrespectful' mountain and Shukaletuda, this transformation appears to involve a diminishment in physical size. This change in size would most likely have involved a commensurate decrease in status. The reduction in the mountain's height means it will no longer be able to be 'arrogantly' tall and refuse to bow low before the goddess. Shukaletuda's diminishment and death prevent him from committing further acts of sexual violence; his lying on top of the goddess during the rape suggests physical dominance.

Death is frequently a composite aspect of the vengeance brought against Ishtar's enemies, as we see with Shukaletuda, Bilulu, Ebih, and Dumuzi. Gudam, the violent warrior, seems to also be threatened with death by Inanna in a very fragmentary Sumerian composition:

> Gudam began to grieve, and was tear-stricken: 'Inana, spare my life!'
>
> (*Inana and Gudam*, ETCSL 1.3.4)

The incomplete nature of the text makes it hard to tell if Gudam's plea, and his subsequent attempts to blackmail the goddess, helped him to avoid a capital punishment for his transgression. Without knowing Gudam's fate, Gilgamesh once again seems to provide the main exception to the rule, although Enkidu's death is likely to perform a kind of substitution for the hero's death (Mandell, 1997: 127).

It is important to note the variety in the deaths of Ishtar's enemies; Bilulu and Shukaletuda appear to be cursed before they die, but the curses are not the same (*Inanna and Bilulu*, ETCSL 1.4.4; *Inanna and Shukaletuda*, ETCSL 1.3.3). Ebih is simply annihilated through a multi-layered divine offensive (*Inanna and Ebiḫ*, ETCSL 1.3.2), and Dumuzi is cursed and dragged away (*Inanna's descent to the Netherworld*, ETCSL 1.4.1). The variability in the unhappy fates of Ishtar's opponents enhances the narrative richness of the myths, and emphasises the goddess' creativity and potency.

Although not commented upon in the texts, it is possible that Gilgamesh's exceptionality in the theme of Ishtar's vengeance may be due to his special status as the king of Uruk (or his quasi-divinity). Kings, as we have noted, are important in assisting Mesopotamian divinities to establish justice, in a mutually rewarding relationship. Whether or not Gilgamesh's royalty imparts some immunity in this area, Ishtar's attempts to gain retribution on Gilgamesh in the *Epic* highlights further the extreme disorderliness of their relations in Tablet VI, especially in light of Gilgamesh's role as monarch.

Even when her revenge is not perfectly enacted, as with Gilgamesh, there remains a poetic sense in the story of fitting the planned punishment to the attributes and actions of the transgressor. In her selection of the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh, Ishtar is choosing a champion who mirrors the varied nature of the quasi-divine hero. The Bull's ability to transgress the boundaries between the earthly realm and the divine makes the beast the perfect foil for the legendary king of Uruk, and parallels drawn in the narrative between Bull and hero are emphasised by the at times clumsy manner in which the Bull attempts to fit within the limits of the human world; due to its heavenly origins, the creature's very presence on earth is destructive.

The case with Gilgamesh is complex and exceptional in almost every aspect, but for the most part we can say that Ishtar's retribution is almost always efficiently enacted – in the sense that it is almost impossible for her enemy to reoffend.

Victory, Mercy and Return to Order

A frequent final step in the pattern of vengeance is a brief post-script in praise of the goddess, and sometimes a speech where the goddess explains to the offender why she has acted in such a punitive way, or a celebration of her victory. The offending behaviour is described, and the goddess may praise her own successful efforts (*Inanna and Ebiḫ*, ETCSL 1.3.2).

The final lines of Inanna and Bilulu give a clear sense that Inanna's behaviour has been appropriate; through her act of vengeance, the universal order has been restored:

> How truly she proved the equal of Dumuzid, avenging him; by killing Bilulu, Inanna proved equal to him!
>
> (*Inanna and Bilulu*, ETCSL 1.4.4)

It was noted above that the goddess' vengeful acts show some variety. This diverse quality to the goddess' actions in myth is further demonstrated in her at times merciful treatment of her enemies. In Chapter 2, it was noted that Inanna's decision to let Shukaletuda's name live on could be viewed as an act of mercy. Inanna decrees that Shukaletuda's name shall live on in song, and make songs sweet (*Inanna and Šukaletuda*, ETCSL 1.3.3). The punishment is intriguing given the goddess' enjoyment of music; she changes the form of her attacker into something from which, in wider literature, she finds pleasurable. This amelioration of the punishment given to Shukaletuda can be contrasted with the goddess' treatment of her husband's killer, Bilulu. When Inanna catches up to the bandit woman, she declares that she will kill Bilulu, and destroy her name with her (*Inana and Bilulu*, ETCSL 1.4.4).

For modern audiences, the association of mercy with the vengeful goddess of battle is perhaps unexpected, yet it is an aspect of her ancient identification referenced in numerous texts (such as *Literary Prayer to Ishtar*, III.28, Foster, 2005: 609). The power to relent and show mercy and compassion are frequently conceptually linked to the ability to decide fates and make judgments in hymns and myths involving the Mesopotamian deities (for example, *Literary Prayer to Marduk*, III.29, Foster, 2005: 611, and *The Lament for Nibru*, ETCSL 2.2.4).

In keeping with Shamash's deep connection to justice, he is also presented as having a great capacity to relent and have mercy; this quality is seen in the Sumerian myth of *Dumuzi's Dream* (ETCSL 1.4.3). For Ishtar, the ability to relent is a key narrative element of the Old Babylonian *Agushaya Hymn* (II.5, Foster, 2005: 97–106).

> The lioness Ishtar quieted, her heart was appeased.

Ishtar's ability to pursue vengeance or to be merciful relate to her close relationship with decreeing destinies and promoting righteousness. Both mercy and vengeance are powerful expressions of the goddess' ability to enact judgments, in the earthly and heavenly sphere. The divine quality of mercy is often connected to prayers for the absolution of sins and requests for divine healing in Mesopotamian literature, a connection seen in royal compositions directed to Ishtar (such as *Psalms to Ishtar for Assurnasirpal I: On Occasion of Illness*, III.4.a, Foster, 2005: 327–330). The goddess' ability to heal is explored in further detail below.

As well as functioning as an expression of her capacity to enact justice and change fates, the provision of mercy in literature associated with Ishtar gives depth to her characterisation. The complexity of Ishtar's characterisation in myth is seen in the Sumerian version of *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*; although Inanna condemns Dumuzi to be killed in her place, she appears (despite the admittedly fragmentary evidence) to mourn her husband and to pine for him at a later stage in the narrative. This behaviour of the goddess in response to her husband's death carries the additional benefit of ending the cycle of improper mourning and the related cosmic imbalance.

The above analysis of myths involving Ishtar's lust for revenge has shown an interesting juxtaposition of behaviours from the goddess. She acts autonomously and transgressively, while also adhering to what appear to be accepted patterns of behaviour, such as requesting permission before acting. The narratives combine social and sacred elements in the crimes and punishments involved, and commonly result in the restoration of order after a period of disruption. Within the course of a single narrative, Ishtar can be seen to be aware of the structure of the world around her, but also capable of superseding that structure in the pursuit of her own ends.

SOCIAL CONTEXTS FOR JUSTICE

The concept of placing limitations on the scope of vengeance was an important ethical and legal consideration in the ancient law codes of the Ancient Near East, necessary for the maintenance of social order. In the *Code of Hammurabi*, and more famously in the Hebrew Bible, there is a demonstrated concern for circumscribing the impact of revenge. The need to maintain a sense of balance towards vengeful behaviour in society likely stems from an awareness of the powerful destructive potential of vengeance, its unlimited capacity for self-renewal, and the negative effects of the pursuit of vengeance on the harmonious order of a community. Revenge, left unchecked, may swiftly escalate beyond any sense of proportion with the original transgression, in a cycle of destruction that is perpetually renewed and fuelled by itself. Vengeance, conceptualised in this way, has a boundless capacity for destruction. While unchecked vengeance might tear at the fabric of social order, criminal behaviour still required redress, as criminal transgressions threatened the larger order of the cosmos as well as community relations.

Ishtar's pursuit of justice and retribution is presented in ancient literature in the context of a social and supernatural frame. Ishtar's revenge is 'checked' in a sense by her appeals to relatives and authority figures for advice and support, behaviour which often precedes her retributory actions in myth. The significance of this behaviour in limiting the scope of the goddess' revenge can be seen in its reproduction through several different myths, and provides a social element to her behaviour.

It is clear from Ishtar's interactions with those close to her that she is not reaching *far* beyond the boundaries of balanced retribution, even as these boundaries are tested. When anticipating difficulty in acquiring the means for her chosen act of vengeance in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the goddess warns that she will raise the dead from the underworld to consume the living (*Gilgamesh*, VI.96–99). While this threat expresses the transgressive capabilities of the goddess, at the same time, Ishtar is not, as a first choice, selecting the most destructive and feared means of vengeance available to her.

RAISING THE DEAD

Ishtar's threat to raise the dead in *Gilgamesh* is a much more serious action than her borrowing the Bull of Heaven would be – as can be seen in Anu's sudden capitulation

to the latter when threatened with the former (*Gilgamesh* VI.101–114). In response to Ishtar's actions, Anu makes the goddess agree to undertake seven years of preparation for the people of Uruk, so that they may survive the famine brought by the Bull's appearance on earth. This creates a sense of irony in narrative, where Anu's concern for preserving the vital source of food for Uruk's people is juxtaposed against Ishtar's threat to make the people themselves a source of food for the dead.

Anu's foresight regarding the negative consequences of bringing the Bull to earth further emphasises the more patient, measured character of the elder deity, in contrast with the angry young goddess, and highlights the usefulness of the 'checking' of Ishtar's vengeance through her consultation with others. Anu's wisdom helps to prevent some of the harmful effects of the Bull's use by Ishtar, but despite his objections he cannot prevent the goddess' vengeful activities altogether.

The unappealing threat to raise the dead commonly results in the individual making the threat being granted their desire. The threat is used to 'positive' effect by Ishtar in the myth of *Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld* (III.19, Foster, 2005: 498) and by her sister Ereshkigal in the myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, where the goddess of the underworld makes the threat to regain her divine lover, Nergal, when she has not had her 'fill of his charms'. This Akkadian narrative is known from several versions, including a Middle Babylonian copy from El-Amarna in Egypt, with all versions poorly preserved.

> If [you do not] send t[hat] god (Nergal),
> Accor[ding to the authority of the lower regi]ons and the great netherworld,
> I (Ereshkigal) shall raise up the dead to devour the living,
> I shall make the dead outnumber the living!
>
> (III.20, Foster, 2005: 520)

From the text above, we can see that in myths related to the underworld, Inanna and Ereshkigal both use the threat of raising the dead as an initial response to not getting their own way. Notably, both goddesses are concerned with gaining entry to the underworld, but in distinctly different ways. The suggestion of opening the gates to allow a desired visitor entry is poetically juxtaposed with the danger of unwanted visitors being permitted to exit into the upper world – the 'opening' can have positive or negative consequences, depending on how closely it reflects the desires of the deities involved.

Both Ishtar and her sister use what is arguably the most serious threat at their disposal while attempting to redress romantic problems – once again raising the issue of whether there is an observable correlation between the seriousness of the crime or provocation, and the scale of the potential divine consequences in myth. Ishtar's primary association with love makes it perhaps unsurprising that a romantic rejection would be viewed as a serious problem for the goddess, in keeping with the grave nature of her resulting threat. Despite the sense of 'balance' in Mesopotamian concepts of vengeance, Van De Mieroop has made the important observation that, in Mesopotamia, 'the punishment is equal to the crime only when the perpetrator and the victim are also equal' (2003: 14).

The foregrounding of the provocation of the goddess within the narratives of myths involving Ishtar's retribution also appear to act as a kind of 'checking' mechanism. Earlier, it was noted that Ishtar's accomplices in vengeance do not always agree with her that revenge is justified. In *Gilgamesh*, Anu tries to suggest to the goddess that there may be mitigating factors in the hero's rude refusal.

> Anu opened his mouth to speak,
> Saying to the lady Ishtar:
> 'Ah, but did you not provoke King Gilgamesh,
> So then Gilgamesh recounted things that insult you,
> Things that insult and revile you?'
>
> (VI.87–91)

An once again suggests Ishtar adopt the policy of clemency in the myth of *Inanna and Ebih* (ETCSL 1.3.2). As has been noted above, An suggests the mountain is too dangerous and mighty to attack, and that the young goddess must not oppose it.

Not all of Inanna's accomplices attempt to change her mind about seeking vengeance. Although the text is badly fragmented, Inanna's decision to avenge her dead husband appears to have the support of her mother in the myth of *Inanna and Bilulu* (ETCSL 1.4.4). In *Inana and Šukaletuda* (ETCSL 1.3.3), Enki does not argue with Inanna about helping in her search for Shukaletuda – although we must note that the goddess once again employs a threat along with her request for help to ensure the elder deity's support.

In having the myth's protagonist consult with family members and elder deities, the punishment of vengeance in these myths may be reflecting the familial or social basis of the concept of vengeance in Mesopotamian society. The seeking of permission to act, or support by Ishtar in these myths, also functions as a narrative device, allowing for different perspectives on the story's events to be voiced, other than the perspectives of Inanna and the object of her retribution. The perspective of another deity, one more emotionally removed from events, helps to inform the audience about what is at stake, and provides a context for Ishtar's actions.

COSMIC CONTEXTS FOR JUSTICE

In contrast to the social and familial elements seen in myths of the goddess' retribution, the exaggerated scope of Ishtar's punitive acts reflects the cosmic nature of her attempts to bring about justice. In the oversized scale of Ishtar's vengeance, her power is articulated in an emphatic manner. The goddess is shown to have the capacity to enlist the forces of nature such as storms and dust, as well as the ability to bring life to the dead and death to the living. The expansive and transformative aspects of the goddess' retribution reinforce her divine status, as well as her connectedness to the heavenly and earthly realms, and other members of the pantheon.

Ishtar's vengeful acts are imbued with powerful elements of danger. The goddess' response to the cosmic imbalance caused by a transgression is often to exacerbate the universal disorder; she brings heavenly beings down from the sky, blocks out the sun

and brings demons forth from the underworld. The social stature of her victims shows great variety, with even the king of Uruk at risk of the goddess' retributory acts. The disorderly and dangerous quality of Ishtar's vengeance reinforces the impression of supernaturalism, and emphasises the necessity of divine favour for the harmonious continuation of universal order.

DEATH IN MESOPOTAMIAN THOUGHT AND CULTURE

The limits of mortality define more clearly than any other area the boundary between the world of the divine and that of mortals. Human mortality is an unalterable constant in an often changing world; the universality of the human condition transcends differences in status, culture and gender. In comparison to the timespans inhabited by theistic figures, the brevity of mortal lives contributes to the hierarchical structure of human and divine relations. Most deities, while conceptualised as maintaining a perpetual freedom from the limits of mortality, are not presented as shifting between the realms of heaven, earth and the underworld in the manner credited to Ishtar. With her potent capacity for transcending limitations and crossing boundaries, Ishtar is intrinsically related to the (ordinarily) final transition of death.

The ancient Mesopotamians conceived of an afterlife which contained deities, demons and dust. While some of the best known literary works from the Ancient Near East involve voyages to the underworld – including detailed descriptions of what is found there – the understanding of this aspect of Mesopotamian thought is still developing in modern scholarship. While ancient narratives provide some sense of custom, such as the importance of properly mourning the deceased, the mythical nature of these sources creates uncertainty about how much the information they offer can illuminate the Mesopotamian conceptions of death more broadly. The wide variety of sources for Mesopotamian views on death and the afterlife, including ritual texts, lamentations, magic and medical texts, omens, hymns and prayers, provide a sense of balance to our modern perspective yet also create conflicting accounts of how the 'after life' experience was conceived. Certainly, the gloomy view of a miserable afterlife, found in some Mesopotamian mythic narratives, is not reflected in the rich archaeological record accessed through grave goods (Barrett, 2007: 54).

The experience of the netherworld shows variability even within the course of a mythical composition. When Enkidu describes the netherworld to Gilgamesh, after dying, the fates of the various characters he describes show striking diversity in the Sumerian composition *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* (ETCSL 1.8.1.4). This myth is one of five extant Sumerian works relating to Gilgamesh, and seems likely to have been part of a Sumerian Gilgamesh cycle in the Old Babylonian period (Gadotti, 2014). In the myth, there is a touching moment where Gilgamesh enquires after his stillborn children, and receives a comforting response from his friend:

> 'Did you see my little stillborn children who never knew existence?' 'I saw them.' 'How do they fare?' 'They play at a table of gold and silver, laden with honey and ghee.'
>
> (ETCSL 1.8.1.4)

In contrast to the happy playing of the children and their abundant supply of food, a man whose relatives have not made food offerings is described feeding off scraps and crumbs in the afterlife, and a man who was eaten by a lion is presented as mourning for his damaged limbs. The varied nature of the sources on the Mesopotamian afterlife may reflect diversity in its conception in ancient times. The suggestion of afterlife scepticism in some texts (Katz, 2003: 235) implies some variance in conceptions of death and the existence (or otherwise) that followed the perishing of the body.

As can be seen in the reference above to the unhappy fate of the man who was not provided with offerings after death, the proper performance of burial and mourning rites was necessary for the deceased to participate in 'life' after death. These practices were also crucial to prepare for the journey to the underworld (Scurlock, 1995: 1883–1884). Physically, the underworld was not far away, being located underground and capable of being accessed through a sufficiently deep hole, but metaphorically the underworld could only be reached through a long and arduous journey. This journey involved crossing demon-infested territory, negotiating the Khubur River and then passing through the underworld's seven gates (Scurlock, 1995: 1886–1887). Several features of this journey are reminiscent of the deceased person's afterlife journey in the Classical world, including the requirement of an assistant for crossing the river.

The underworld and the terrestrial realm were not entirely separate spheres; some amount of penetrability was tolerated between the two territories. Behaviours in the upper world had significant consequences for those below, and ghosts and demons were thought capable of rising periodically and haunting or otherwise interfering with living mortals. For both the inhabitants of the upper and lower worlds, actions that 'crossed over' could be beneficial or harmful. Good mourning practices in the upper world resulted in a happier afterlife for those below, and dead relatives and loved ones could be consulted by the living for supernatural advice. Death was perceived as a gradual weakening of the connections that bound the deceased person to the land of the living, rather than as an abrupt and complete end (Scurlock, 1995: 1892).

ISHTAR AND DEATH

Ishtar's liminal and transformative aspects are well fitted to her competency in the sphere of death. In the lives of her ancient audience, the goddess was present during times of transition – often events involving sudden changes of status. Like marriage or childbirth, death is a reality of life that is traditionally viewed as necessitating community support; social ties are swiftly strengthened, severed or altered, although as we have seen above, social ties between the dead and the living could survive death and persevere in the afterlife. This gave relations in the Ancient Near East a kind of immortality which emphasises their social significance.

In natural alignment with her complex character, Ishtar held a number of roles in association with death. She is prominent in lamentations for deceased loved ones as well as declining cities, and she famously visits and returns from the netherworld. The goddess' competency in love and social connections are expressed in her caring for the deceased individual, and the community activity of mourning. In many ways,

Mesopotamian cognisance of death can be considered to hold many similarities to marriage: the grave and the marital bed both involve the provision of food and drink, gifting, and entry into a new family. For the deceased person, the 'new family' was the ancestral one (Abusch, 1998: 373), and for the bride or groom, the family-in-law. Both the grave and the marital bed are liminal spaces that provide a physical locus for the severing of ties to a previous 'life'. The success of the individual's new 'life' can be viewed as dependent on the maintenance of close social ties during a time of upheaval and changes of status.

Ishtar's experience of the underworld is exceptional in several ways. She is the only individual to effect a lasting return from death in the netherworld (although this statement is complicated by Ninhursaga's cursing of Enki in *Enki and Ninhursaga*; see Katz, 2008: 329–333, who draws a comparison with Ishtar's underworld experience). Even Ishtar's experience of the underworld, while she 'resides' there, is unlike that of other deities, or even humans. The goddess does not become a deity of the underworld, as Dumuzi will do, and her death temporarily puts an end to her existence, with the notable exception of the continuing yet lifeless presence of her physical form (although transformed). Despite Ishtar's failed usurpation of her sister's domain, she remained linked to the underworld in Mesopotamian thought, as is perhaps evidenced in references to Inanna as the 'mistress of Heaven and the Netherworld' in some prayers and hymns of praise (see Barrett, 2007: 20, with caveats).

Ishtar's connection to death is an area where modern understanding is limited, yet her own experience of death is uniquely connected to her transgressive nature. Ishtar's ability, demonstrated in myth, to visit the underworld and then to return to the land of the living, is a powerful manifestation of her supernatural qualities. Inanna's unique expertise in entering and escaping the underworld is likely to be a leading cause for her association with death, the afterlife, and the voyage in between. As is evidenced in her threats to raise the dead, discussed earlier in this chapter, Ishtar's power to bring individuals up from the Land of No Return is not limited to herself (admittedly her own return proved tricky, but it is the end result rather than the means which is the focus here). The Akkadian hymn, *Ishtar Queen of Heaven*, notes the goddess' association with justice and mercy, before describing her capacity to 'bring back the one who reveres her from the grave', and 'revive the dead' (III.26, Foster, 2005: 594).

As well as being credited with the ability to bring the dead into the realm of the living, the goddess is (much more commonly) noted for her ability to keep the living (at least temporarily) from the realm of the dead. The goddess' competency in healing the sick is especially prominent in her close ties to kingship, where she grants 'life' to the king (for example, *To Ishtar*, A.II.I, Foster, 2005: 88). Although the granting of 'life' appears to be a complex blessing, several texts reference the goddess' ability to add years to a lifespan, with the implied benefit of forestalling death:

> Grant (the king) a hearing and (time) to grow old,
> Let him always walk in your sweet protection.
>
> (*On Occasion of an Offering*, III.4.b, Foster, 2005: 331)

As well as helping the king personally to live longer, on at least one occasion the goddess appears to use her influence to ensure the survival of the king's lineage. The fascinating narrative of the *Legend of Etana* shows Ishtar being sought by the king in her role of 'goddess of procreation'; the king is told that the goddess possesses the 'plant of birth' that will give him an heir. Etana dreams of traveling up to heaven to find the beautiful goddess seated on a throne and wearing a tiara, with lions crouching beneath her seat (*Etana*, II.22, Foster, 2005: 552). Although the text breaks off before the king can act out the dream, it seems likely he succeeded in getting the plant, as in Mesopotamian tradition Etana was succeeded on the throne by his son, Balih.

The power to heal was not used exclusively on royalty, however, with Ishtar referenced in literature as being entrusted with sick children by mothers (*Inana* D, ETCSL 4.07.4), who laid their offspring in her arms. She was invoked in spells to combat various diseases, including impotence (*Against Impotence*, III.43.c, Foster, 2005: 676). Often, the goddess worked alongside her fellow deities (especially her twin, Utu/Shamash) to 'cleanse' sufferers from illness (*All Diseases*, II.23. b, Foster, 2005: 179), the healing pair of Utu and Inanna are featured in medical incantations. As noted in Chapter 5, the goddess worked with Utu and her father, Nana, to heal the sick king in the myth of *Lugalbanda and the mountain cave* (ETCSL 1.8.2.1). Using her 'power of life', the goddess puts the homesick king into a healing sleep, and 'enveloped him with heart's joy'. In comparison to the goddess' soporific healing influence, her father assists the king by giving his feet the power to stand (for a detailed analysis of the combined healing influence of Utu, Inanna and Nana in this text, see Wee, 2014, with particular emphasis on the celestial side of healing). The divinities are shown to work together, but to use their powers in varied ways. The ability to heal and to prevent death by granting 'life' in Mesopotamian religion is closely connected to the divine capacity to determine the future, and to support justice.

The power to keep the living and the dead in their respective zones, or at times to interchange these two areas, seems to have been also accessible by the goddess' cult functionaries in a limited manner, with a hymn to the goddess referencing their function of keeping away ghosts (*Inana D*, ETCSL 4.07.4). Ishtar's power was also accessed in the domain of death, as seen in prayers and hymns where the goddess is requested to wield her influence on the journey between the upper and lower worlds (Barrett, 2007: 24). Veldhuis notes a text which appears to be the prayer for a deceased person to gain access to the netherworld (2003: 1). In this text, Inanna is requested to be the dead person's vanguard, and Veldhuis notes that the goddess' personal experience may matchlessly qualify her to deal effectively with an unwelcoming doorkeeper at the gates of the underworld (2003: 3–4).

Among Ishtar's powers of *ME*, taken from Enki, are the cosmic domains of 'going down to the netherworld' and 'coming up from the netherworld'. These capacities are listed along with the goddess' other functions, and would appear to specifically bond her to the aspect of death involving the journey between the earthly realm and the realm inhabited by the dead. Ishtar's connection to the journey involved in death fits well with her identification as a goddess with particular competence in transitional experiences, and her frequent mythical association with travel.

Figure 6.2 Queen of the Night relief (also known as the Burney Relief). The figure stands on the back of two lions, and the double row of rounded shapes at the base of the relief symbolise a mountain range. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

In iconographic evidence, too, Ishtar's image is at times presented in a funerary context. Barrett has convincingly argued that the famous Burney Relief, with its depiction of the nude, winged goddess, represents an 'underworld form' of Ishtar (2007).

Several features of the Relief indicate that the goddess is being presented in the context of her visit to the underworld. The deity holds the rod and ring of leadership, which recall the measuring rod and line described in *Inanna's Descent*. As in the myth, the goddess wears a turban and a necklace, and is possibly wearing a wig (Jacobsen,

1987b: 3). The double row of oval-like shapes at the base of the Relief represent mountains, which have associations with death, as do the owls. While not a part of the myth, the positioning of the figure on the backs of two lions strengthens the connection to Ishtar, as does the figure's frontal presentation. The goddess' nudity, then, would represent the stage in the myth of the Descent where she is close to death.

Of course, the connection between the Burney Relief and Ishtar's underworld journey does not necessarily provide an exact match between iconographic and literary evidence. The goddess in the Relief is naked but still wearing her turban and beads, and carrying the rod and ring. In contrast, the myth describes the goddess' dress being removed after her turban and necklace. These interesting differences are perhaps unsurprising, considering the various ambiguities of context, function, authorship, and audience that are related to both the Burney Relief and the Descent myth. Despite these uncertainties, I would suggest that the Burney Relief appears most likely to show Ishtar on her way back from the realm of the dead. Although it is unclear in the Sumerian version, the Akkadian version of the Descent shows the deity's clothing and jewellery being returned to her as she ascends. Further, the goddess is shown in the Relief with prominent wings and raptor-like talons on her feet. Groneberg has noted it is common for Ishtar to be shown with wings (1997: 128), and I would argue that these bird-like features relate to a specific theme of the myth, and that the elements of death and vengeance are united in the artistic representation of the deity in the Burney Relief. Inanna and Ishtar are both presented in literature 'flying' into battle (her symbolic presentation as a falcon is discussed in Chapter 3), and her depiction with bird-like features has been noted to be connected to her vengeful nature (Hallo and van Dijk, 1968: 51). The talons and wings of the figure, then, show the goddess returning from the netherworld in pursuit of vengeance – which will lead to the punishment and death of her faithless lover.

Barrett has made the further observation that the large size of the Burney Relief suggests the Relief functioned as the object of cultic worship (2007: 39). For the image of Ishtar on her journey to (or more likely from) the realm of the dead to be a focus of worship gives further weight to the importance of the goddess' connection to death in the religious lives of ancient Mesopotamians.

Like the goddess herself, Ishtar's love is not permanently destroyed by death. In granting blessings to dead kings, assisting in the transition of the deceased, and participating in mourning, the goddess' love for the deceased continued after they had physically perished. Ishtar provided protection and benefits to those on their way to the underworld, as well as to the loved ones lamenting their loss.

OVERVIEW

This chapter considered the role of Inanna/Ishtar in retribution, justice and death. The goddess' ability to break with the established order and push through boundaries gives her a special competence in each of these areas. The goddess' capacity for vengeance has been shown to be an expression of her close relationship with justice, fate and order.

Ishtar's links to sexuality and her vivacity perhaps makes her association with the afterlife unexpected for modern audiences, yet sex and death were frequently considered as two sides of the same coin in antiquity. The extreme female beauty possessed by the deity also represents its natural opposition–death and decay (Bahrani, 2001: 154).

In her links with vengeance and death, we once again see the importance of Ishtar's intimate social ties to the rest of the pantheon, and her unique relationship with the Mesopotamian king. Other deities play an important role in 'checking' the scope of the goddess' vengeance, along with its extremely dangerous potential for collateral damage. In her association with death, the goddess' love and care extends beyond the realm of the living, and through her association with lamentations, she is involved in drawing communities together following a loss.

Even in her quests for retribution, and her links to the death, Ishtar's focus on matters of the heart is clearly in evidence. She saves her most dreaded punishment for the intended spouse who rejects her, while her love for the Mesopotamian king prolongs his life and staves off death. In the goddess' vital image we see the extremes of life reflected, but also, transcended.

ISHTAR AFTERWARDS

7

RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE

Ishtar was the most powerful and famous Mesopotamian goddess; her substantial influence was embedded in many of the most critical aspects of her worshippers' lives, and she was revered across the broad geographical reach of Mesopotamia for a period spanning thousands of years. Yet, in contrast to her wide-ranging impact in the ancient world, the goddess' image seems to have been almost entirely lost from our cultural awareness in the present day. The diminished awareness that remains of Ishtar in the modern world is frequently obscured by methodological and historiographical controversy, particularly in terms of the distorted fixation on the goddess' sexuality found in much twentieth-century scholarship. In this chapter, we consider the reception of Ishtar in later cultural and religious traditions of the ancient and modern world. The goddess' reception in the modern day can be divided into two distinct yet related strands: scholarship and popular culture.

Many goddesses from the Classical period, such as Aphrodite, Artemis and Athena, have continued to function as important cultural symbols. The significance of these goddesses has persevered to the present day, largely undeterred by the long lapse of time that has passed since their primary, initial period of worship, and even in light of the cultural distinctiveness of their original historical context. Ishtar, comparatively, has not enjoyed a similar longevity to her image and symbolism. From being the most commonly attested deity in ancient Mesopotamian religious thought, she has instead fallen into almost complete obscurity.

THE DISAPPEARING GODDESS

Although her sharp slip into anonymity is particularly relevant for the purposes of this book, Ishtar's experience in disappearing from the collective cultural awareness of modern audiences is in no way unique among the deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon. Few people today, even in scholarly circles, would feel entirely confident in describing the religious responsibilities and areas of competence of primary Mesopotamian deities such as Enlil, Ea and Shamash, at least in comparison with the continuing wide appreciation of Zeus, Horus and Apollo. There is no 'Ishtar' scented perfume, as is the case with Aphrodite, and there have not been, as far as I am aware, characters in Disney films based upon Marduk or Gula; although this would perhaps make for an interesting project.

It seems plausible then, in the context of the modern anonymity of her fellow deities, to at least partially attribute the diminishing consciousness of Ishtar over time to the more general lack of cognisance of Mesopotamian religious concepts in the modern day. However, given the overwhelming significance of Mesopotamian religion and culture on both Eastern and Western traditions, the unfamiliarity of modern-day audiences with the religious ideology of this ancient culture is certainly worthy of deeper analysis.

The broad nature of this subject is beyond the scope of this chapter, so the consideration here will be restricted to noting the disappearance of Ancient Near Eastern written traditions – in keeping with the focus on the ancient written record in this book. The great empires of the Ancient Near East experienced a long period of decline, over many centuries, which ultimately resulted in the loss of Egyptian hieroglyphs and cuneiform as written languages. The cuneiform script occupied an increasingly diminishing sphere of influence after the sixth century BCE, before its usage ceased entirely between the first and third centuries CE (Clancier, 2011: 758). For the culture of a civilisation to continue, or for its religious traditions to endure in the written record, the written customs of that civilisation must be preserved through education (Snell, 1997: 138). The focus on the literary traditions associated with Ishtar in this book reinforces the significance of written sources for gaining a deeper awareness of the rich religious ideology of ancient Mesopotamia.

SEXUALITY AND SCHOLARSHIP

Ishtar's prominent, powerful role in ancient Mesopotamian religion and culture means the lack of representation of the deity in modern culture is problematic, in terms of developing further awareness of Ancient Near Eastern civilisations in the present day. The issue is complicated further by the distortion in modern scholarship of what meagre traces of the goddess remain. The image that has survived of Ishtar to the present day is clouded in historiographical biases. An overwhelming emphasis on the goddess' sexuality, to the near exclusion of her various other important qualities, has pervaded scholarly approaches to Ishtar – a focus which has spilled over into the reception of the goddess in popular culture.

The imbalanced emphasis on sex means that the goddess who was deeply connected to social intimacy, love, life, death and justice is most commonly known today as a promiscuous sexpot. The consideration of the intimate and unique relationship between Ishtar and the king, with all its complex and varied imagery, has been dominated by the disproportionate emphasis on the possible physical enactment of sacred marriage rituals (a problem considered in Chapter 4). Ishtar's modern image has been dominated by a second issue related to sacred sex: the concept of sacred prostitution.

Ishtar's sexuality is a vital component of her ancient image, a subject explored in detail in Chapter 2. Sexuality, with its close connections to love, intimacy, and abundance, is undeniably central to the goddess' ancient identity. Yet the scholarly emphasis on the goddess' sexuality has generally obscured her image in two ways: first, the exhaustive preoccupation with sex has left little air in the academic discourse

for discussing the many other important aspects of this remarkably intricate deity. Second, there has been a substantial lack of complexity and methodological accuracy in the depictions of the sex life of the goddess, and the consideration of how her sexuality relates to her broader identity, a problem evidenced by the continued dominance of the concept of sacred prostitution in the modern conception of Ishtar. Sex and religion is a powerful combination, and this mixture has over-shadowed the modern representation of the goddess – an imbalance that is only in recent years beginning to experience a redress.

MYTH AND INFLUENCE

In the Introduction, we noted that temple prostitution can be defined as a cultic activity involving the exchange of sexual favours for material gains which are wholly or partly donated to the temple of a deity (Budin, 2008: 3). The historiographical myth of sacred prostitution has undeniably had a vastly damaging influence on Ishtar's image in the modern day, despite there being no ancient evidence linking Ishtar to cult prostitution (Budin, 2008: 47). While accepting that the Classical authors established a myth asserting the broad prevalence of sacred prostitution in antiquity, it must be noted that this early scholarly trend has been dutifully continued in later academic works – an issue worth considering further in this chapter on the deity's later reception. The once widespread acceptance of the sacred prostitution myth raises the question: how does this scholarly tradition inform on the subject of this chapter, which is to consider the reception of the goddess, Ishtar, on later audiences? As one of the most lasting historiographical traditions associated with Ishtar, can the concept of sacred prostitution in the Ancient Near East inform on her reception by later audiences, despite our awareness of its inaccuracies?

The sacred prostitution tradition makes a close association between a sexually powerful goddess, and the practice of commonly prohibited sexual behaviours in the female members of the society in which the goddess was worshipped. The focus on the activity at the goddess' temple, and the emphasis on the universality of the behaviour among Babylonian women, gives the representation of the goddess' sexual influence a 'corrupting' power, both on her female followers and society at large. Throughout this book, we have observed the importance of close community ties to the image of the goddess – through the concept of sacred prostitution, this community 'closeness', associated with Ishtar, is distorted into a commercial sexual experience which is notable for its lack of intimacy. For the women involved to require financial incentives, and blessings of fertility, to engage in the alleged practice suggests a lack of joy to the copulation that is at odds with the depiction of religious traditions in Mesopotamian myths and hymns.

It is difficult, in the modern age, to be certain of what kind of influence Ishtar's powerful sexuality may have had on her female followers. It seems plausible, based on the available evidence, that the goddess was deeply involved in the sexual lives of Mesopotamian women: her image is prominent in texts involving marital relations, fertility and even childbirth. Yet, the Ancient Near Eastern evidence does not provide

a corresponding sense, in line with later sources, that the invocation of the goddess was corrupting. Instead, we have noted that Ishtar appears to dominate especially at times of upheaval in the lives of her followers' personal lives; she appears in a helpful capacity in healing and love magic, both areas which involve her competency with the granting of desires – a sacred ability frequently noted in ancient sources.

Transitional life events are often conceived as periods of traditional social significance. These periods can be marked by communal social occasions, such as weddings and funerals. Although of course it must be noted that 'traditional' occasions and activities may be more visible in the ancient record, the presence of the goddess at these transitional times, and her close links to social intimacy, suggests a role that supported community closeness, rather than causing corruption and alienation. The goddess' negative influence on women, implied by the sacred prostitution myth, then, seems to function to define the goddess purely in terms of her sexual influence, and to demonstrate the destructive potential of that effect, either deliberately or inadvertently. The goddess is in this way misrepresented, and both she and her followers are reduced to inhabiting the domain of sexual servitude.

In this book, we have seen that the happiness of the goddess (often partly informed by positive sexual relations) results in blessings of abundance, and imagery of the goddess' sexual union is frequently accompanied by imagery of agricultural and monetary richness (see Chapters 1 and 4). In the sacred prostitution myth, these links to abundance and fecundity are clearly referenced (Strabo also makes mention of the exchange of gifts, and agricultural abundance, in connection to the practice), but in a distorted and polemical manner. Possible contexts for this distortion in Ishtar's image may be the different cultural conceptions of sexuality and gender in Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Greece. Ancient Greek culture frequently presents a negative view of female sexuality, one that can be contrasted with the more positive, often laudatory, references to female sexuality in Mesopotamian sources – perhaps particularly noticeable in descriptions of female genitals (see Bahrani, 2001). In terms of gender, women were often portrayed negatively in Ancient Greece, in comparison with ancient Mesopotamia, where women were not viewed as a form of divine punishment, or as incomplete men (Cooper, 1997: 89–90). The Mesopotamian image of Ishtar, involving hymns of praise to her vulva, and the deity's potent yet complex sexuality, was very likely particularly vulnerable to being misconstrued in Greek sources, due to these significant cultural differences.

The swiftly changing focus of scholarship in this area of Mesopotamian religion suggests a future where Ishtar will exist in modern cultural awareness in a fuller and more balanced form. Ishtar will, of course, always be strongly associated with sexual love, but her association with sexuality should be viewed as a crucial component of her identification in the ancient world, rather than defining and delimiting her entirely.

THE DYING AND RISING GOD SCHOOL

The consideration of possible syncretisms between deities of the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean provided the foundation for the Dying and Rising god school

of mythology. This influential theory is an important area of concern for this chapter's exploration of the reception of Ishtar by later audiences. The Dying and Rising theory was first elucidated by Sir James George Frazer around the turn of the twentieth century.

As noted in the Introduction, this theory held that the ancient cultures in Egypt and Western Asia celebrated a similar rite representing the yearly decay and revival of vegetation. These rites were believed by scholars to vary only in the names of the deities involved, and in some minor details. In Frazerian theory, Osiris in Egypt, Tammuz in Babylon, Attis of Phrygia and Adonis in Phoenicia and Greece were viewed as local versions of one myth, with these deities thought to hold essentially one nature.

The collection of varied practices from widespread cultures into one generalised pattern was further considered by Hooke's Myth and Ritual school of thought, which viewed myths and rituals as inseparable from one another in certain ancient societies. While it was acknowledged that the religions of Egypt, Babylon and Canaan varied in many aspects, they were considered in this theory to each be defined as 'ritual religions', with certain fundamental characteristics in common. The rituals of early societies were considered to stem from a need to manage or even to attempt to control the unpredictability of the human experience. 'Myth' in this conception was thought to be not only inseparable from ritual, but also heavily dependent upon it. While the spoken word had a magical efficacy of its own, Hooke's 'myths' functioned to describe the story enacted through ritual. Included in this theory was the concept of the Dying and Rising vegetation deity, as well as the symbolic representation of creation myths, ritual combat, a triumphal procession led by the king and sacred kingship. These elements were thought to be represented at an annual festival, which functioned as the religious climax of the year in each culture. The sacred kingship theory also contained the idea of *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage, where the human king was married to a divine spouse. Like Frazer, Hooke sought to explain the origins of religion across a range of early civilisations with a unifying theory, and both conceptualised myth as an ancient, primitive counterpart to modern science (for an introduction to the various Myth and Ritual theories, with a good bibliography, see Segal, 1998: 1–13).

A problem with both the Dying and Rising god theory and the Myth and Ritual school is the pervasive tendency to select the evidence available to better fit with a desired pattern. A further issue is the privileging of apparent similarities between cultures over the most likely equally significant differences. An example of this can be found in the treatment of the myth of *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld*. The myth of Inanna's descent was available in a very fragmented form at the time of the formulation of the above theories – even today, the text contains many ambiguities. While Frazer acknowledged the obscurity of the source material, and indeed, the complexity of the problem, he used the Greek myths of Adonis, Persephone and Aphrodite to complete the myth of Inanna's descent, and in this amended form, included the story in his theoretical pattern of Dying and Rising deities. The danger of this method has been proved by the differences that have arisen between Fraser's version and the ancient myth, as more evidence comes to light.

The credibility of the Myth and Ritual school has gradually disappeared over the last century (with noteworthy assistance from Kramer, Yamauchi, Frankfort, and Cooper), yet its legacy remains apparent in studies relating to Ancient Near Eastern

myth and religion. The concepts of fertility, vegetation gods, sacred marriage and cult prostitution in this context now carry an enormous scholarly stigma. The ongoing academic sensitivity to these issues can be considered to owe almost as much to the backlash against the theories of the Myth and Ritual school as to the once-powerful influence of the theories that sparked this reaction.

SYNCRETISMS

Despite the present-day rejection of the overly blunt approach to syncretism found in the Dying and Rising school, the process of syncretism itself remains important for our modern understanding of ancient religions. Syncretism is an adaptive process, and one that demonstrates the continuing interaction of religious ideas and their communities. This process involves the mixing of religious elements from different traditions or cultures into an existing or new religious concept, image or ideology. Understanding syncretism requires the knowledge of a society's cultural perceptions of external religious symbols. How they related this symbolism to their own spiritual practices directly impacts the representation of deities within the culture. The drawing in of elements from other religious traditions suggests acceptance of those elements, while elements that are not selected, or those that are discarded, may shed light on the divide between two cultures.

A significant aspect of Ishtar's cultural legacy is her shaping influence on conceptions of the identities of other goddesses, both contemporaneously, and in later periods. Ishtar stands at the very beginning of the tradition of powerful goddesses in the ancient world, and was the most prominent of the Mesopotamian female deities. Considering the combination of the goddess' extreme antiquity, and her widespread recognition in the Ancient Near East, it is natural for Ishtar to have played a central role in the syncretistic development of later deities.

The first well-known connection of Ishtar to syncretism is the linking of the Sumerian deity Inanna with the Semitic goddess, Ishtar. This blending of divinities demonstrates the significant early interplay between cultural and religious identities in the Ancient Near East, but also highlights the problematic nature of analysing the means with which similar deities may have been related to one another. As Vanstiphout has noted, the 'blending' of Inanna and Ishtar may have been the product of syncretism, or of intrusion, yet we have no evidence to support this assumption (1984: 228–228).

MEASURING INFLUENCE

The processes of syncretism were widely present in antiquity, yet scholarly attempts to scientifically quantify syncretism are fraught with difficulties in terms of methodology and evidence. The processes, motivations and results of syncretisms are difficult to conceptualise in absolute terms. Where we see similarities and blending, there may be commonalities caused by unknown, exterior factors. The broad range of Ishtar's influence in antiquity makes her a prime candidate for syncretism, while at the same

time making her influence particularly difficult to measure. Even in the event that a syncretism between two figures has been established, the question remains of how to quantify the amount of 'blending' between the figures involved.

To explore possible syncretisms of Ishtar with later goddesses is to select a complicated area of study, one geographically spanning regions of Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant and the Mediterranean world, over a period of almost 3000 years, beginning with the ancient Sumerians, and continuing to the time of the Roman Empire – and possibly beyond. A recent study dedicated to the generally accepted syncretism between Ishtar, Astarte and Aphrodite resulted in the conclusion that the three goddesses, while in some ways related, may have been understood in antiquity as completely independent divine figures. The study recognised further that future investigations of the issue may need to include Isis, Hathor, Venus and many more divinities to gain a clearer perspective (Sugimoto, 2014). Inanna/Ishtar's image as the divine female figure of the Ancient Near East par excellence creates uncertainty over where her image may overlap with other female divinities.

We have seen that Inanna/Ishtar is an intensely complex character, inhabiting a wide variety of roles with diverse competencies: the goddess' intricate characterisation only intensifies the difficulties of attempts to analyse her relationship to syncretisms. While the widespread competencies and characteristics assigned to Ishtar make the procedure of identifying syncretisms especially difficult, it remains worthwhile to develop our understanding of this area, and to explore Ishtar's possible influences on other goddesses. Indeed, it is likely that the goddess' intricate nature contributed to her popularity and syncretistic influence, as has been suggested by Selz (2000: 38–39).

In this section, we have established the consideration of Ishtar's syncretisms with other deities is a worthwhile yet challenging academic endeavour. We now briefly explore the possible syncretic relationship between Ishtar and Aphrodite. The comparison between Ishtar and Aphrodite in this section cannot provide a full account of potential links between the deities. Instead, we consider that, while the syncretistic relationship between Aphrodite and Ishtar has been generally accepted in modern scholarship, there is great variability and complexity to the linking of the two goddesses – further illustrating the syncretism 'problem' as it relates to Ishtar.

APHRODITE

Although Inanna/Ishtar is the world's first goddess of love, Aphrodite is undoubtedly the most famous deity linked to this area of competency. The Greek goddess Aphrodite has a complex persona in myth that spans multiple expressions of divine femininity (for a detailed analysis of Aphrodite, see Cyrino, 2010, in this series). An Eastern origin for Aphrodite, dated around the time of the first millennium, has come to general acceptance in the scholarly community. Despite their intricate personalities, or perhaps because of this complexity, Ishtar and Aphrodite have a great deal in common: both are described as 'Queen of Heaven'; they are goddesses of love, beauty and sex, who are involved in battle (to varying degrees), and both are Venus

deities with connections to mountains. Both goddesses were born of 'sky father' deities (significantly, in only some traditions), both deeply love a young god who dies and descends to the underworld, and both display a powerful capacity for vengeance – especially in relation to romantic indiscretions. Both goddesses are the subject of compositions by early, influential poetesses: for Inanna this is Enheduanna, and for Aphrodite, Sappho. The commonalities between Astarte and Aphrodite arose from a slow process of 'Orientalising' the Greek goddess, and this process of syncretism is thought to have occurred via Cyprus (Budin, 2004: 95).

Yet, despite all of these shared elements, and the useful awareness of a historical context for the syncretising process, the two goddesses remain distinctive from one another; the similarities between them are not 'fixed' across their many traditions. Recent scholarship has noted that poetic compositions to Aphrodite show a combination of Near Eastern and local input on the image of the Greek goddess. Differences in the descriptions of Aphrodite in Hesiod and Homer reveal unequal use of Mesopotamian sources in their works, and – as Metcalf has clearly shown – unequal use of the image of the Mesopotamian deity herself, with specifically the celestial aspect of Inanna/Ishtar influencing the story of Aphrodite's birth (Metcalf, 2015: 175–177). Despite surface similarities (such as their youth and an early death), Aphrodite's divine lovers hold little resemblance to the shepherd king Dumuzi, and the relationships between the goddesses and their lovers (and also to their divine families) show a great deal of variance from one another. Scholars have noted the shaping influence exerted by physical representations of Inanna on sculptures of Aphrodite, but also the many unique elements of the Greek artistic works (Marcovic, 1996: 51–53). The exchange of artistic inspiration was not limited to flowing from east to west: in the Hellenistic period, Mesopotamians adopted Greek carving techniques yet adapted them to their own perceptions of feminine imagery (Bahrani, 1996: 4). These are just a few of differences between Ishtar and Aphrodite, yet this brief comparison has shown that gaining an awareness of a shaping influence between two deities is only the beginning of the process of unravelling the extent of the bond between them, along with possible meanings for this connection.

ISHTAR AND THE BIBLE

We have seen in this chapter the ability of Ishtar to blend with other deities and contribute to their images in extremely complicated ways. Among the various cultures and religions connected to Ishtar, her potential influence has been explored particularly closely in studies of the Bible. The origin and development of the modern scientific discipline of Assyriology, like Egyptology, was itself shaped by scholars seeking to provide greater contextualisation for biblical traditions. There are no clear references to the goddess Ishtar in the Bible, but her name and image are considered as possibly informing several biblical passages. Perhaps the most commonly accepted connection of Ishtar occurs in the Book of Jeremiah: Ishtar is one of several Ancient Near Eastern deities considered to be a candidate for the mystery goddess ascribed the general title, 'Queen of Heaven', in Jeremiah 7:18 and 44:15–19. The standard Koehler-Baumgartner

Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament identifies the Queen of Heaven with Canaanite Ashera, Ashtarte, Anat, Babylonian Ishtar and Egyptian Isis – possibly all at the same time (Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, 1994–2000: 2:593). Astarte is generally accepted as the most probable among the divine contenders (Holladay, 1986: 254–255), with Ackerman suggesting the Queen of Heaven is a syncretistic deity, involving aspects of Astarte and Ishtar (1989: 116–117). If indeed this deity is Ishtar (or, in line with Ackerman, parts of her!), the community aspect of the worship is noteworthy, when considered in light of the importance of social ties in literature involving the Mesopotamian love-goddess. The spread of Assyrian imperialism, during the reign of Manasseh, has been suggested as a potential context for the introduction of the cult of Ishtar into Judah (Jones, 1992: 151).

The role of the women in cultic rituals in the worship of the 'Queen of Heaven' described in the Book of Jeremiah is supported in the text by the men and children of Israel (Gerstenberger, 1996: 19). Carroll observes the emphasis on family in the Queen of Heaven's cult, particularly in the preparation of cake offerings (1986: 213). There is some suggestion that the 'cakes' of Jeremiah 7:18 may carry the image of a star, representing the goddess (McKane, 1986: 170).

Ishtar may be related (possibly through syncretism) to the goddess, Asherah (for a thoughtful analysis of this potential connection, see Lanner, 2006, especially 77–78). The question of the meaning of biblical references to 'Asherah' has been the focus of a great deal of scholarly analysis. In the Bible, 'Asherah' is used in two ways: to refer to a cult object made from wood, and as a divine name (Wyatt, 1999: 99). The Canaanite goddess is known from Ugaritic texts; she is considered to have associations with fertility and motherhood, and her cult was popular throughout the Ancient Near East (Frymer-Kensy, 2007: 562). Despite a great deal of scholarly work, the theology of the goddess and the cult object remain unclear (see Wyatt, 1999, for an overview of the various problems) – preventing the establishment of a certain connection between Ishtar and Asherah. If some form of syncretism did occur, a possible means of transmission for the cult of Ishtar to Canaan has been suggested by Pettey, with the trade between Ebla (where Ishtar was known from 2500 BCE) and Ugarit a likely means of cultural contact (1990: 31).

It is thought that the references to the city of Nineveh (an important cult centre for Ishtar) in the Book of Nahum 2:8 may allude to the goddess herself. This idea was first suggested by Reider (1949: 104), and has been considered by numerous scholars, notably Delcor (1977) and Sanderson (1992: 218). Pinker has given a useful overview of the scholarship and linguistic difficulties, and sees allusions in the text to the goddess' famous *Descent to the Netherworld* (Pinker, 2005). Pinker suggests that the Babylonians, in this section of Nahum, are appealing for Ishtar to enact the Descent to save them and their city, as in the myth she descends 'to save her beloved Tammuz' (2005: 98–99). The credibility of Pinker's argument is undermined by his reliance upon the disproved scholarly theory that Ishtar descended to the netherworld to save Tammuz/Dumuzi. Despite this oversight, Pinker's acknowledgement of Ishtar's role as a protector of women from all levels of society (2005: 9) is poignant, given the strong and disturbing elements of sexual violence found in Nahum – particularly those directed at women. The obscurity of the possible references to the goddess in Nahum

and Jeremiah create problems for establishing the deity's identity with any certainty; however, it is perhaps useful to note that the two books involve a number of close connections in their use of imagery, especially with regard to depictions of warfare (O'Brien, 2002: 46).

A more felicitous reference to the Mesopotamian love-goddess is found in the Song of Songs. While the rich imagery of Song of Songs appears to contain influences from a broad range of cultural traditions (see Gault, 2012, particularly with reference to symbolism relating to the lovers' physicality), the similarities between the Sumerian love poetry of Inanna and Dumuzi to Song of Songs have been noted by several scholars (see Long, 2008: 750–760, for the significance of this Ancient Near Eastern context on reading Song of Songs).

Although, as noted above, there are no direct mentions of Ishtar in the Bible, there does appear to be a reference to her cult, through her involvement in lamentations for her lover. Dumuzi's later Babylonian incarnation, Tammuz, is perhaps best known in the modern day for a brief appearance in the Book of Ezekiel, where the prophet observes women performing ritual lamentations for the Babylonian deity (Ezekiel 8:14). In an interesting thematic link between several of the possible references to Ishtar noted in this chapter, Mein has observed the prominence of women in the myth and mourning rituals related to Tammuz and Ishtar seen in Ezekiel – although Mein too appears to be working with an outdated version of the Descent, where the goddess is credited with her lover's salvation (2006: 127–128).

ISHTAR AND FEMINIST THOUGHT

It makes sense for Ishtar to have a prominent role in discussions of gender, power and agency in religious thought. The field of ancient history has long been used as a polemical tool for the purposes of preserving, shaping, ordering and justifying the present and, indeed, the future as well. Particular perspectives on history have served to provide rationalisation for the dominant modalities of the expression of authority. In this sense, the study of history has at times been marginalised into a mouthpiece for the dominant and powerful. Adjusting our modern view of divine femaleness in antiquity is useful for restoring some balance to history's continuing dialogue between past and present.

Ishtar is an important early feminine archetype, deserving of a dominant position in discourses on women, religion and power, while at the same time she provides an important point of comparison for the study of the portrayal of female deities in later mythic traditions. In this book, we have explored the substantial role played by Ishtar in ancient Mesopotamian culture and religion. Her powerful influence has been shown to seamlessly interconnect the private and the public, the personal and the political spheres of the ancient Mesopotamian world. This connectedness which is a feature of the deity embeds her image into all aspects of ancient Mesopotamian life – and even into death and the 'afterlife'.

The goddess' prominence in ancient culture and thought makes her a natural fit for feminist studies, through the lens of exploring the social construction of gender.

Gods and goddesses are the product of human conceptions of gender functioning to anthropomorphise the divine. In this way, divine femininity (equally divine masculinity) has much to inform us on how concepts of gender are envisaged, as well as the manner in which they are projected onto the sacred. Goddess symbolism has a significant import for feminism, for the purposes of considering female power and providing balance to frequently androcentric modes of authority and legitimacy (Christ, 1979). Religion has historically been closely associated with the expression of power, in public as well as private spheres, politically, socially and spiritually. The presentation of religion in terms of a specific gender framework, then, suggests a dominance of a particular gender hierarchy in a given community.

In de Beauvoir's study *The Second Sex* (1949), Ishtar, along with her fellow ancient goddesses, is considered to have been marginalised into the realm of the 'Other', while male figures dominated the hierarchy of power and the creative space. The mention of Ishtar by de Beauvoir included the Mesopotamian goddess in the feminist project which re-evaluated the role and importance of female figures in historical cultures, alongside more widely known female deities. Similarly significant is the work of Frymer-Kensky, who engaged thoughtfully with the ancient sources to provide a portrayal of Ishtar as a marginal character, who embodies the 'socially undesirable' role of the undomesticated, unattached woman (1992: 25–27). Frymer-Kensky considers Inanna's complaints in the myth of *Enki and the World Order* to be directed towards attempting to gain further divine functions, and thereby demonstrating the goddess' self-awareness of her own marginal nature. Despite the significant impact of Frymer-Kensky's work in beginning to address the patriarchal bias of Mesopotamian historiography, Inanna's 'marginality' is not unanimously accepted, with Stuckey rightly arguing that the centrality of the goddess in Sumerian religion and the diversity of her roles would argue against this identification (2001: 92). The suggestion of marginality from Frymer-Kensky extends from her observation that Inanna lacks a social 'niche', which creates a restless quality to her character.

The idea of a lack of a social 'niche' for the goddess is an important one for considering the development of traditional gender roles in Mesopotamia. Despite lacking an emphasis on maternal qualities, and the early end to her marriage, Inanna/Ishtar can be observed to inhabit a specific space in Mesopotamian social order. She is the 'beloved' one of the other deities, a role informed by a combination of several features, such as the goddess' age, kinship ties, character and gender. Indeed, Ishtar's gender heavily informs her relational bonds; her daughter-like relationship with several primary gods has been explored in earlier chapters, as well as her reliance on her brother Utu/Shamash. Yet, it is not only the goddess who inhabits this role of a youthful family member who is deeply loved. Dumuzi/Tammuz, similarly, is presented in ancient texts as a young man adored by his close relations. Like Inanna, he inhabits a role in the pantheon that is at least partially defined by the emotional closeness he inspires in those around him, as well as by his powerful potentiality. Like Inanna, Dumuzi's character is not defined through marriage or the production of children. The potentiality of the goddess is considered by Frymer-Kensky (2006: 86), and was also noted at an earlier stage by Jacobsen (1976). In this book, we have seen that Ishtar inhabits numerous roles in Mesopotamian religion and culture, and that her diversification

should not be confused with a lack of definition and order in ancient characterisations of the goddess.

There are many aspects of Ishtar's image that make her an appealing subject for scholarly analyses of gender. Ishtar expresses her divine power in complex and varied ways, she often delegates work to other divinities and is generally skilled in accessing celestial support. The goddess is presented in literature as a flexible and accomplished negotiator, and her physical and verbal skills are frequently employed together. She is depicted as part of a male-dominated pantheon, yet is portrayed as capable of co-opting the powers of primary male deities. The goddess, through the richness of her characterisation, provides fertile ground for understanding conceptions of gender and divinity from the time of our earliest written records.

ISHTAR IN MODERN POPULAR CULTURE

In comparison to Classical deities, Mesopotamian gods are almost completely absent from the various creative spheres dominated by modern popular culture. Where deities such as Aphrodite and Apollo have lent their image to a wide array of projects in the arts and sciences of the present day, Enki and Enlil have, in comparison, slipped into obscurity. Despite her capacity to provide the exception to most rules in the ancient world, Ishtar has not proved immune to this present-day slide into anonymity. Traces of the goddess remain, however, with Ishtar's image in contemporary culture focused primarily on her beauty and fierceness.

The obscurity of the goddess' myths in the present day has, generally speaking, resulted in her image being found primarily in works with particularly strong mythical input. Television series such as *Stargate: SG-1* and *Hercules, the Legendary Journeys* are structured around ancient myth, and use ancient narratives to build new stories and characters, in the continuation of a most ancient storytelling trend. This historical focus means the audience and creators of these works may be viewed as having a greater interest in myth and history than the broader community – and correspondingly, a higher level of 'myth literacy' than more general audiences. A depth of knowledge of ancient narratives most likely explains the relative popularity of Ishtar in works of science fiction and fantasy, but, as we will see, it does not always translate into a portrayal of the goddess that closely resembles her ancient identity.

ISHTAR IN SONG

The ancient connection of Ishtar to music has continued into the modern day. Ishtar's myths are referenced in numerous musical compositions, including a full-length opera by composer John Craton, and Vincent D'Indy's *Symphony Ishtar, variations symphoniques, Op. 42* – a composition inspired by the composer's viewing of Assyriological monuments in the British Museum in 1887 (Sasson, 1997: 170).

Music is central to the plot of the action comedy *Ishtar* (1987), a film widely known for its reputation as one of the greatest box office failures in cinema history. The film's

narrative follows the adventures of two talentless yet passionate songwriters, Chuck (Dustin Hoffman) and Lyle (Warren Beatty), as they become involved in political intrigue in the fictional North African country of Ishtar. Leading the two protagonists into danger is the beautiful rebel Shirra (Isabelle Adjani), who is seeking an ancient map with high religious significance, crucial for securing the outcome of the coming coup.

The character of Shirra has several qualities that are connected to the goddess Ishtar. As well as being physically beautiful, Shirra effectively employs tears and persuasive speech to get her own way. She has an extremely close relationship with her brother Omar (J.C. Cutler), and is fiercely loyal to him. It is intriguing to note that, in both scenes where Shirra is introduced to a male protagonist of the film, she is at first mistaken for a young boy, before her identity is revealed. The misidentification of Shirra's gender is due to her cross-dressing, and it is her breasts that reveal her femaleness: she flashes a breast at Chuck, and her chest is carefully groped by Lyle. Although Shirra can manipulate Chuck and Lyle using her feminine charisma, almost leading them to death in the desert, both men show sympathy to Shirra's character even before they realise she is a woman. The depiction of the country of Ishtar in the film, like the character of Shirra, may also express modern attitudes to Mesopotamian religious figures. Ishtar the country is dangerous and unstable, and described by a character as being part of an ancient culture that is difficult for Westerners to understand. The combinations of love and war, beauty, musicality and gender reversals in *Ishtar* perhaps unknowingly reference often noted aspects of the ancient love deity. Although the film was a critical as well as commercial failure when released, it has in recent years developed a cult following.

Returning to the theme of music in popular culture, two musical works seem particularly noteworthy for the performer's frequent artistic exploration of mythical and religious tropes. The influential metal band Soulfly included the song 'Ishtar Rising' on their 2015 album, *Archangel*. The song references Ereshkigal, as well as Asushunamir (the *assinnu* created by Ea to rescue Ishtar). The lyrics of the song reflect the movement of the ancient myth. While the goddess rises, Asushunamir is called down from the heavens, and the song also references Ishtar's threat to bring the dead up from the netherworld. Soulfly's engagement with spiritual and mythical themes is central to their oeuvre, with *Archangel* exploring biblical themes, the world's most ancient law codes, and also a song to Ishtar's twin, Shamash. Ishtar seems to be well represented in the genre of rock: she also gives her name to the song *Inanna* by the Canadian band The Tea Party. The song *Inanna* occurs on The Tea Party's 1995 album Edges of Twilight, known for its world music influences, and its lyrics appear to reference the goddess' astral aspect.

Pop superstar Madonna is famed for the eroticism of her musical work, as well as her at times boundary-pushing interaction with a variety of religious ideas. The combination of sexuality and the transgressive use of traditional symbolism perhaps makes the artist's connection to Ishtar unsurprising, with both Madonna and Ishtar identified as powerful women, capable of frequently reinventing themselves and the world around them.

On 5 February, 2012, Madonna performed the half-time show at the XLVI Super Bowl in Indianapolis. In an interview with Anderson Cooper in the lead up to the

Figure 7.1 Madonna wearing Ishtar-type costume at the XLVI Superbowl half-time show. © Rex Features.

show, Madonna commented on her awareness of the cultural significance of the event, describing the Super Bowl as the 'holy of holies'. Madonna's performance was richly imbued with references to a diverse array of religious and historical references; gladiators pull the performer to the stage, seated on a throne, and flags are removed to reveal the singer dressed in a costume noted for its resemblance to iconographic depictions of Ishtar (Bebergal, 2014: 218). Symbolism and traditions from Egyptian myth, as we have seen, are often placed alongside images related to Ishtar in modern popular culture. Madonna's performance of 'Vogue' in the Ishtar-like costume of a robe and distinctively pointy head-gear follows this trend; there are golden sphinxes on the stage and the all-seeing eye is present, a symbol associated with the Egyptian sun god, Ra. Interestingly, a male dancer dressed as Eros (or possibly Cupid?) frequently circles the performer during 'Vogue', creating a visual interplay with Ishtar's identification as the goddess of love.

Madonna performed several of her most successful songs in the half-time set, including 'Music' and part of 'Express Yourself', although it is only in 'Vogue' that the

musician wears her Ishtar-like costume – perhaps fitting, given the song's praise of dancing, beauty, and powerful female (and male) icons.

LITERARY ISHTAR

The connection between Madonna and Ishtar is not limited to the Super Bowl. In Neil Gaiman's *Sand Man: Brief Lives* (1994), the character of Ishtar dances wildly to 'Like a Virgin', in a scene full of musical symbolism (Prescott, 2015: 246). In Gaiman's graphic novel, Ishtar is a self-destructive stripper and the former lover of the leading character, Destruction. Several other deities feature as characters in the Sandman series, from a range of cultural backgrounds. Ishtar's role in the book as a stripper evokes the prevalence of the concept of temple prostitution in modern awareness of the goddess, and her intimacy with Destruction could be viewed as a nod to the goddess' identification as a storm and warrior deity.

Gaiman's depiction of a dancing Ishtar perhaps reflects the author's awareness of her love of music and dance in the ancient evidence. The connection of Ishtar to dance has been reflected in the three-act Martinu ballet *Istar*, written by the Czech composer in Prague between 1918–1921 (Sasson, 1997: 170). The possibility has been raised that Ishtar's *Descent*, with the goddess' stripping at seven gates, may have influenced the dance of the seven veils in Oscar Wilde's 1891 play *Salome* (Bentley, 2002: 32), although it is not known whether Wilde was aware of the Ishtar narrative (Garland, 2011: 127). Stripping is featured in the Joffrey ballet *Astarte* (debuting in 1967), where a male dancer strips and then dances with the goddess, who is a syncretism of Ishtar.

Dancing, prostitution and fertility all feature in Richard Adams' fantasy novel *Maia* (1984). In *Maia*, a 'Sacred Queen' named Fornis enacts a fertility ritual that involves sexual congress with a divine statue. The statue scene plays upon the concept of a physical enactment of sacred marriage, once widely accepted in scholarship. Observing the interaction between the statue and the Queen has a stimulating influence on the novel's protagonist, Maia, causing her to seduce her young companion. The fantasy author's earlier work *Watership Down* (1972) was recognised as drawing upon the myths and epics of the Classical world, and Adams' familiarity with Sumerian religious practices can be seen in references to the myth of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* in *Maia* and his earlier novel from the same series, *Shardik* (1984).

Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Time Enough for Love* (1973) features a gene scientist who is given the 'bed-name' of Ishtar by a lover, a name that the scientist then adopts as her own. The mythical significance of the name is affirmed by her partner's 'bed-name' Galahad, and his comments that he should have named her for the Hippolyta, the Amazon Queen, due to her proclivity for roughness – a comment which raises interesting questions about the character's assumption of gentler treatment from Ishtar's namesake. Heinlein's Ishtar plays an important role in facilitating the rejuvenation and extended lifespan of the novel's protagonist, Lazarus Long. The scientist's association with healing and vitality gives some depth to Heinlein's use of mythical symbolism involving Ishtar.

ISHTAR ON SCREEN

Although perhaps not usually considered in context with one another, the literary contribution of Gaiman and the narrative composition of television series *Stargate: SG-1* hold several shared themes in common. Both display an overriding concern with ancient religion and mythology, and use commonly known archetypes or mythical figures to inhabit realms which blend a sense of realism with supernatural elements. It was noted earlier in this section that science fiction and fantasy audiences (and their writers) can be viewed as generally holding a wider knowledge of myth than the population at large, leading to the representation in these works of more 'obscure' ancient figures. Additionally, the frequent usage of more commonly known mythical figures in science fiction and fantasy necessitates the broadening of the narrative focus to include less commonly seen figures, to give new works freshness and individuality. This concept can be seen in the Marvel comic universe, where virtually the entire pantheons of Greece, Rome, Asgard and Mesopotamia are presented in various forms. Inanna first appeared as a character in the comic world in Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian #40 – The fiend from the forgotten city* on 1 July, 1974. Marvel's Inanna holds similar powers to her mythical counterpart, including the ability to heal.

STARGATE: SG-1

Returning to the medium of television, Ishtar's presence as a character on *Stargate: SG-1* is one of the more accurate and interesting modern presentations of the deity. In the over-arching plot of *Stargate: SG-1* (1997–2007), a small military unit is selected to battle aliens, who have taken the form of ancient deities, to protect the earth (and, rather magnanimously, some other planets as well). This storyline necessitates interacting with mythic narratives to produce characters based on ancient divinities, primarily ones of Egyptian origin, such as Apophis and Ra. The Egyptian emphasis is seen in multiple aspects of the series – interestingly, Egyptian symbolism is frequently associated with Ishtar in modern popular culture.

'Ishta' (played by Jolene Blalock) is a former priestess of the deity/alien Moloc. Ishta leads a tribe of all-female warriors in two episodes of the television series *Stargate: SG-1* (2003/2004): 'Birthright,' in season seven, and 'Sacrifice' in season eight. In an interesting co-optation of the historical reputation of Molech as an ancient deity whose worship involved child sacrifice, *Stargate*'s Moloc decrees that all female children must be killed, an edict which leads to Ishta's rebellion, and her eventual alliance with the team of SG-1, led by Colonel Jack O'Neill (Richard Dean Anderson).

Despite the light-hearted format, the presentation of 'Ishta' in *Stargate* gives an image of the goddess that aligns convincingly with several aspects of the depiction of the goddess that emerge from ancient sources. The writers of *Stargate* emphasise Ishta's fighting ability and her leadership: she loves courage, displays fierce loyalty and, like the ancient goddess, is skilled in the use of weapons. The religious competencies of the goddess are expressed in a limited capacity through the character's role as a high priestess, with close links to the temple (although she is presented as

employed in the service of another deity). Ishta on *Stargate*, like the deity who forms the subject of this book, is closely related to the onset of sexual maturity in the young women in her care. Ishta's own sexual allure is also a significant part of her characterisation, as she becomes one of the few lovers of one of the series' lead characters, the alien warrior, Teal'c (Christopher Judge, who also wrote both 'Ishta' episodes). Like Dumuzi, Ishtar's first husband has met a premature death.

YEAR ONE

The modern connection between Ishtar and Molech in popular culture is further explored in the film *Year One* (2009). The film follows the adventures of hunter Zed (Jack Black) and gatherer Oh (Michael Cera), as they journey through a biblically inspired landscape in search of meaning and romance. Many biblical narratives and characters are involved in the film's plot, such as Cain and Abel and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and there is even a reference to Gilgamesh. In the film, Princess Inanna (played by Olivia Wilde) is involved in a cult in the biblical city of Sodom, where a giant statue provides the locus for the burning of human sacrifices. 'Inanna' in *Year One* resembles the Mesopotamian goddess in several ways: she is beautiful and seductive, and shows empathy for the suffering of the people. At the end of the film, she becomes Queen Inanna, ruling (somewhat confusingly) over Sodom. The biblical theme of *Year One* would suggest that the connection between Ishtar/Inanna and Molech in popular culture may have developed from the influence of biblical texts, where the 'Queen of Heaven' and Molech are both mentioned in prohibitions against apostasy. The character of Princess Inanna almost becomes a sacrifice to Molech, before being rescued by the film's hero – in *Year One* as in *Stargate*, the presence of Molech is presented as dangerous for the goddess.

The association of Inanna/Ishtar with love, sex and prostitution may be represented in the character of Inara Serra, from the television series *Firefly* (2002).[1] Inara (played by Morena Baccarin) is a beautiful Companion, which in the series is presented as a role of high status involving sexual commerce. Inara's allure is an important narrative element, and the romantic attraction between the Companion and the series' lead, Malcolm 'Mal' Reynolds (Nathan Fillion), assists in the characterisation of both figures. For Davidson, Inara represents the sexual and compassionate aspect of Inanna/Ishtar, while the goddess' war-like aspect is expressed through the character of Zoe Alleyne Washburne (played by Gina Torres) (2004: 113–124).

Firefly was created by Joss Whedon, whose wide-ranging oeuvre contains a notably thoughtful preoccupation with ancient myths, archetypes and symbols, especially with the representation of powerful female characters. Whedon is perhaps best known for creating the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), based on the film of the same name (1992). In the television series, heroic young vampire slayer, Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar), battles the forces of evil with a small but intrepid band of friends. Ishtar is briefly referenced in Buffy's season 5 episode, 'Blood Ties,' where the anti-hero vampire Spike (James Marsters) uses one of her cult objects as an ashtray.

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

Indeed, Buffy herself has been noted for her similarities to Ishtar/Inanna (Playdon, 2002). As a slayer, Buffy is the latest in a line of female warriors who battle evil to protect humanity. She is brave, loyal, beautiful and capable of securing what at first appear to be unlikely victories through either her physical skills or her wits. Buffy's characteristic verbal dexterity has been widely noted, adding to the parallels between the slayer and the goddess. For Playdon, Buffy's death and resurrection in Seasons 5 and 6 of the series echo the journey of Inanna into the underworld:

> Buffy must visit her 'dark sister', not once but time and again. Ereshkigal is represented most obviously by Faith, the Slayer gone bad, who figuratively kills Buffy by taking her body from her (This Year's Girl), but that darkness is also represented by the First Slayer (Restless) who haunts Buffy's dreams; by her negative reaction to Willow coming out as a lesbian, so that her 'sister' becomes sexually threatening (New Moon Rising . . . and most explicitly by the 'death wish' which, Spike tells Buffy, led to the death of previous Slayers (Fool For Love).
>
> (Playdon, 2002: 169)

In her relationship with Faith (a scene-stealing Eliza Dushku), Buffy enters murky moral territory, which ends in her almost killing her fellow slayer – and partially inhabiting the 'dark' role that has been established as Faith's domain. Playdon also notes the similarities between Buffy's resurrection by her loyal friend Willow (Alyson Hannigan), and Inanna's rescue through the efforts of faithful Ninshubur (2002: 169).

In the Season 2 finale, Buffy, like Ishtar, sends her lover, Angel (played by David Boreanaz), to Hell ('Becoming: Part 2'). By sending Angel into a vortex to Hell, Buffy saves the world from being drawn into the underworld, creating a parallel with the necessity of re-establishing earthly and cosmic order following the goddess' death in myth of *Inanna's Descent* (ETCSL 1.4.1).

Despite their roles in the deaths of their lovers, both Buffy and Ishtar are powerfully affected by the loss of their loved ones, and mourn for them deeply. Both Angel and Dumuzi engage in behaviour that is harmful to their lovers prior to their demise, and their own actions are shown to be integral to their unhappy fate. Of course, despite the similarities, there are clear differences between the two stories. Perhaps most importantly, Ishtar herself threatens to bring the residents of the netherworld up to the terrestrial realm in the *Descent*, something Buffy spends a great deal of time and energy attempting to avoid in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, both warriors can be seen to inhabit a sacred role which incorporates a special authority in maintaining the order between the realms of the living and the dead. Ishtar's occasional disruption of this order, whether threatened or enacted, expresses her power over both realms.

Despite the rich mythical context of *Buffy*, the obscurity of Ishtar/Inanna's stories in the modern day might suggest the parallels noted here are unintentional. Yet it is intriguing to observe that, even in the modern day, there is a strong interest in powerful and beautiful female warriors, who take on a sacred role in maintaining cosmic order. One further note on Buffy: when Buffy (who we have likened to Ishtar in this section) fights against Molech in the first season episode 'I Robot, You Jane', it is a

clear victory for the slayer – an outcome that could be viewed as a happy reversal of the trend, noted previously, of Molech dominating Ishtar in modern culture.

HERCULES

Moving from horror to adventure, the television series *Hercules, the Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999) retells the story of the Greek hero, Herakles, in a creative blend of myth, action and comedy. Ishtar, or at least, a character with the name Ishtar, appears as the monster that the hero must defeat in the season three episode, 'Mummy Dearest'. Several features of this 'Ishtar' reflect trends in the modern reception of the deity; most notably, 'Ishtar' is Egyptian, and in her (or in the episode, his) role as a mummy, the close association between the goddess and death is reflected. The mummy Ishtar seeks to devour a human 'life force', and through controlling mummy-Ishtar, another villain, the ruthless Sobek, intends to take the throne of Egypt – perhaps referencing the close relationship between the goddess and the Mesopotamian king in the ancient world. The swiftness of the mummy, remarked upon by multiple characters in the episode, and the creature's near-constant vocalisation ('grrr!') are aspects of this 'Ishtar' that are more in line with ancient sources on the deity, although one suspects these similarities may owe more to coincidence than an effort towards accurately representing the goddess. Dumuzi, too, has a villainous turn on *Hercules*, in the season five episode 'Descent'.

The mummy-Ishtar's desire to eat a human 'life force' is not an isolated feature of the goddess' modern representation. Following the unflattering ancient trend started by Gilgamesh in his *Epic*, the connection between the goddess and insatiable, destructive consumption has lingered in later artistic works. Ishtar's threat to raise the dead 'to consume the living' has led to the recounting of the goddess' myths in several books devoted to the modern popularity of zombies in film and television. Ishtar is also linked to her worshippers' practising of cannibalism in *Blood Feast* (1963), a film considered as the first of the 'splatter' genre (again in this film, Ishtar is considered an Egyptian deity, a misidentification that is spoofed in the film's later sequel).

ISHTAR IN THE STARS

We have seen that, from the time of the earliest history of Mesopotamian civilisation, Ishtar has been connected to the celestial body, Venus, and she is represented in artistic sources as an eight-pointed star. This most ancient connection of the goddess to the stars continues in the modern day, through the naming of the geographical landscape of the planet Venus. The planet Venus has two large highland areas: one is called Aphrodite Terra, and the other is Ishtar Terra. The geographical area named after the world's original goddess of love is about the size of the continent of Australia. It is home to Maxwell Montes, which at its peak is the highest point on the surface of Venus – taller than Earth's Mount Everest. Ishtar Terra is also home to volcanoes named after famous historical women, including Cleopatra and Sacajawea.

OVERVIEW

Ishtar's cultural impact has diminished exponentially over time, and in the modern day awareness of her has almost disappeared. Yet, beneath the surface of more commonly known traditions her influence may still be found. Continuing to revive the goddess in present-day scholarship is a process with a wide variety of benefits for the study of the ancient world, as well as gender and religious studies. In this chapter, we have seen that Ishtar's influence on later religious traditions can be expressed subtly, and is frequently difficult to quantify.

In modern culture, the loving warrior goddess lives on in strong female protagonists, and her associations with dance and song continue to find expression in diverse creative works. Ishtar's present-day obscurity has led to her finding a home in works of science fiction, fantasy and horror – due to the generally greater awareness of myth among the audiences of these genres. Modern-day representations of the goddess show considerable diversity, and explore, to varying degrees, themes of beauty, love, sexuality, battle and musicality.

At the conclusion of this book, there are many aspects of Ishtar which remain elusive, and parts of her history and identification that require further specialist clarification. We have seen, for example, that the goddess' bond with the Mesopotamian king is unique among her relationships, yet there are still many aspects of this connection requiring further study. The themes of this book hopefully provide a sense of the richness of the goddess' ancient image, and perspectives on possible areas where future research might be well directed.

We have found that the goddess' connection to love infuses every aspect of her image, including her associations with healing, vengeance, battle and death. The goddess' love is an extremely powerful force with the potential to provide 'life' and blessings, to heal, and even to care for her loved ones after death. Among her many powerful attributes is the goddess' voice: a diverse instrument with transformative potential. The goddess uses her voice to express feelings of joy and love, but also to enlist support – or to threaten and scream when things do not go her way.

Through the course of this analysis, it is hoped that the goddess' voice has emerged more clearly, and will find a more central role in the continuing dialogue between past and present, myth and history. Ishtar's complexity has, at times, presented a serious obstacle to gaining a clearer awareness of her identity in scholarly works, but the 'silver lining' to this diversity is its enormous capacity to provide the grounds for future research. Like the powerful Mesopotamian goddess of love herself, future research on Ishtar indeed has unlimited potential.

NOTE

1 I am grateful to Stephanie Budin for making me aware of the scholarship connecting Ishtar to *Firefly*.

FURTHER READING

The suggested readings in this section are not meant to be exhaustive, rather to present some avenues for extended study, and to complement the thematic focus of this book. Assyriological works have developed a reputation for inaccessibility to the non-specialist. In awareness of this, I have aimed to keep the focus in this section on more general and accessible works. Included here are a small number of more specialised studies, and also one or two in languages other than English, when they have seemed particularly foundational or relevant for a deeper analysis of the themes explored in this book.

INTRODUCTION

It is a particularly good time to begin one's study of the Ancient Near East, as sources are continually being made more widely available. Perhaps the best example of this trend is the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*, where almost 400 literary compositions can be searched and read online, with each entry containing English language prose, transliteration, and a useful bibliography.

To gain an overview of the social and economic life in the Ancient Near East, Daniel C. Snell's *Life in the Ancient Near East, 3100–332 BCE* gives a detailed introduction with a strong emphasis on the ancient sources. Two recent publications combine informed analysis with a readable style: Benjamin R. Foster's *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia* (2016), and Marten Stol's *Women in the Ancient Near East* (2016). Although perhaps showing its age a little, Thorkild Jacobsen's *The Treasures of Darkness* (1976) was for many decades the key reference for students beginning to research Mesopotamian religion. An overview of Mesopotamian religion is provided (in English) by Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (2001); Ivan Hrůša's *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: A Descriptive Introduction* (2015); and in the collection of selected essays by W.G. Lambert in *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology* (2016).

Moving towards studies more focused upon Mesopotamian literary traditions: Stephanie Dalley's *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (1989) provides a very readable entry point to the world of Akkadian myth. Two anthologies, one by Benjamin R. Foster (*Before the Muses: An Anthology of*

Akkadian Literature, 2005) and the other from Thorkild Jacobsen (*The Harps that Once Sounded . . . Sumerian Poetry in Translation*, 1987) present a great variety of textual evidence in translation, with some commentary. An excellent introduction to Ancient Near Eastern Literature by leading scholars is *From an Antique Land: An Introduction to Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, edited by Carl S. Ehrlich (2009).

For further reading on the connection between Inanna/Ishtar and the poetess, Enheduanna, see Hallo and van Dijk's *The Exaltation of Inanna* (1969). This volume contains a detailed commentary of that text, and analyses many literary, religious and historical problems related to the hymn. Enheduanna is also the subject of two books by Betty De Shong Meador, *Inanna, Lady of the Largest Heart* (2001) and *Princess, Priestess, Poet: the Sumerian Temple Hymns of Enheduanna* (2009).

The complex presentations of Mesopotamian goddesses through a range of sources and periods are carefully analysed in *Goddesses in Context: On Divine Powers, Roles, Relationships and Gender in Mesopotamian Textual and Visual Sources* (2013), edited by Julia M. Asher-Greve and Joan Goodnick Westenholz. For works on Ishtar more specifically: several previous books have provided translations of key texts, with commentary (Groneberg, *Lob der Ištar: Gebet und Ritual an die altbabylonische Venusgöttin*, 1997; and Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 1983). Perhaps the most frequently cited work on Ishtar to date is Harris' 1991 article 'Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites' (*History of Religions* 30.3: 261–278). Harris gives a detailed consideration of the complexity of the goddess, with a useful bibliography.

CHAPTER 1: LOVE AND INTIMACY

Sumerian love poetry provides the focus for Yitzhak Sefati's *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature: Critical Edition of the Dumuzi-Inanna Songs* (1998). A clearer understanding of Sumerian literary traditions can be developed through consultation with *The World's Oldest Literature: Studies in Sumerian Belles-Lettres* (2010) by William Hallo, and Jeremy Black's comprehensive study *Reading Sumerian Poetry* (1998). Jerrold S. Cooper has written several notable articles on particular aspects of Sumerian poetry and lamentations, a very small sample of which may be found in the bibliography of this book. A combination of Sumerian and Akkadian poetry is the focus of *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (1996), edited by M.E. Vogelsang and H.L.J Vanstiphout.

To better understand the historical context of the poetry, the excellent 2013 volume, *The Sumerian World* (edited by Harriet Crawford) is recommended; the collection explores literary and archaeological evidence for political systems and everyday life (and death) as well as other diverse topics.

CHAPTER 2: SEXUALITY AND ORDER

Gwendolyn Leick's *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (2003) unites the kind of overview useful for an introductory work, together with close attention to the

sources and critical argumentation. Zainab Bahrani's *Women of Babylon* (2001) provides a detailed insight into gender and sexuality in literature, and a strong analysis of the artistic sources for Mesopotamian women. I would further recommend Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting, (eds) *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East* (2002), in two volumes, and Marten Stol's *Women in the Ancient Near East* (2016).

The myth of Inanna and Shukaletuda has formed the main focus of this chapter, and the definitive work on this myth, to date, is by Konrad Volk: *Inanna and Šukaletuda: Zur historisch-politischen Deutung eines sumerischen Literaturwerkes* (1995). Jeffrey Cooley has made a thorough analysis of the astral associations of this myth (in English), and also provides a detailed bibliography for further study of the myth (2008).

For a thorough exploration of the differences between male and female divine creativity and fertility, see Stephanie Budin (2014) 'Fertility and Gender in the Ancient Near East', in M. Masterson, N. Sorkin Rabionwitz and J. Robson (eds) *Sex in Antiquity*. Abingdon/New York: Taylor & Francis, pp. 30–49.

CHAPTER 3: ISHTAR AND THE PANTHEON

For Inanna's relationship with other deities, see H.L.J. Vanstipout's article 'Inana/Ishtar as a Figure of Controversy', in *Struggles of the Gods*, edited by Hans J. Kippenberg. Despite its publication in 1984, Vanstipout's paper has aged extremely well, and continues to hold great value for understanding this aspect of the goddess. For thoughtful considerations of the Mesopotamian pantheon, see Barbra Nevling Porter (ed.) *What is a God? Anthropomorphic and Non-Anthropomorphic Aspects of Deity in Ancient Mesopotamia* (2009).

In this chapter, the close relationship between Inanna and her divine 'mentor', Enki was explored. To consider this relationship further from the other side, and to learn more about the influential deity of magic and wisdom, see *Myths of Enki, the Crafty God* (1989), edited by Samuel Noah Kramer and John Maier. For a diverse collection of essays on various Sumerian deities, see *Sumerian Gods and Their Representations* (1997), edited by I.L. Finkel and M.J. Geller.

For an introductory overview of Mesopotamian religion, see the *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (2005), edited by Lindsay Jones, which has two substantial entries on Mesopotamian religion, the first by Thorkild Jacobsen, and the second by Giovanni Pettinato.

CHAPTER 4: KINGSHIP, BATTLE AND FAMILY

Two articles are particularly relevant for considering the complex relationship between Ishtar/Inanna and the Mesopotamian king: these are Philip Jones' 'Embracing Inana: Legitimation and Mediation in the Ancient Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage Hymn Iddin-Dagan A', (2003), and 'King by Love of Inanna; An Image of Female Empowerment?' (2000) by Joan G. Westenholz. A recent book on kingship *Experiencing Power, Generating Authority: Cosmos, Politics, and the Ideology of Kingship in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia* (2013) contains several indispensable

articles – most notably for this chapter, JoAnn Scurlock's 'Images of Tammuz: The Intersection of Death, Divinity, and Royal Authority in Ancient Mesopotamia'. *Text, Artefact and Image: Revealing Israelite Religion* (2006), edited by Gary M. Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis, is useful for exploring different periods in the monarchy, and for considering kingship more broadly in a range of cultures of the Ancient Near East – but see particularly for relevance to this study Jacob Klein's 'Sumerian Kingship and the Gods'. *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (2011), edited by Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson, contains several excellent articles on varied aspects of kingship, each with an extremely detailed bibliography and a helpful 'Further Reading' section.

The significant question of the king's divinity has been explored in *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond* (2008), edited by Nicole Brisch – which in some ways could be viewed as a kind of re-evaluated, worthy successor to Henri Frankfort's influential comparison of Egyptian and Mesopotamian kingship, *Kingship and the Gods* (1948). A helpful overview of scholarship on the subject of divinity and Mesopotamian kingship, as well as an explanation of some of the main problems, can be found in Nicole Brisch's article, 'Of Gods and Kings: Divine Kingship in Ancient Mesopotamia' (2013).

CHAPTER 5: ISHTAR AND THE HEROES OF MESOPOTAMIAN EPIC

To begin to explore the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is most helpful to start with a strong translation of the text, such as Andrew George's *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation* (1999). Also by George, and uniting a new (currently definitive) translation with a critical analysis of the text is *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (2003), in two volumes. Also containing a combination of commentary and translation of the text is *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* edited by Benjamin Foster (2001). To delve more deeply into analyses of the Epic, see (most notably) *Gilgamesh: A Reader* (1998), a fascinating study edited by John Maier, containing twenty-five essays. The development of the *Epic* is analysed in Jeffrey Tigay's *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (1982). The emphasis of these analyses is generally on giving a detailed commentary for specific aspects of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. For further reading on Gilgamesh as a character, see also my forthcoming book in this series, which aims to provide a focus on Gilgamesh as a heroic individual from Ancient Near Eastern mythology.

The complex dynamics between Ishtar and Gilgamesh in the *Epic* are further explored in Tzvi Abusch's article 'Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, Tablet 6, Lines 1–79' (1986), which also contains an extensive bibliography. Rivkah Harris provides an important context for the presentation of women in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, in chapter seven of her book *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia* (2000).

For the Sumerian myth of Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld, see Alhena Gadotti's *'Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld' and the Sumerian Gilgamesh Cycle* (2014).

CHAPTER 6: VENGEANCE AND DEATH

Translations of law codes, such as the Laws of Ur-Namma, can be found in Martha Roth's comprehensive volume, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (1997). For a recent and accessible entry point into Mesopotamian concepts of justice, see Sophie Démare-Lafont's chapter 'Judicial Decision-making: Judges and Arbitrators', in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (2011), edited by Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson – with an extensive bibliography and useful 'Further Reading' section.

For further consideration of Ishtar and death, see Caitlyn Barret's excellent article, 'Was Dust Their Food and Clay Their Bread?' (2007), with extensive bibliography. For death in Mesopotamia more generally, a good starting point is Joann Scurlock's 'Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought', in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, (1995) edited by Jack Sasson. The published conference proceedings, *Death in Mesopotamia: Papers Read at the XXVIe Rencontre assyriologique internationale* (1980), edited by Bendt Alster, give a very diverse selection of aspects of Mesopotamian death, from many of the field's leading scholars.

A particularly influential resource, focused on the Sumerian sources, is Dina Katz's *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (2003). Also from Katz, a wonderful overview of funerary practices (and good entry point to Katz's oeuvre) is the 2005 paper 'Death They Dispensed to Mankind: The Funerary World of Ancient Mesopotamia'. More recently, for an overview that combines archaeological and literary sources, see Helga Vogel's chapter 'Death and Burial', in *The Sumerian World* (2013), edited by Harriet Crawford.

CHAPTER 7: RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE

To further explore the scared prostitution myth, see Stephanie Budin's thorough analysis *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (2008). The complexity of syncretism, particularly in terms of Mesopotamian religion, is the subject of a detailed analysis by Joan Goodnick Westenholz (2013). Christopher Metcalf's discussion of the Inanna/Aphrodite syncretistic relationship deserves a close reading for understanding the complexities of the connection (2015).

A detailed overview of the problems in attempting to establish connections between the Ancient Near Eastern and Classical worlds has been provided by Scott Noegel, in *A Companion to Greek Religion* (2007), edited by Daniel Ogden. The interplay between Greek religion and the Ancient Near East has been the subject of a thoughtful analysis by Jan Bremmer, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Religion* (2015), edited by Esther Eidinow and Julia Kindt.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky's *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (1992) gave Inanna/Ishtar a prominent place in discussions of women and gender, and her analysis of the gradual disappearance of the influence of goddesses in the Ancient Near East has been extremely influential. This book continues to provide a critical reference for studies of Ishtar and gender.

For possible Biblical connections to Inanna/Ishtar (and a great variety of other Mesopotamian deities), see the classic work, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (1999), edited by Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst – and affectionately known as 'the *DDD*'. The *DDD* has detailed entries on several deities discussed in this chapter: as well as Ishtar, there is also Tammuz, Aphrodite, Asherah and Astarte, each with a bibliography.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This brief glossary lists some useful terms that appear in this book. When listing deities that have differing Sumerian and Semitic names, I give the Sumerian version first. The family relations noted below show some variability in different periods and traditions. Spelling differences in names that appear in quoted text throughout the book reflect the use of translations.

Amaushumgalana Another name for Inanna's bridegroom, Dumuzi.

An/Anu Mesopotamian sky deity, father of Ishtar and Shamash.

Asushunamir A creation of Ea who rescues Ishtar from the underworld.

Balbale A type of literary composition involving lamentations.

Bull of Heaven Cosmic warrior, connected to the constellation of Taurus. Killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, while in the service of Ishtar.

Dumuzi/Tammuz Divine bridegroom of Inanna/Ishtar.

Duttur Mother of Dumuzi and Geshtinanna.

E-ana Temple of Inanna in Uruk, literally 'House of heaven.'

Ebih Mountain range to the north-east of Sumer, destroyed by Inanna.

Enheduanna Historical priestess and princess. World's first individually identified poet and author of important works dedicated to Inanna.

Enki/Ea Mesopotamian deity of wisdom, mentor of Inanna/Ishtar.

Enkidu Heroic companion of Gilgamesh.

Enkimdu Farmer deity who competes against Dumuzi to marry Inanna.

Enlil One of the primary Mesopotamian deities. Often described as 'king' or 'supreme lord'.

Ereshkigal Queen of the Underworld, sister of Inanna/Ishtar.

***Gala* demons** Demons with a special capacity to carry living individuals away to the underworld.

Geshtinanna Mesopotamian goddess, sister of Dumuzi.Gilgamesh: Legendary king of Uruk and hero of the *Gilgamesh* epic.

Inanna/Ishtar Primary Mesopotamian goddess of love and war. In Sumerian sources she is Inanna; in Semitic sources, Ishtar.

Isimud Two-faced (literally) divine minister of Enki.

ME Collection of fundamental ordinances necessary for the continuation and maintenance of universal order.

Neti Divine gatekeeper of the Underworld, assistant of Ereshkigal.

Ningal Mother of Inanna and Utu.

Ninshubur Inanna/Ishtar's loyal assistant.

Sargon of Akkad King and empire-builder who united northern and southern Mesopotamia.

Shukaletuda Son of a gardener, sexually assaults Inanna.

Tigi A kind of hymn with the accompaniment of a lyre.

Ur-Namma King of Third Dynasty of Ur, author of legal code.

Uttu Sumerian goddess of weaving.

Utu/Shamash Mesopotamian sun deity, strongly connected to justice. Brother of Ishtar.

TIMELINE

The timeline below is intended to give a very general sense of the main periods of Mesopotamian history – dates should not be considered as absolute.

4000–2600 BCE Archaic

Mid-to-late 4th millennium: first attested text from Uruk

2600–2340 BCE Early Dynastic III

2340–2100 BCE Sargonic (Old Akkadian, Gutian)

Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279) creates the first politically unified Mesopotamian state.
Sargon's daughter, Enheduanna, composes a collection of poems to Inanna.

2100–2000 BCE Ur III

End of 3rd millennium: Sumerian disappears as a living language.

2000–1600 BCE Isin-Larsa, Old Babylonian

1950–1750 BCE Old Assyrian

1600–1100 BCE Middle Babylonian/Kassite

1500–1000 BCE Middle Assyrian

1000–539 BCE Neo-Babylonian

1000–600 BCE Neo-Assyrian

539 BCE–1st century CE

1st century CE sees virtual disappearance of Mesopotamian culture, along with use of cuneiform script.

19th century CE

Cuneiform rediscovered and deciphered.

INDEX

Following the text, this index uses 'Ishtar' except where 'Inanna' is specifically indicated.