

The Myths of Summer



For the nerd, by the robot

The Myths of Sumer
Stories from the First Scribes

Jose Blanca

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The prose of this book was composed by artificial intelligence working under human direction. All scholarly sources consulted are cited in the text and in the bibliography; a fuller account of the process is given in the preface that follows.

A Note on How This Book Was Made

This book is unusual in its authorship. The stories it retells are ancient — first pressed into clay four thousand years ago — but the prose that retells them was written, almost from first word to last, by artificial intelligence. The human role was to choose the project, approve what the machines produced at a small number of review points, and decide when the book was done.

The project itself was an experiment. The question behind it was a simple one: what would an AI produce if it were asked, seriously and with proper tooling, to write a book about the mythology of a particular culture? Not a summary, not a Wikipedia-style overview, but a full-length retelling in the tradition of the popular science and humanities writing of the twentieth century where a knowledgeable narrator walks the reader through a body of material with clarity, pace, and judgement. Sumer was chosen as the test case because its literature is rich, its sources are well catalogued, and it's the first civilization. Whether the experiment has succeeded is for the reader to decide.

The work runs as a pipeline of discrete stages, each stage a separate job handed to an AI in a fresh conversation. The stories the book would cover were gathered in a first stage, then audited in a second; each chapter was then built in three further stages — a list of numbered factual claims anchored line by line to specific tablets, a check of those claims against the original translations, and a final draft that turns the verified claims into continuous narrative prose. A last stage confirms that the narrative faithfully reflects the claims and adds nothing that was not there. Between major stages the human author reviewed a short audit report, corrected any findings he wished to correct, and released the next stage.

Gemini's research mode was used for the opening survey of Sumerian literature. But from that point onward, almost all the work — drafting, checking, line-editing, assembly — was done by Claude in fresh conversations for each stage. The cross-model discipline the pipeline was designed around was not, in practice, enforced here. Isolation between conversations was maintained; isolation between models was not. The reader should weigh the book with that in mind.

The machinery that binds all this together is a small Python program that assembles prompts from a library of instruction files — one per stage — and passes them from one AI to the next. Every factual statement in the book carries a hidden machine-readable token pointing to its source. A final assembly stage builds the bibliography from those tokens automatically, rather than by parsing the prose, which eliminates an entire class of citation errors. The book itself is written in AsciiDoc and rendered to EPUB and PDF through Asciidoctor.

What the human author whose name appears on the cover actually did was this: choose the culture and the period, read the opening scope and inventory, skim the audit reports at a handful of gates, correct a small number of findings, and press the button that started the next stage. The scholarly judgement, the prose style, the sentence rhythm, the choice of which comparative hooks to draw to Greek or Biblical traditions — all of that came from the machines.

The reader should treat the book accordingly. The scholarship it draws on is real, and each factual claim is tied to a published source that the reader can look up. The stories it tells are the stories on the tablets. But the voice that tells them is not a human voice, and the reader should feel free to judge the result on its own terms.

Chapter 1. Introduction: The Literature of the Black-Headed People

Around 2100 BCE, in the southern Mesopotamian city of Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru), a student at an *edubba* — a scribal school, literally a "tablet house" — sat down with a lump of damp clay and began copying a story about a goddess who walked into the land of the dead. He did not invent the story. He may not even have understood all of it. But he copied it, and because fired clay is nearly indestructible, his copy survived. It outlasted the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the rise and collapse of Babylon, the Persians, Alexander, the Parthians, and nineteen centuries of desert. It survived because nobody knew it was there.

The student's tablet is one of roughly four hundred Sumerian literary compositions now known to scholarship, most of them catalogued in the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL), the standard digital edition assembled at Oxford between 1998 and 2006.^[1] These four hundred compositions include hymns, laments, proverbs, love songs, and the narrative myths that concern us here. Almost none survive in originals from the period they describe. The overwhelming majority are Old Babylonian copies — dating from roughly 2000 to 1600 BCE — of texts whose oral and written origins reach back centuries earlier, some to the archaic period around 2600 BCE.^[2] The people who composed and transmitted these texts called themselves the *saĝ-gig-ga*, the "black-headed people." They inhabited a network of city-states spread across the alluvial plain between the Tigris and Euphrates: Eridu, the oldest city in their own tradition and seat of Enki's temple; Ur, the great port city sacred to the moon god; Uruk (Sumerian: Unug), the walled city of Inanna; and Nippur, the religious capital where Enlil's temple the E-kur stood and where the largest single cache of literary tablets was found.

The geographic spread of the finds matters. The largest concentration of literary tablets comes from Nippur, which the University of Pennsylvania began excavating in the 1890s, and Nippur's *edubba* tradition dominates the corpus. But significant literary tablets have also turned up at Ur (excavated by Woolley in the 1920s and 1930s), at Uruk, at the northern Babylonian sites of Sippar and Kish, and at Tell Haddad (ancient Me-Turan) east of the Tigris, where important Gilgamesh fragments emerged as recently as the 1980s. The result is a literary tradition that is at once local — most of our texts are Nippur schoolwork — and demonstrably widespread across southern Mesopotamia.

The condition of these texts demands a word of caution. A Sumerian literary tablet is not a book. It is a school exercise, or a temple archive copy, or a fragment of either. Many compositions survive on dozens of overlapping tablets, no single one complete, and the "text" modern scholars read is a composite stitched together from these witnesses. Lines are broken. Passages are illegible. Whole sections are missing. The ETCSL composites represent the best current reconstruction from all available evidence, but they are reconstructions: behind every smooth translation lies a jigsaw puzzle of clay fragments, some of which are still missing. The scribal schools themselves — the *edubba* institutions where students advanced through a graded curriculum from sign-lists and proverbs to the literary compositions treated in this book — were the primary mechanism that kept these texts alive.^[3] A composition popular in the *edubba* was copied by many students, and therefore survives in many tablets; a composition that fell outside the standard curriculum survives in few, if any. So what we have is not a representative sample of Sumerian storytelling. It is a sample shaped by institutional pedagogy, and the biases of that pedagogy — toward Nippur, toward Enlil's theological supremacy, toward the interests of the scribal elite — are baked into the

corpus itself.

Three scholars, spanning the twentieth century, have shaped how the modern world reads this literature. Samuel Noah Kramer, working from the 1930s onward, first made the corpus accessible to a general audience, and his *Sumerian Mythology* (1961) remains a useful orientation despite decades of superseded readings.^[4] Thorkild Jacobsen, whose *The Harps That Once...* (1987) offered literary translations of extraordinary sensitivity, brought the poetic dimension of these texts into English for the first time with real force.^[5] And Jeremy Black, together with his collaborators at Oxford, built the ETCSL and produced the single most comprehensive English anthology, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (2004), which serves as the baseline reference for this book.^[6] The present volume stands on the shoulders of all three, cross-checked where possible against the ETCSL composite texts and the philological studies cited in each chapter.

This book covers thirty-six compositions, organised into ten cycles. What follows in this introduction is a map of that territory: what each cycle contains, why it mattered to the Sumerians who copied it, and where it connects to mythological traditions the reader may already know.

1.1. The Enki Cycle

Enki—god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu*, the underground freshwater ocean beneath Eridu—is the most narratively productive deity in the Sumerian pantheon. Four compositions centre on him, and together they cover an enormous range: the origin of paradise, the creation of humanity, the bureaucratic organisation of the cosmos, and the ritual movement of divine power between cities.

Enki and Ninhursaja (Chapter 1) is set in Dilmun, a paradisaal land associated with purity and trade (scholars identify it with modern Bahrain). The text describes a place with no sickness, no old age, no predation—a primordial state of perfection that Enki disrupts by eating forbidden plants, provoking a curse from the mother goddess Ninhursaja, lady of the mountain. Ninhursaja eventually reverses the curse, healing eight ailments in Enki's body by creating eight healing deities.^[7] The composition survives in co-equal Nippur and Ur recensions, both well attested in Old Babylonian copies.^[8] Its cultural function is cosmological—it establishes Dilmun's divine purity—and aetiological, explaining the origin of specific healing deities. The parallel with the Genesis Eden narrative—a paradise garden, forbidden consumption, divine curse—has been noted since Kramer, though direct borrowing should not be assumed.^[9]

Enki and Ninmah (Chapter 2) is the Sumerian creation story. The gods are tired of labouring, and Enki devises a solution: humanity, shaped from clay over the *abzu* by the mother goddess Ninmah. What follows is a drunken contest in which Ninmah creates humans with various impairments and Enki finds a social role for each—the blind man becomes a musician, and so on—until Enki creates a being so helpless that Ninmah cannot assign it any role at all.^[10] This is a central composition: multiple Old Babylonian Nippur copies place it firmly in the scribal curriculum.^[11] Its function is theogonic—it explains why humans exist (to relieve the gods' labour)—and social, grounding human physical diversity in divine intention. The clay-shaping motif echoes the Prometheus tradition in Greek mythology, while the contest between divine craftspeople has resonances with creation-through-challenge stories worldwide.^[12]

Enki and the World Order (Chapter 3) runs to roughly 470 lines and reads like a divine org chart.

Enki tours the known world—Sumer, Ur, Meluhha, Dilmun, the Tigris and Euphrates—and assigns each land, river, craft, and institution to a specific deity. Agriculture goes to one god, weaving to another, the rivers to another, and so on through the entire inventory of Sumerian civilisation. The composition concludes with Inanna complaining that she has been given no clear domain, a complaint that sets up the Inanna cycle narratively and theologically.^[13] This is a central text for understanding Sumerian thought: it reveals the *me*—the divine powers and cultural blueprints that govern civilisation—as the operating system of the cosmos, with Enki as its administrator.^[14] The systematic division of divine portfolios parallels how Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades partition the cosmic domains after the Titanomachy, and the Egyptian Ennead's structured assignment of divine roles.^[15]

Enki's Journey to Nibru (Chapter 4) is a shorter but significant composition in which Enki travels from Eridu to Nippur, establishing a ritual geography that maps the political and religious landscape of southern Mesopotamia. Its presence in the scribal curriculum suggests it served a pedagogical function: teaching students the proper relationship between the two great religious centres.^[16]

1.2. The Enlil Cycle

Enlil—king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur—generates fewer narratives than Enki, but the two compositions in his cycle are among the most heavily attested in the entire corpus.

Enlil and Ninlil (Chapter 5) is one of the most copied Sumerian literary texts, preserved in numerous Old Babylonian Nippur tablets.^[17] Its story is troubling and was meant to be: Enlil sexually accosts the young goddess Ninlil at the city canal. The divine assembly judges his act transgressive and banishes him from Nippur toward the *kur*—the mountain, the netherworld, the foreign land, depending on context. Ninlil follows. As Enlil descends through the levels of the cosmos, he engenders the moon god Nanna-Suen (patron of Ur, son of Enlil and Ninlil) and three chthonic deities who will serve as Nanna's underworld substitutes, allowing the moon to rise into heaven rather than remain below.^[18] The theological core is a logic of substitution: three gods are born in the underworld so that one god can ascend from it. The text's function is theogonic (it explains the birth of the moon god and the lunar cycle) and cosmological (it maps the vertical structure of the cosmos through Enlil's descent). The motif of a god punished by divine assembly, and the generative consequences of exile, find echoes in the Greek Kronos-Zeus cycle and in Hindu narratives of divine transformation during amorous pursuit.^[19]

Enlil and Sud (Chapter 6) is a divine courtship narrative: Enlil woos the goddess Sud in the city of Shuruppak, following an elaborate protocol of gifts, messages, and negotiations with her mother. The text details the exchange of bridal gifts, the formal deputising of messengers, and the mother's interrogation of the suitor's credentials—the kind of procedural specificity that suggests the composition served as a mythological charter for the proper conduct of courtship, divine and human alike.^[20] It is well attested but not as heavily copied as Enlil and Ninlil, placing it in the "significant" tier. Notably, the text ends by renaming Sud as Ninlil, establishing a narrative continuity between the two Enlil-cycle compositions: the courtship and renaming in Enlil and Sud precede the more violent events of Enlil and Ninlil in the mythological sequence. The two compositions, though, circulated independently and were not read as sequential chapters of a single story.

1.3. The Ninurta Cycle

Ninurta — warrior god, son of Enlil, champion of the gods — is the protagonist of the Sumerian Chaoskampf tradition, the pattern in which a young divine warrior defeats a primordial chaos being to impose order on the cosmos.

Lugal-e (Chapter 7), also known as "Ninurta's Exploits," runs to roughly 730 lines, making it one of the longest Sumerian literary compositions.^[21] It tells how Ninurta battles and defeats the monstrous Asag, a demon of sickness who has raised an army of stones against the gods. After the victory, Ninurta dams the primeval waters unleashed by the battle, creating the Tigris river system and the fertile plains of Mesopotamia, then assigns fates to each stone that fought for or against him. The composition closes with a renaming: Ninurta's mother Ninmah receives the title *Ninhursaja*, "Lady of the Mountain," in recognition of the *kur* that Ninurta has mastered.^[22] It is central by every measure: attestation (numerous Old Babylonian manuscripts from Nippur and other centres), scholarly attention, and structural importance.^[23] The Chaoskampf pattern it exemplifies — a young warrior god defeating a chaos monster to organise the cosmos — reappears in the later Babylonian *Enuma Elish* (Marduk versus Tiamat), in the Greek Zeus-Typhon conflict, and in the Vedic Indra-Vrtra combat, where the warrior god slays a serpentine demon blocking the waters.^[24] *Lugal-e* predates the *Enuma Elish* by centuries and should be read as a precursor, not a derivative.

Angim (Chapter 8), "Ninurta's Return to Nibru," is a companion piece to *Lugal-e*. It narrates Ninurta's triumphant homecoming after the battle, loaded with trophies, radiating the *me-lam* — the terrifying divine radiance that emanates from gods, monsters, and sacred objects. The composition focuses on martial display and on the tension between Ninurta's overwhelming power and the need to submit that power to the authority of Nippur and Enlil's temple. This tension — the young warrior who has become too powerful for comfort — resolves through Ninurta's willing subordination to his father Enlil, a resolution that reinforces the Nippur-centred theology of the *edubba* curriculum.^[25] *Angim* is significant, well attested but not as heavily copied as *Lugal-e* itself. Taken together, the three Ninurta texts form a triptych: cosmic battle (*Lugal-e*), triumphant return (*Angim*), and comic deflation (*Ninurta and the Turtle*), a range of registers that suggests the Sumerian scribes knew perfectly well that heroism makes the best material for both exaltation and mockery.

Ninurta and the Turtle (Chapter 9) is a marginal text, fragmentary and short, but it provides an essential comic counterpoint to the martial grandeur of *Lugal-e* and *Angim*. After his great victory, Ninurta tries to seize the Tablet of Destinies for himself. Enki, unimpressed, digs a pit and sets a turtle to drag Ninurta into it. The champion of the gods ends up stuck in a hole, lectured by Enki on the limits of warrior ambition.^[26] The text appears to function as a deliberate deflation of the heroic mode, suggesting that even within the Sumerian tradition the Chaoskampf was not treated with unmixed reverence.

1.4. The Inanna Cycle

Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star, patron of Uruk — generates more narrative material than any other figure in the corpus. Four compositions belong to her solo cycle, distinct from the Inanna-Dumuzid cycle treated below.

Inanna and Enki (Chapter 10) tells how Inanna travelled from Uruk to Eridu, got Enki drunk at a feast, and persuaded him to give her the *me*. She loaded roughly one hundred of these divine powers and cultural blueprints — kingship, priesthood, truth, the descent to the underworld, sexual intercourse, the craft of the carpenter, and dozens more — onto her Boat of Heaven and sailed home to Uruk, fending off Enki's attempts to retrieve them.^[27] The composition is central: widely copied in Old Babylonian scribal schools, it encodes the theological transfer of civilisational authority from Eridu (the oldest city) to Uruk (the rising power).^[28] The *me* catalogue — fragmentary though it is — constitutes the most comprehensive Sumerian taxonomy of civilisation, and the theft plot recalls Prometheus stealing fire and the Polynesian myths of Maui stealing fire from the underworld: a culture hero's transgressive act founds civilisation as we know it.^[29]

Inanna and Ebih (Chapter 11) narrates Inanna's destruction of Mount Ebih, a mountain that refused to submit to her authority. Inanna petitions An, the sky god, for permission to attack. When An refuses, she attacks anyway. The mountain is razed. It was a standard curriculum text, attested in many copies, and it functions as a showcase for Inanna's uncompromising violence and for the theological principle that nothing in the cosmos may defy divine authority with impunity.^[30] Its centrality rests on heavy attestation and its role as a curriculum text where students encountered Inanna's martial aspect at full force. The text also illustrates a distinctive feature of Inanna's theology: she is the one deity in the pantheon who routinely acts against the counsel of other gods and succeeds. This independence sets her sharply apart from Ninurta, who submits to Enlil's authority in Angim, and from Enki, who works through cunning and consensus.

Inanna and Shu-kale-tuda (Chapter 12) is significant rather than central. A gardener rapes the sleeping goddess, and Inanna, unable to identify the culprit, unleashes three plagues on the land before tracking him down with Enki's help.^[31] The composition functions as a divine vengeance narrative, demonstrating both the reach of Inanna's justice and the curious role of Enki as the deity to whom even Inanna must turn for information — a dynamic that echoes the Inanna and Enki relationship but reverses its power dynamics.

Inanna and Gudam (Chapter 13) is marginal, surviving only in fragments. Gudam is a destructive creature that Inanna confronts and destroys. *[At this point the tablet breaks. The text is too fragmentary for its precise cultural function to be determined with confidence.]*

1.5. The Inanna-Dumuzid Cycle

These three compositions form the dying-god tradition in Sumerian literature: the descent, death, and partial return of a deity linked to seasonal change. They are the most emotionally intense texts in the corpus, and the most directly connected to ritual practice. Where the Enki cycle is intellectual and the Ninurta cycle is martial, the Inanna-Dumuzid cycle is tragic in a sense Greek audiences would have recognised: its protagonists move toward catastrophe with full knowledge that the laws governing their fate cannot be broken.

Inanna's Descent to the Nether World (Chapter 14) is, by attestation, the single most copied Sumerian literary composition. Over forty Old Babylonian tablets and fragments preserve it.^[32] Inanna decides to descend to the underworld, ruled by her elder sister Ereshkigal, queen of the dead. At each of seven gates she is stripped of one item of clothing or regalia, arriving naked and powerless before Ereshkigal, who kills her. Through Enki's intervention she is revived, but no one leaves the underworld without providing a substitute. The *galla* demons — underworld demons

who enforce the laws of the dead—follow Inanna back to the surface, and she designates her consort Dumuzid, the shepherd-god, as her replacement. The text ends with a seasonal alternation: Dumuzid spends half the year in the underworld and his sister Geshtinanna spends the other half, establishing the cycle of death and return that drives the Sumerian agricultural calendar.^[33]

The composition functions on multiple levels: eschatological (it provides the fullest Sumerian account of underworld geography and the laws of the dead), ritual-aetiological (it grounds the wailing cult of Dumuzid attested in Ur III and Old Babylonian periods), and theological (it establishes the principle that death's laws bind even the gods).^[34] The seasonal alternation motif parallels the Greek Persephone myth directly, and the dying-god pattern echoes the Egyptian Osiris tradition.^[35] The Akkadian Descent of Ishtar is a shorter, later adaptation and must be treated as a distinct composition, not a variant.^[36]

Dumuzid's Dream (Chapter 15) is significant and well preserved. Dumuzid dreams of his own death—sees the reeds closing in, the fire spreading, the *galla* demons approaching—and Geshtinanna interprets the dream as inescapable doom. What follows is a desperate flight across the steppe, a series of shape-shifting transformations, betrayal, and capture.^[37] Alster's critical edition established the text as a key document for Sumerian oral-poetic technique.^[38] The prophetic dream foretelling inescapable death is a motif found across the ancient Near East (including later in the Akkadian Gilgamesh epic), and the tragic foreknowledge of doom echoes the Greek heroes—Cassandra, Oedipus—who see catastrophe coming but cannot prevent it.^[39]

Inanna and Bilulu (Chapter 16) is marginal and fragmentary. It narrates Inanna's vengeance on Bilulu (an old woman who may be a bandit chieftain) for the death of Dumuzid, and it concludes by establishing a libation cult. Its precise function is hard to determine given the state of the text, but it appears to ground a specific ritual practice in mythological precedent.^[40] *[At this point the tablet breaks. The fragmentary state prevents confident reconstruction of the full narrative logic.]*

1.6. The Nanna/Suen Cycle

Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nibru (Chapter 17) is the sole composition in this cycle. Nanna-Suen, the moon god (son of Enlil and Ninlil, patron of Ur), loads a barge with the agricultural produce of the Ur region and sails to Nippur to receive his father Enlil's blessing for the city of Ur.^[41] It is significant rather than central, and its chief interest lies in mapping the political and religious axis between Ur and Nippur—the two most important cities of the Ur III state. The journey encodes Ur's theological subordination (wealthy, productive) to Nippur (religiously supreme), enacted through gift-giving and blessing. The barge carries specific agricultural products—cream, butter, dates, grain—and their enumeration reads like a tax receipt dressed up as mythology, a reminder that Sumerian narrative literature was never far from the economic realities of temple and palace administration.^[42] The composition may have functioned as a ritual text performed in connection with actual tribute deliveries or ceremonial journeys between the two cities, lending mythological prestige to what was, at its core, an economic transaction.

1.7. Other Divine Narratives

The Marriage of Martu (Chapter 18) stands outside the major cycles. It narrates the marriage of the god Martu (the divine personification of the Amorites, the nomadic West Semitic peoples pressing on Sumer's borders) to a Sumerian goddess. The text is remarkable for its ethnographic

perspective: it contains a famous speech in which the bride's friend catalogues everything wrong with the Amorites — they eat raw meat, they have no houses, they are not buried after death — and the bride marries Martu anyway.^[43] It is significant as evidence for how the Sumerians perceived and assimilated their nomadic neighbours, and it provides a mythological charter for intermarriage across the sedentary-nomadic boundary. The ethnographic catalogue of Amorite deficiencies is one of the liveliest passages in Sumerian literature — the Amorites "know no grain," they "eat raw meat," they "have no houses in their lifetime," and "are not brought to burial when they die." The bride's decision to marry Martu despite all this is presented without irony as an act of divine love.^[44] The text likely dates from a period of active Amorite integration into Mesopotamian urban society, encoding anxieties about cultural absorption through a narrative that resolves them in divine favour. By the end of the Old Babylonian period, Amorite dynasties ruled most of Mesopotamia; this text may reflect an earlier moment when such an outcome seemed less inevitable and more troubling.

1.8. The Sumerian Gilgamesh Poems

Gilgamesh (Sumerian: Bilgames) — king of Uruk, two-thirds divine hero — is the most famous figure in Mesopotamian literature, but the reader must set aside the later Akkadian epic and approach the Sumerian poems as independent compositions. There are five, and they share a protagonist but no unified plot. Andrew George's critical edition of the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic (2003) provides the essential framework for distinguishing the Sumerian poems from their Akkadian descendants.^[45]

Gilgamesh and Aga (Chapter 19) is the most unusual of the five: it contains no supernatural elements whatsoever. Aga, king of Kish, sends an ultimatum to Uruk. Gilgamesh consults two assemblies — the elders, who counsel submission, and the fighting men, who counsel resistance. He sides with the fighters, the siege occurs, and Aga is eventually captured and magnanimously released.^[46] The composition is central not for its literary grandeur but for its political content: scholars have read the bicameral assembly structure as evidence for early political institutions in Sumer, a kind of proto-democratic deliberation that predates comparable Greek evidence by over a millennium.^[47]

Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven (Chapter 20) is significant but heavily damaged. The outline is recoverable — Inanna, spurned or angered, sends the Bull of Heaven against Uruk, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeat it — and the episode was clearly among the most widely known in the tradition. Cylinder seals from the third and second millennia depict heroes fighting a bull in poses that match the narrative, providing iconographic evidence independent of the literary tablets.^[48] But the textual evidence is too broken for a full literary analysis. *[At this point the tablet breaks. Much of the narrative is lost; the composition's precise textual form cannot be fully reconstructed from surviving tablets.]* The episode's fame in later tradition — it becomes a pivotal event in the Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh epic — far outstrips what survives in Sumerian, a reminder that the popularity of a story and the survival of its tablets are two different things.

Gilgamesh and Huwawa (Chapter 21) survives in two co-equal versions, A and B. Version A (roughly 197 lines) is longer and better attested; Version B (roughly 160 lines) is shorter and emphasises the psychological dimension — Gilgamesh's fear, his hesitation before the forest.^[49] Both tell how Gilgamesh journeys to the Cedar Forest, confronts its guardian Huwawa (guardian of the Cedar Forest, appointed by Enlil, wielder of seven *me-lam*), tricks him into surrendering his radiance, and kills him. The composition is central by attestation and centrally important for the

theme it introduces: the desire for lasting fame as compensation for inevitable death.^[50] The quest for imperishable renown parallels the Greek concept of *kleos* — Achilles' choice of a short glorious life over a long obscure one — and the hero-versus-monster motif echoes Beowulf's confrontation with Grendel.^[51]

Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World (Chapter 22) opens with a cosmogonic prologue describing the separation of heaven and earth and the primordial ordering of the world. The main narrative tells how Gilgamesh's ritual objects (the *pukku* and *mekku*, possibly a drum and drumstick, fashioned from the *huluppu* tree, a tree of uncertain species sacred to Inanna) fall into the underworld. Enkidu, companion and servant of Gilgamesh, descends to retrieve them, breaks every taboo Gilgamesh warned him about, and is trapped. Through Enki's intervention, Enkidu's ghost returns to deliver a devastating catalogue of afterlife conditions, organised by manner of death and social status.^[52] The composition is central: widely attested in numerous Old Babylonian tablets, it provides the most detailed Sumerian map of the underworld.^[53] The cosmogonic prologue, sometimes treated by older scholarship as a secondary addition, appears integral to the text's purpose: it establishes the cosmic framework within which the underworld exists. The catalogue of the dead parallels Homer's Nekyia (Odyssey Book 11), where Odysseus consults ghosts who report on afterlife conditions, and Virgil's Aeneid Book 6.^[54]

The Death of Gilgamesh (Chapter 23) is significant but fragmentary. It survives in Nippur manuscripts and in a Tell Haddad (Me-Turan) version that has substantially improved the text's legibility since its publication. It narrates what its title suggests: even Gilgamesh, two-thirds divine, must die. The gods decree that immortality is not for him, and the composition confronts mortality with a directness that makes it the thematic capstone of the entire Gilgamesh tradition. It concludes with funeral rites and the establishment of Gilgamesh's posthumous cult — a resolution in which fame and ritual memory, not physical survival, constitute the only available consolation.^[55] *[At this point the tablet breaks. The Nippur manuscripts alone are insufficient for a complete text; the Tell Haddad material fills substantial gaps but the ending remains damaged.]* The five Sumerian Gilgamesh poems, taken together, cover politics, adventure, cosmic knowledge, and death — but they were never unified into a single narrative. That unification was the achievement of the later Akkadian tradition, and one thing this book emphasises is what the Sumerian poems look like before that unification occurred.

1.9. The Enmerkar-Lugalbanda Cycle

This cycle contains four compositions narrating the deeds of two legendary kings of Uruk, both predecessors of Gilgamesh in the Sumerian King List. The cycle is the showcase for Sumerian narrative poetry at its most elaborate: long, structurally complex, and rhetorically rich.

Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta (Chapter 24) runs to roughly 630 lines and is central by every measure.^[56] Enmerkar, king of Uruk (credited in tradition with the invention of writing), engages in a diplomatic contest with the unnamed lord of Aratta, a distant, fabulously wealthy city beyond the mountains. The contest escalates through a series of messenger exchanges — increasingly complex demands, riddles, and challenges — until communication by messenger breaks down entirely and Enmerkar invents writing on clay to send a message that no human memory can carry.^[57] The composition also contains a passage describing a time when all lands spoke a single language before the gods confused human tongues — an unmistakable parallel to the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11.^[58] Its function is royal-legitimation (Uruk's divinely backed supremacy over

Aratta), literary (the peak of Sumerian narrative art), and didactic (encoding cultural memory of the origins of writing and linguistic diversity).

Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana (Chapter 25) is a significant companion piece in which the rivalry between Uruk and Aratta takes the form of a sorcery contest. Where Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta resolved the conflict through language and writing, this composition escalates to magical combat: sorcerers on each side conjure animals and countercharms, and a woman from Aratta who defects to Uruk's side decides the contest. It explores the boundaries of legitimate competition — military force, diplomacy, and now magic — and is well attested in Old Babylonian copies.^[59]

Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave (Chapter 26) and **Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird** (Chapter 27) form a linked pair, the only two-part narrative sequence in the corpus. In the first, Lugalbanda — a soldier in Enmerkar's army campaigning against Aratta, and in later tradition the father of Gilgamesh — falls desperately ill during the march through the mountains and is abandoned in a cave by his companions, who expect him to die. He does not. Through prayer, sacrifice, and sheer persistence he recovers and sets out alone. In the second composition, he encounters the nest of the Anzud bird — a divine lion-headed eagle of terrifying size. By caring tenderly for its chick (feeding it, anointing it with oil, adorning it with a crown of vegetation), he earns the gratitude of the returning parent bird, who grants him the gift of supernatural speed. He becomes Enmerkar's indispensable messenger, and the narrative arc from abandoned invalid to the fastest man alive is complete.^[60]

Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird is central: heavily attested in the scribal curriculum, it ranks among the most copied Sumerian narrative poems.^[61] Its function is didactic: piety and reciprocity toward the divine are rewarded with supernatural gifts, and Lugalbanda's humility contrasts sharply with the martial bravado of the Ninurta cycle. The motif of a hero befriending an enormous magical bird recalls Sinbad and the Roc in the Arabian Nights, and the divine eagle granting boons parallels the Garuda tradition in Hindu mythology.^[62]

1.10. Underworld and Eschatological Narratives

Three compositions address the underworld as a destination — not as a backdrop for divine drama (as in Inanna's Descent) but as the subject itself.

The Flood Story: The Eridu Genesis (Chapter 28) survives on a single tablet, CBS 10673, from Nippur. It is extraordinarily fragmentary. Whole columns are missing. What survives describes the creation of humans, the founding of cities and kingship, a divine decision to destroy humanity by flood, and the survival of the pious king Ziusudra. Ziusudra builds a boat at Enki's secret instruction (communicated through a reed wall) and is afterwards granted immortality in Dilmun.^[63] Despite its ruinous state, this is a central text: it is the sole Sumerian flood narrative. Its parallels to the Akkadian traditions (Utnapishtim in Gilgamesh Tablet XI, the Atrahasis epic) and to the biblical flood of Noah (Genesis 6-9) are the most direct and widely discussed cross-cultural resonance in the entire Mesopotamian literary corpus.^[64] The Akkadian versions are distinct traditions and must not be used to fill the Sumerian text's gaps. The Greek Deucalion flood myth — divine destruction, pious survivor, boat — offers a further parallel.^[65]

Ningishzida's Journey to the Nether World (Chapter 29) is marginal and fragmentary.

Ningishzida — a god of the underworld and judge among the dead — is taken to the nether world, and the text appears to narrate the grief of those left behind.^[66] *[At this point the tablet breaks. Too little text survives for a confident assessment of the composition's function or narrative structure.]*

The Death of Ur-Namma (Chapter 30) is a hybrid composition — part royal praise, part underworld travelogue. Ur-Namma, the historical founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur, dies (apparently in battle) and journeys to the underworld, where he presents gifts to Ereshkigal and the other underworld deities, including Gilgamesh and Ningishzida, who serve as judges of the dead.^[67] It is significant: Flückiger-Hawker's critical edition provides the standard text, and the composition offers the most detailed Sumerian account of a king's entry into the underworld.^[68] The royal afterlife journey parallels the Egyptian Book of the Dead tradition and the Greek literary convention of royal shades retaining their identity in the underworld (Agamemnon in *Odyssey* Book 11).^[69]

1.11. The Debate Poems

The Sumerian debate poems are a genre with few close parallels in later Western literature, though medieval European debate poetry — such as *The Owl and the Nightingale* — offers a distant echo.^[70] Two personified entities — a pair of animals, plants, tools, metals, or seasons — argue their respective merits before a divine judge, who delivers a verdict. They are products of the *edubba* and represent the scribal school's intellectual culture at its most playful and systematic.

Six compositions are treated in Chapters 31-36. Four are significant; two are marginal. As a group, the debate poems are the compositions most obviously tied to the *edubba* classroom: they train students in constructing arguments, marshalling evidence (however fanciful), and recognising that every claim has a counterclaim. Several open with cosmogonic prologues that set the debate within a narrative of divine creation, lending cosmic weight to what might otherwise be exercises in rhetoric.

The Debate between Hoe and Plough (Chapter 31) and **The Debate between Ewe and Grain** (Chapter 32) are the most important of the six. Both are well attested in Old Babylonian Nippur scribal schools as standard curriculum texts.^[71] *Ewe and Grain* opens with a cosmogonic prologue describing an era when humans lived like animals, before the gods created *Ewe* (pastoralism) and *Grain* (agriculture) to sustain them — a passage that is one of the most cited in all of Sumerology for its picture of primitive humanity before divine civilisation.^[72] The tension between pastoral and agricultural economies mirrors the Cain-and-Abel conflict in *Genesis* 4, though the resolution differs: in the Sumerian text, *Grain* typically wins the verdict.^[73]

The *Hoe and Plough* debate, meanwhile, stages a contest between two agricultural technologies, with Enlil as judge. Its function is didactic: it teaches the merits of each implement while displaying the rhetorical skills the *edubba* cultivated.^[74]

The Debate between Winter and Summer (Chapter 33) and **The Debate between Bird and Fish** (Chapter 34) are both significant and well preserved.^[75] *Winter and Summer* argues the relative merits of the two agricultural seasons, with Enlil delivering the verdict. It maps the Sumerian calendar of farming activities onto a dramatic framework: each season claims credit for the harvests, the festivals, and the prosperity of the land. *Bird and Fish* is the best preserved of the group and stages a particularly vivid contest of insults between two creatures from different

ecological niches — the bird mocks the fish's inability to leave the water, the fish mocks the bird's fragility on the ground. Both function as didactic texts, training students in the art of formal argumentation, and both display a playful delight in competitive rhetoric that makes them the most entertaining of the corpus's pedagogical compositions.

The Debate between Copper and Silver (Chapter 35) and **The Debate between Date Palm and Tamarisk** (Chapter 36) are marginal. Both are fragmentary. Copper and Silver is missing its verdict — the most dramatically important section of any debate poem — which leaves its rhetorical structure incomplete.^[76] *[At this point the tablet breaks. Neither composition can be fully analysed without substantial missing text.]*

1.12. What the Corpus Reveals

Step back from the individual texts and a pattern emerges. The Sumerian literary corpus, taken as a whole, is not a random collection of entertaining stories. It is the curriculum of a scribal school — or rather, of a network of scribal schools across southern Mesopotamia — and what was copied most tells us something about what the culture valued.

The central compositions — the ones attested in the most copies, assigned to the most students, preserved in the most tablets — share certain features. They address the organisation of the cosmos (Enki and the World Order, Lugal-e), the origin and nature of civilisation (Enki and Ninmah, Inanna and Enki, Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta), the relationship between the living and the dead (Inanna's Descent, Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World), and the legitimization of political authority (Gilgamesh and Aga, Enlil and Ninlil, Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird). The marginal compositions — fragmentary, poorly attested, apparently less copied — are often comic (Ninurta and the Turtle), highly local, or duplicate themes treated more fully elsewhere.

This distribution suggests a worldview in which four concerns were paramount.^[77]

First, **cosmic order**. The Sumerians were preoccupied with how the world was organised and who was responsible for its parts. The *me* system — the divine powers and cultural blueprints distributed by Enki, fought over by Inanna, embedded in temples and cities — is the Sumerian answer to a question every complex civilisation must ask: why does the world work the way it does? The Enki cycle and the Inanna cycle between them constitute a sustained meditation on the structure of order itself.

Second, **the boundary between the living and the dead**. Few ancient literary traditions devote as sustained an attention to the underworld as the Sumerian. Inanna descends to it. Enkidu is trapped in it. Ur-Namma is received into it. Ningishzida journeys to it. Dumuzid spends half the year there. The *kur* is not a distant hell; it is the inevitable destination, present in nearly every cycle, and the laws that govern it — you must have a substitute, you cannot return unchanged, your status there depends on how you lived and how you died — pervade the entire corpus.^[78]

Third, **the legitimacy of power**. Nearly every central composition asks who has the right to rule: gods over gods (Enlil's authority, Inanna's complaint), cities over cities (Uruk over Aratta, Uruk over Kish), the living over the dead (Ereshkigal's sovereignty). The scribal school that preserved these texts was an instrument of state power, and the texts it taught were not religiously neutral; they encoded the political claims of the cities that funded the schools.^[79]

Fourth, **the transmission of knowledge**. The debate poems, the curriculum texts, the elaborate messenger structures of the Enmerkar cycle, and the invention of writing itself within Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta all reflect a culture acutely aware that civilisation depends on storing and transferring information accurately. The *edubba* did not merely preserve these texts; it preserved texts about preservation. The Hoe and Plough debate teaches agricultural knowledge; Ewe and Grain teaches economic categories; Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta dramatises the moment when oral communication fails and writing becomes necessary. These are stories about knowing things and making sure other people know them too.

The convergence of these four concerns—order, death, power, and knowledge—in a corpus produced by and for a professional scribal class suggests that Sumerian literary mythology functioned less as popular religion and more as an intellectual curriculum for the administrative elite, a way of training young bureaucrats and priests to think about the systems they were inheriting.

One further pattern deserves attention. The corpus is not theologically monolithic. Different cycles encode the theological interests of different cities. The Enki cycle promotes Eridu's traditions. The Enlil cycle promotes Nippur's supremacy. The Inanna cycle and the Gilgamesh poems promote Uruk. The Nanna cycle maps the Ur-Nippur axis. And the debate poems, which tend to feature Enlil as judge, reinforce Nippur's claim to be the seat of divine adjudication. That these competing theological perspectives coexist within a single scribal curriculum—a curriculum centred at Nippur—suggests that the *edubba* tradition was catholic in its intellectual appetite. It did not suppress rival theological claims; it collected them, copied them, and taught them alongside its own.^[80]

The cross-cultural resonances that run through these thirty-six compositions—paradise and fall, the theft of civilisation, the dying god, the flood, the confusion of tongues, the hero's quest for fame, the catalogue of the dead—are striking not because they prove borrowing or common ancestry (though in some cases they may), but because they reveal the depth of the questions the Sumerians were asking. How was the world organised, and who organised it? Why do humans exist? What happens after death? Is power legitimate? Can civilisation survive its own contradictions? These are the questions every major mythological tradition addresses, and the Sumerian answers—worked out in clay, in a dead language, by anonymous scribal students four thousand years ago—are among the earliest surviving attempts to address them systematically.

These patterns will be explored in detail in the comparative chapter that concludes this volume. For now, the reader has a map. The territory itself begins with Enki, fresh water, and a paradise called Dilmun.

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[3] Black et al. 2004, pp. xxii-xxv.

[4] Kramer, S.N., *Sumerian Mythology*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

[5] Jacobsen, T., *The Harps That Once....: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[6] Black et al. 2004, full volume.

[7] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 1-278; Black et al. 2004, pp. 38-50.

[8] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 181-204.

[9] Kramer 1961, pp. 54-59.

- [10] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 1-139; Black et al. 2004, pp. 30-37.
- [11] Kramer 1961, pp. 68-72.
- [12] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 151-166.
- [13] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 1-473; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215-225.
- [14] Kramer 1961, pp. 59-62.
- [15] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 151-166.
- [16] ETCSL 1.1.4; Black et al. 2004.
- [17] ETCSL 1.2.1, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, pp. 100-107.
- [18] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167-180.
- [19] Black et al. 2004, pp. 100-107.
- [20] ETCSL 1.2.2; Black et al. 2004.
- [21] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 1-729; Black et al. 2004, pp. 163-191.
- [22] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233-272.
- [23] Black et al. 2004, pp. 163-164.
- [24] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233-272; Kramer 1961, pp. 80-83.
- [25] ETCSL 1.6.1; Black et al. 2004.
- [26] ETCSL 1.6.3; Black et al. 2004.
- [27] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 63-70.
- [28] Kramer 1961, pp. 64-68.
- [29] Kramer 1961, pp. 64-68.
- [30] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004.
- [31] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004.
- [32] ETCSL 1.4.1, manuscript list; Sladek 1974.
- [33] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205-232; Black et al. 2004, pp. 52-62.
- [34] Sladek 1974, full philological study.
- [35] Kramer 1961, pp. 83-96.
- [36] Sladek 1974.
- [37] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 1-260; Alster 1972, full critical edition.
- [38] Alster 1972, pp. 7-15.
- [39] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 28-55.
- [40] ETCSL 1.4.4; Black et al. 2004.
- [41] ETCSL 1.5.1; Black et al. 2004.
- [42] ETCSL 1.5.1; Black et al. 2004.
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- [46] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 1-115; Black et al. 2004, pp. 279-284.
- [47] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 141-148; Kramer 1961, pp. 187-190.
- [48] ETCSL 1.8.1.2; Black et al. 2004.
- [49] ETCSL 1.8.1.5 and 1.8.1.5.1; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 149-174.
- [50] Black et al. 2004, pp. 269-278.
- [51] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 149-174; Kramer 1961, pp. 190-196.
- [52] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1-303; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 175-195.
- [53] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 175-195.
- [54] George 2003; Kramer 1961, pp. 196-205.
- [55] ETCSL 1.8.1.3; George 2003.
- [56] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 1-636; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1-95.
- [57] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1-95; Black et al. 2004, pp. 236-251.
- [58] Kramer 1961, pp. 232-234.
- [59] ETCSL 1.8.2.4; Vanstiphout 2003.

- [60] ETCSL 1.8.2.1 and 1.8.2.2; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 215-275; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320-344.
- [61] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, manuscript list; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 215-275.
- [62] Vanstiphout 2003; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320-344.
- [63] ETCSL 1.7.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 145-150.
- [64] Kramer 1961, pp. 97-101; George 2003.
- [65] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 145-150.
- [66] ETCSL 1.7.3; Black et al. 2004.
- [67] ETCSL 2.4.1.1; Flückiger-Hawker, E., *Urnamma of Ur in Sumerian Literary Tradition* (Fribourg: University Press, 1999).
- [68] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 380-385.
- [69] Kramer 1961, pp. 128-131.
- [70] Black et al. 2004, pp. 207-209.
- [71] ETCSL 5.3.1 and 5.3.2; Black et al. 2004.
- [72] Kramer 1961, pp. 72-73.
- [73] Kramer 1961, pp. 72-73.
- [74] ETCSL 5.3.1; Civil, M., *The Farmer's Instructions* (Barcelona: Editorial AUSA, 1994).
- [75] ETCSL 5.3.3 and 5.3.5; Black et al. 2004.
- [76] ETCSL 5.3.6 and 5.3.7; Black et al. 2004.
- [77] Black et al. 2004, pp. xix-xxv; Kramer 1961, pp. 3-35.
- [78] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205-232.
- [79] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1-10.
- [80] Black et al. 2004, pp. xix-xxv; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1-10.

Chapter 2. Enki and Ninhursaja: The Paradise of Dilmun

The composition known to scholars as "Enki and Ninhursaja" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.1.1. It survives in several Old Babylonian manuscript witnesses (ca. 2000–1600 BCE) on clay tablets from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) — the religious capital of Sumer — and from Ur, the great port city of the south.^[1] The Nippur and Ur recensions are co-equal witnesses, but they differ in significant ways: the Ur manuscripts insert international tributes to Dilmun that the Nippur copies lack, while the Nippur tablets supply the base text that the ETCSL composite follows.^[2]

No single tablet preserves the complete composition. The text as scholars now read it is a composite, assembled from these overlapping fragments, with gaps remaining in the Dilmun description and in several dialogue sections.^[3] This is typical of Sumerian literary works: what appears on the page as a continuous narrative is in fact a jigsaw pieced together by modern editors from school exercises and archive copies that no scribe ever read in the form we now have. Multiple Old Babylonian copies from the Nippur and Ur scribal schools attest to wide circulation in the *edubba* curriculum — the scribal school system through which these texts were copied, studied, and transmitted.^[4]

Both Jacobsen and Kramer analyse the text's paradise motif and botanical imagery at length, making it one of the most discussed Sumerian compositions in modern scholarship.^[5] The retelling that follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by the translations in Black et al. 2004 (pp. 38–50) and Jacobsen 1987 (pp. 181–204).^[6] The ETCSL composite takes the Nippur recension as its base but draws on Ur manuscripts to fill gaps and offer alternative readings.^[7]

ETCSL composite follows Nippur recension as base.^[8]

The story, as the tablets preserve it, goes as follows.

The text opens by describing Dilmun — a paradisaal land associated with purity, trade, and immortality — as pure, clean, and bright.^[9] No sickness exists there. No old age. No death. No predatory violence disturbs it. The lion does not kill. The wolf does not seize the lamb. The description reads less like geography and more like a definition of what the world would look like if nothing had yet gone wrong — a baseline of perfection against which the events of the story will register as disruption.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening invocation partially damaged in Nippur manuscripts (lines 1–13). Ur manuscripts preserve portions of the opening and are used to supplement the composite.]

Scholars have generally identified Dilmun with the region of modern Bahrain and the eastern Arabian coast, a location known in the historical record as a trade emporium linking Mesopotamia to the lands to the east.^[10] The identification is plausible: Dilmun appears in Mesopotamian trade records as a real commercial hub, and the geographical references in Sumerian texts point consistently to the Gulf region. But whatever its geographic basis, the Dilmun of this text is not yet a trading port. In its initial state, Dilmun has no fresh water. No river flows through it. No well yields water. No rain falls.^[11] It is perfect and it is dry. The text presents the two conditions together,

without irony, as though perfection and sterility were not contradictions but simply different aspects of a world that has not yet been activated.

The goddess Ninsikila — whom some scholars identify with Ninhursaja, the mother goddess and lady of the mountain, but whom the ETCSL text presents separately — appeals to Enki to solve this problem.^[12] Enki is the god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* — the underground freshwater ocean beneath Eridu, the oldest city in Sumerian tradition. If anyone in the Sumerian pantheon can provide water, it is Enki. Water is what he does.

Enki responds by commanding the sun god Utu to bring fresh water from the earth, filling Dilmun's wells and irrigating its fields. The transformation is immediate: Dilmun becomes a garden paradise, green and watered.^[13]

With the water comes prosperity. In the Nippur text, Dilmun becomes a prosperous harbour and trading port — an emporium on the quay for the land (lines 50–55). The Ur manuscript goes further. An extended insertion (lines 49A–49P) names specific trade partners: Tukric, Meluhha, Magan, and others, detailing the goods and tributes that flow through Dilmun's port.^[14] The contrast between the two versions is instructive: the Nippur scribes were content with a general reference to trade; the Ur scribes, working in a city whose prosperity depended on exactly this kind of international commerce, named the partners one by one.

Nippur recension: brief mention of trade.^[15]

What follows is one of the strangest narrative sequences in Sumerian literature: a chain of four generations of sexual unions, each producing a goddess, each completed in nine days rather than nine months.

Enki copulates with Ninhursaja. She conceives and, after a gestation of nine days, gives birth to the goddess Ninsar — Lady Greenery.^[16]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Transition between water-provision and first plant-eating episode partially broken in Nippur manuscripts (lines 64–78). Ur manuscripts overlap but diverge in the tribute section.]

Enki then copulates with his daughter Ninsar, who conceives and gives birth to the goddess Ninkurra — Lady Pasture — after the same accelerated nine-day gestation.^[17]

Enki copulates with his granddaughter Ninkurra, who gives birth to the goddess Uttu, goddess of weaving.^[18]

The pattern is mechanical. Each generation unfolds with the same compressed nine-day gestation, the same lack of courtship, the same immediate union and birth. The nine-day period, replacing the normal nine months, marks Dilmun as a space operating under different temporal rules — a feature characteristic of paradise or otherworld narratives across cultures.^[19] *(The accelerated gestation functions as a narrative marker of Dilmun's otherworldly temporal nature.)*^[20]

The chain of incestuous unions — father with daughter, father with granddaughter, father with great-granddaughter — is likely to strike modern readers as transgressive. But it may reflect a mythological theme in which divine power concentrates through successive generations rather

than a narrative about kinship taboos as moderns would understand them.^[21] What matters to the text is not the incest but the production: each union generates a new goddess, and each goddess bears a name that ties her to a specific domain of the natural world — greenery, pasture, weaving.

At the fourth generation, the pattern breaks. Ninhursaja — or Nintud, as the text calls her in this passage — warns Uttu not to yield to Enki unless he brings her gifts of garden produce: cucumbers, apples, and grapes.^[22] The condition is specific and domestic: the god of wisdom must go to market before he can seduce anyone. Enki obtains the required produce and brings it to Uttu. She opens the door to him. He copulates with her.^[23]

What happens next moves the story from divine genealogy into something closer to a transgression narrative. Ninhursaja removes Enki's semen from Uttu's body and plants it in the ground, where eight plants grow.^[24] The plants cannot be identified with certainty — their Sumerian names do not map neatly onto modern botanical categories — but they are specific, individual, and clearly distinguished from one another in the text.

Enki, aided by his minister Isimud — a two-faced servant who acts as Enki's intelligence agent and factotum — discovers the eight plants one by one. He determines the nature of each plant, and then he eats it. One after another, all eight.^[25] The verb the text uses for what Enki does with each plant is "to decree its fate" — and he decrees their fates by consuming them, absorbing them into himself.

(The act of eating the plants constitutes a transgression: Enki "decrees the fates" of the plants by consuming them, an act of appropriation that enrages Ninhursaja.^[26])

The response is swift and absolute. Ninhursaja pronounces a curse of death on Enki. She declares that she will not look upon him with the "eye of life" until he is dying. Then she withdraws from the scene entirely.^[27] The mother goddess has withdrawn her sustaining attention from the god of wisdom, and the consequences come at once.

Enki's decline is total. After the curse, he falls gravely ill. Eight parts of his body fail — the same number as the plants he consumed, a symmetry the text leaves implicit but unmistakable. The healing dialogue that follows reveals which body parts are ailing.^[28]

The situation outstrips what the pantheon can manage. The great gods sit in the dust — a gesture of mourning and helplessness that signals a crisis of cosmic scale. Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur — cannot cure Enki. No divine power, no ritual knowledge, no authority in the Sumerian pantheon can undo what Ninhursaja has done.^[29]

It is the fox who breaks the impasse. Not a god, not a great being — the fox. It offers to bring Ninhursaja back, and it succeeds in persuading her to return.^[30] The text does not explain how the fox accomplishes this — what argument, inducement, or trick it uses. It simply does what no god could do, and the narrative moves on.

The healing scene that follows is the compositional climax and the most structurally elaborate passage in the text. Ninhursaja seats Enki beside her vulva and asks him, one by one, which part of

his body hurts.^[31] The form is catechistic: question, answer, response. "My brother, what hurts you?" Enki names a body part. Ninhursaja gives birth to a deity.

For each of the eight ailing body parts, Ninhursaja gives birth to a healing deity whose name puns on the body part being cured — an aetiological account of these deities' origins and domains.^[32] The puns are Sumerian wordplay of a kind that delighted the *edubba* scribes: each deity's name echoes, in sound or sign, the name of the ailment it cures. This is not incidental; it is the point. The composition exists, at least in part, to explain where these eight deities came from and why they bear the names they do.

Among the eight healing deities is Ninti. Her name means both "Lady of the Rib" and "Lady of Life" — a double meaning made possible by the Sumerian word *ti*, which means both "rib" and "life." This pun has been compared to the biblical Eve, who is created from Adam's rib and whose name means "living."^[33] The parallel is suggestive. It is also untranslatable into Hebrew, which means that if the Sumerian and biblical traditions are connected, the connection runs through the motif rather than through the wordplay. A Sumerian scribe would have heard both meanings at once; a Hebrew author could not have reproduced the pun.

(Each newly born deity is assigned a specific role or domain by Enki, integrating them into the divine order.^[34])

Each newly born deity receives from Enki a specific role or domain, completing a cycle that began with Enki's consumption of the plants and ends with new divine figures generated from the damage that consumption caused. The god who ate what was not his to eat now organises the beings born from his illness into the structure of the cosmos. Destruction produces creation. The transgressor becomes the administrator.

The composition functions on two levels at once. Cosmologically, it establishes Dilmun as a pure land where sun and fresh water are granted by divine decree — a place set apart from the ordinary world. Aetiologicaly, it explains the origin of eight healing deities through Ninhursaja's curing of Enki's ailments.^[35]

The text is also, in a less obvious way, a study of appetite and consequence. Enki's pattern throughout the story is to consume — sexually, then botanically. He copulates with four generations of goddesses. He eats eight plants that were not his to eat. And his body pays the price, part by part, until the same mother goddess whose authority he violated agrees to repair what he has broken. The structure is not accidental. The Sumerian scribes who shaped this composition into its surviving form understood narrative symmetry: eight plants eaten, eight body parts afflicted, eight deities born. The numbers match because the story is built around the matching.

"Enki and Ninhursaja" stands among the most discussed compositions in the Sumerian corpus, and for good reason. Its paradise motif, its forbidden consumption, and its pattern of divine curse and healing place it at the intersection of several comparative traditions. The parallels with the Genesis Eden narrative — a garden of perfection, a forbidden act of eating, a divine curse — were first noted by Kramer and have been debated by scholars since, though direct borrowing should not be assumed. The Ninti pun alone — rib and life compressed into a single Sumerian syllable — has generated a bibliography of its own. The broader parallel with golden-age narratives — a time when suffering did not exist and the divine and natural worlds were in effortless alignment —

connects Dilmun to a pattern found in Hesiod, in Vedic literature, and in Celtic traditions of otherworld paradises where time moves differently.

[1] ETCSL 1.1.1, bibliography page.

[2] Black et al. 2004, pp. 38–39.

[3] ETCSL 1.1.1, composite text.

[4] ETCSL 1.1.1, manuscript list.

[5] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 181–204; Kramer 1961, pp. 54–59.

[6] Black et al. 2004, pp. 38–50; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 181–204.

[7] ETCSL 1.1.1, editorial notes on manuscript base.

[8] An alternate tradition gives: "Ur manuscripts preserve extended tribute passage (Dilmun trade goods) absent from Nippur recension, per Jacobsen 1987 pp. 181–204". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL editorial decision; Ur tribute passage presented separately.

[9] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 1–30.

[10] Kramer 1961, pp. 54–59.

[11] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 29–39.

[12] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 29–39; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 184–186.

[13] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 40–49.

[14] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 50–55 (Nippur); lines 49A–49P (Ur insertion).

[15] An alternate tradition gives: "Ur manuscripts include an extended tribute passage detailing Dilmun trade goods, absent from the Nippur recension (Jacobsen 1987, pp. 186–188)". The prevalent version is chosen here because Co-equal witnesses; Ur tribute passage should be presented as a clearly marked inset per brief instructions.

[16] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 69–87; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 188–190.

[17] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 88–107.

[18] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 108–126.

[19] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 188–190.

[20] Inference: The pattern of nine days replacing nine months is consistent across all four generations of births in the text. Risk: The text does not explicitly state the symbolic function; this is scholarly interpretation.

[21] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 188–195.

[22] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 127–151; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 191–193.

[23] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 152–175.

[24] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 186–197.

[25] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 202–219; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 194–196.

[26] Inference: The text shows Enki eating the plants followed immediately by Ninhursaja's curse; the causal link is strongly implied. Risk: The text does not explicitly label the eating as forbidden or use a word for "transgression".

[27] ETCSL 1.1.1, line 220.

[28] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 220–271; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 197–199.

[29] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 220–227.

[30] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 228–247; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 199–200.

[31] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 247–271.

[32] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 254–278; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 200–203.

[33] Kramer 1961, pp. 54–59; ETCSL 1.1.1, line ~270.

[34] Inference: The text shows Enki assigning roles to the newly born deities. Risk: The phrase "integrating them into the divine order" is scholarly characterisation, not a direct textual statement.

[35] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 1–30 (cosmological), lines 230–278 (aetiological); Jacobsen 1987, pp. 181–204.

Chapter 3. Enki and Ninmah: The Creation of Humanity

The composition known to scholars as "Enki and Ninmah" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.1.2 and survives on multiple Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur; no manuscripts from other sites are known.^[1] Unlike the previous composition in this book, which turned up at both Nippur and Ur, this one comes from a single site. Every witness was copied in the same city, in the same scribal tradition, during the same period.^[2]

It is a foundational creation narrative, discussed in every major survey of Sumerian literature.^[3] Kramer, Jacobsen, and every subsequent handbook devote sustained attention to it, for a straightforward reason: this is the Sumerian answer to one of the most basic questions a civilisation can ask — why do humans exist?

The text is largely intact but breaks off in the middle (about 6 lines) and at the end (about 9 lines).^[4] The damage does not obscure the plot, but it leaves gaps at moments that would interest us — particularly in the catalogue of created beings and in the composition's final resolution. The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 30–37.^[5]

The composition belonged to the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum at Nippur, as multiple curricular copies attest.^[6] So many student copies survive that we can read its importance directly from the evidence: the scribes of the *edubba* — the scribal school where these texts were copied and taught — considered this story essential knowledge. Students learned to write by copying it. They learned to think about the gods by reading it.

Before humanity exists, the gods must do their own physical labour — digging canals, dredging waterways, piling up silt — to sustain themselves.^[7] The opening lines say so bluntly. The irrigation system that made Mesopotamian agriculture possible — and with it, Mesopotamian civilisation — had to be maintained by someone, and before there were humans, the gods did the work themselves.

The gods cry out in complaint; their weariness and suffering directly motivate humanity's creation.^[8] This is worth emphasising, because it sets the Sumerian creation story apart from most later traditions. This is not a story of divine generosity. No god wakes up one morning and decides, out of love or philosophical interest, to populate the world with thinking creatures. There is no moment of contemplative wonder, no urge to share existence with lesser beings. Humanity is invented because the gods are tired and want someone else to do the digging. The motive is entirely practical, and the text makes no effort to dress it up.

The solution begins with Nammu, the mother goddess of the watery deep. She rouses her son Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu*, the underground freshwater ocean beneath Eridu — from sleep and urges him to devise a way of relieving the gods of their toil.^[9] Enki, it should be noted, was sleeping while the other gods were complaining. The text does not comment on this, but one notices it.

Enki devises the plan: humanity will be made from clay taken from above the *abzu*.^[10] The material matters. Clay was what Mesopotamians built with, wrote on, and understood. It is also, in this text, the raw substance of human existence — moldable, functional, and decidedly not divine.

At Enki's instruction, Nammu kneads clay from above the *abzu* to shape the first human beings, with Ninmah — the great mother goddess — and the birth-goddesses assisting.^[11] The creation is collaborative, which is itself worth noting. In many later traditions, a single god creates humanity alone — one potter, one act of will. Here, the work demands a division of labour: Enki provides the concept, Nammu provides the material and the primary shaping, and Ninmah and the birth-goddesses assist. The gods solve their labour problem through teamwork, producing creatures who will themselves work as a team.

The birth-goddesses help shape the new creatures, who are then assigned the labour the gods previously performed.^[12] The transfer is the entire point. Humanity's purpose, as this text defines it, is to take over the work — the canal-digging, the field-tending, the endless maintenance of an irrigation economy.

(The specific tasks assigned to humans — digging canals, growing food, maintaining the irrigation system — are inferred from the opening description (lines 1–13) of the gods' original labour rather than stated directly in the creation passage.^[13])

The composition supplies a Sumerian answer to the question of why humanity exists: humans were created to relieve the gods of physical labour.^[14] This is a theological position, and a remarkably clear one. Other cultures would build creation narratives on divine love, cosmic accident, or philosophical necessity. The Sumerians proposed a labour shortage.

This labour-relief motive is distinct from, though parallel to, the Akkadian *Atrahasis* creation account, a separate textual tradition with its own narrative framework that should not be conflated with the Sumerian version.^[15] Both traditions explain humanity as a solution to divine exhaustion, but the narratives differ in structure, detail, and emphasis. The *Atrahasis* involves the killing of a god whose flesh and blood are mixed with clay; the Sumerian version, as preserved here, uses clay alone.

So far, the story has been about production: making creatures, assigning them work, solving a divine staffing problem. What follows is something else entirely.

A banquet follows the creation, and at it Enki and Ninmah drink beer and become intoxicated.^[16] The creation of an entire species, it seems, calls for celebration. Beer, in Mesopotamian culture, was not a casual indulgence — it was a staple, a social lubricant, and a feature of every significant occasion from temple rituals to diplomatic receptions. The gods drink, and what happens next unfolds with the logic of a drinking contest — which is, in fact, more or less what it is.

Ninmah challenges Enki: she will create beings with various impairments, and Enki must find a social role for each.^[17] The terms of the contest are precise. Ninmah does not merely ask Enki to assess her creations; she demands that he integrate each one into the working social order. The test is not whether Enki can describe what is wrong with a being, but whether he can find what it is good for.

Ninmah creates a series of humans with physical impairments — including a person who cannot bend their hands, a blind person, a person who cannot hold urine, and a barren woman — and for each one, Enki successfully decrees a role in society.^[18]

The social-integration theme is central. Each impaired human receives a productive function: the person who cannot bend their hands is made a servant of the king; the blind person becomes a musician; the barren woman is placed in the queen's household.^[19]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Approximately nine lines (68–76) damaged in the middle of the impaired-humans sequence. No parallel witnesses fill this gap.]

The pattern is worth pausing over. Each impaired being is not discarded, not pitied, not hidden. Each one is given a place. The blind person is defined not by what they cannot do — see — but by what they can do — make music. The person whose hands do not bend is assigned to the king's service, where, presumably, the specific impairment is either irrelevant or an advantage. The barren woman is placed in the queen's household, where she has a function that does not require her to bear children.

(The text constitutes the oldest known literary treatment of accommodating physical diversity within a social order.^[20])

The structure of the contest — create an impaired being, find it a role — establishes a divine origin for human physical diversity and for the assignment of social roles by capacity.^[21] People differ from one another because the gods made them that way, and the social order accommodates those differences because Enki decreed that it should. This is not a modern argument for inclusion. It is a Sumerian explanation for why the world contains variety, and why that variety is not a mistake.

Enki reverses the contest: he will now create a being, and Ninmah must find it a role.^[22] The reversal is simple and devastating in its logic. Ninmah has been testing Enki; now Enki will test Ninmah. Fair is fair.

Enki creates Umul — a being so utterly helpless and dysfunctional that it cannot eat, drink, stand, sit, or perform any action whatsoever.^[23] The description is relentless. The text runs through capacity after capacity — eating, drinking, standing, sitting, grasping — and marks each one as absent. Umul is not impaired in one specific way, as Ninmah's creations were. Umul is impaired in every way, a being with no capacity at all — a creature that cannot be placed anywhere in the social order because it cannot do anything. Enki has found the limit case, and he has done so deliberately.

Ninmah cannot assign any social role to Umul; she cannot integrate this creation into the human order, and she admits defeat.^[24] The asymmetry of the contest is instructive. When Ninmah created beings with specific impairments, each one retained enough capacity to serve a function. A person who cannot see can still hear, speak, and play music. A person who cannot use their hands can still walk, observe, and advise. Each impairment closed one door but left others open, and Enki — the cleverest god in the pantheon — found the open doors. But Umul has no open doors. The contest is over. Enki's point — if we can extract one from what is, after all, a drunken divine competition — is that accommodation has limits. Every specific impairment can be absorbed into the social structure, because every specific impairment leaves other capacities intact. But total helplessness defeats even a goddess's ingenuity.

The closing lines contain Ninmah's lament and a statement about Enki's superior wisdom; the exact resolution is debated among translators because of damage in the final lines.^[25] What survives suggests that the composition ends by acknowledging Enki's cleverness — the god of wisdom wins the argument, as he usually does in Sumerian literature — but the broken state of the tablet leaves the precise terms of the resolution uncertain.

The story, taken whole, answers two questions at once. The first is practical: why do humans exist? They exist because the gods needed workers. The second is more interesting: why do humans differ from one another? They differ because the gods, in a moment of competitive intoxication, made them that way — and then built a social order that could absorb the variation.

There is something remarkably pragmatic about the whole composition. It does not treat human creation as a grand philosophical event. It treats it as a labour problem followed by a drinking game. The creation itself takes only a few lines; the contest that follows takes most of the text. The Sumerian scribes who shaped and transmitted this narrative were apparently more interested in what happened after humanity was created — what it meant that humans came in different forms, with different capacities — than in the creation itself.

The composition is compact. At roughly 141 lines, it accomplishes what many later creation narratives would take thousands of words to develop: a clear account of human origins, a theory of physical diversity, and a theological claim about the relationship between divine will and social structure.

The clay-from-the-*abzu* motif — gods shaping humans from earth and water — recurs in creation traditions across the world. Parallels range from the Greek account of Prometheus moulding figures from clay to the Vedic hymn of the Purusha Sukta, in which the cosmos and its inhabitants are fashioned from the body of a primordial being. The contest over human form — gods competing to shape creatures and assign them destinies — has its own set of parallels in traditions where divine beings argue over humanity's design or fate. These connections are real, though we should be cautious about drawing direct lines of influence between traditions separated by centuries and thousands of kilometres. What we can say is that the Sumerians were not alone in asking why humans exist, why they suffer, and why they differ from one another. But the Sumerian answer — a labour shortage and a drinking game — has a directness that is hard to find elsewhere.

The scribes at Nippur copied this composition repeatedly, taught it to their students, and preserved it across generations of the scribal curriculum. They thought it mattered. Reading it now, several thousand years later, it is not difficult to see why.

[1] ETCSL 1.1.2, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.1.2, composite text, lines 1–141.

[3] Kramer 1961, pp. 68–72; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 151–166.

[4] ETCSL 1.1.2, composite text.

[5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 30–37.

[6] ETCSL 1.1.2, manuscript list.

[7] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 1–20 (reconstructed).

[8] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 10–20; Kramer 1961, pp. 68–69.

[9] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 15–25.

[10] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 24–30.

[11] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 24–37; Kramer 1961, pp. 69–70.

[12] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 35–45.

[13] Inference: The transfer of labour from gods to humans is the explicit purpose of creation. Risk: The itemised list of specific activities is an interpretive expansion.

[14] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 1–20; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 151–166.

[15] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 151–152.

[16] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 46–55.

[17] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 55–65; Kramer 1961, p. 70.

[18] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 65–95.

[19] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 65–95; Kramer 1961, pp. 70–71.

[20] Inference: Each impaired being is explicitly given a valued social role rather than being discarded. Risk: Modern disability-rights framing may anachronistically overinterpret the Sumerian social logic.

[21] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 55–130.

[22] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 96–105.

[23] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 105–120; Kramer 1961, pp. 71–72.

[24] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 120–130.

[25] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 129–141.

Chapter 4. Enki and the World Order: The Decrees of Destiny

The composition known to scholars as "Enki and the World Order" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.1.3 and survives on numerous Old Babylonian manuscripts, primarily from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) — the religious capital of Sumer and seat of Enlil's temple, the E-kur.^[1] It runs to roughly 470 lines, with internal gaps that reach up to seven missing lines in places.^[2] At that length it ranks among the longest Sumerian narrative compositions preserved — a text that does not so much tell a story as build a world, office by office, river by river, craft by craft.^[3]

Scholars reconstruct the text from multiple Old Babylonian manuscripts from Nippur; no competing recension from another site is known.^[4] That makes it, from a textual standpoint, simpler than the previous compositions in this book — one tradition, one line of transmission, one scribal school's version of what the cosmos looks like when properly organised.

The composition reveals the Sumerian conception of cosmic bureaucracy more fully than any other single text in the corpus.^[5] Other narratives focus on conflict between gods, journeys to distant places, or the origin of particular institutions. This one attempts something more comprehensive: a complete inventory of how the world works, who is responsible for what, and on whose authority the whole system operates. The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–225.^[6]

The composition opens with a long self-praise speech by Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu — extolling his own wisdom, power, and role as organiser of the cosmos under the authority of Enlil and An.^[7] Self-praise is a recognised Sumerian literary genre, and Enki's version runs for some sixty lines. It is not modest. Then again, modesty is not what the genre calls for.

Enki declares that his father An has entrusted him with organising the world: assigning functions, establishing offices, and decreeing the destinies of lands, rivers, and crafts. Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur — has likewise delegated authority to him.^[8] The delegation matters. Enki does not claim to be the supreme god. He claims to be the one the supreme gods have appointed to get things done — the organiser, not the ruler. An is the sky, remote and sovereign. Enlil is the commander whose word is final. Enki is the administrator who makes the system work. In a civilisation whose survival depended on irrigation canals, silt management, and the precise coordination of agricultural labour, the administrator may have been the most important figure of all.

Enki organises the world through the *me* — the divine powers and cultural blueprints that govern civilisation's arts and institutions.^[9] The *me* resist easy translation, and for good reason: no single English word captures what they are. They are not merely laws, not merely skills, not merely divine decrees. They are something closer to the operating principles of civilisation itself — the know-how and authority that make each institution, each craft, each social role possible. The concept differs from the Akkadian *parsu* (divine decrees or ritual offices); the Sumerian *me* encompass a broader category of civilisational blueprints, including arts, crafts, social institutions, and moral qualities.^[10] When Enki assigns a function, he is distributing the *me* — handing out the blueprints

without which nothing can operate.

The *me* assignments in this composition mirror the temple-administrative hierarchies attested in contemporary royal inscriptions from the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods.^[11] That is no coincidence. The scribes who copied and transmitted this text worked within exactly those administrative hierarchies. The cosmic order Enki establishes in the poem looks remarkably like the bureaucratic order the scribes themselves maintained — the same chain of delegation, the same emphasis on defined roles, the same assumption that a well-run operation requires everyone to know their job. The Sumerians imagined their gods running the universe the way they ran their temples: with clear titles, specific responsibilities, and a reporting structure.

With his authority established and his instruments defined, Enki begins what can only be called an inspection tour. He travels from land to land, blessing each one and decreeing its fate.

He travels first to Sumer and blesses it, establishing its abundance and declaring its pre-eminence among all lands.^[12] Sumer comes first, naturally. This is a Sumerian composition, written by Sumerian scribes for a Sumerian audience. Its position at the head of the list is no geographical accident but a theological statement.

He visits Ur and blesses it as a prosperous city of trade and livestock, the seat of the moon god Nanna-Suen — son of Enlil and Ninlil, patron of Ur.^[13] The blessing of Ur emphasises commerce and herding, the two activities on which the city's historical wealth depended. The gods, in this text, do not assign fates arbitrarily; they confirm what already exists and give it divine sanction.

He blesses Meluhha (identified with the Indus Valley region or coastal East Africa), praising its exotic trees, gold, tin, and precious stones.^[14] Meluhha's mention places this text within long-distance trade networks that connected Mesopotamia with distant civilisations. The goods listed — gold, tin, precious stones — are exactly the imports that appear in actual trade records. The poem's geography is not fantasy; it reflects the commercial world the scribes knew.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Gap in the blessing of Meluhha (lines 141–147); details of trade goods and divine favour partially lost. No duplicate manuscripts fill this passage.]

He blesses Dilmun — the trading island, associated with purity, trade, and immortality — decreeing that Dilmun's ships shall carry goods between the lands.^[15] Dilmun appears in this text not as the paradise of "Enki and Ninhursaja" but as a commercial hub, a trans-shipment point. The same place can mean different things in different compositions, and the Sumerian scribes felt no need to reconcile the images.

He visits Elam and Markhashi (eastern lands) and decrees their fates, though the passage is partially damaged.^[16] What survives of these blessings places the eastern lands within Enki's administrative reach — not as hostile territory, but as components of the same ordered system. Even foreign lands receive their *me*, their designated roles in the cosmic economy.

The tour is comprehensive and systematic. Enki does not visit only the places that matter to Sumer; he visits the whole known world. Each land gets its decree. Each land is slotted into the structure. The effect is of a chief administrator making rounds, confirming appointments, checking that each department knows its business.

From lands, Enki turns to rivers — the lifelines of Mesopotamian civilisation.

He fills the Tigris (Idigna) with sparkling water and appoints the god Enbilulu as its inspector, the "canal-controller of the gods."^[17] The title is telling. Enbilulu is not the god of the Tigris; he is its inspector. He reports to Enki, who reports to Enlil and An. The divine hierarchy is as structured as the water system it governs.

He fills the Euphrates (Buranuna) with life-giving water and establishes it as a source of abundance for the land.^[18] Together, the Tigris and Euphrates defined the geography of Sumerian life. Without them, there was no irrigation, no agriculture, no civilisation. The text treats their activation — their filling with water — as a deliberate act of divine administration, not a natural event.

He organises the marshlands, placing fish in the reedbeds and appointing deities to oversee them.^[19] The marshlands of southern Iraq — then as now — formed a distinct ecological zone with their own economy, their own products, their own way of life. The text acknowledges this by giving them their own divine oversight, separate from the rivers that feed them.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Transition passage between appointment of river deities and marsh deities (lines 318–324) damaged. Single composite tradition, no parallel witnesses.]

He organises the sea, establishing sea trade and appointing the goddess Nanshe as its overseer.^[20] The pattern holds. Every body of water — river, marsh, sea — gets its own administrator. The Sumerians did not conceive of "water" as a single domain; they saw distinct environments, each requiring its own management and its own divine supervisor. The Persian Gulf, the marshes, the Tigris, the Euphrates — each was a separate department in the cosmic bureaucracy.

With the geography settled — lands blessed, rivers filled, waters managed — Enki turns to the human activities that depend on them.

He decrees the fate of the plough and assigns Enlil's farmer-god Enkimdu to oversee agriculture.^[21] The plough comes first among the crafts, which is the right order of importance for an agricultural civilisation dependent on irrigation farming. Without the plough, nothing else matters.

He establishes grain and the pickaxe, assigning Ashnan (goddess of grain) her domain.^[22] The pickaxe, in Sumerian literature, is no minor tool. It is the instrument with which canals are dug and foundations are laid — the basic technology that makes both agriculture and construction possible. Grain and the pickaxe together represent the productive core of Sumerian life: the food and the means to grow it.

He organises brickmaking, building, and construction, assigning the god Kulla to brick-moulding and Mushdamma to architecture.^[23] Two gods for one craft — or rather, two gods for two related crafts that the text carefully distinguishes. Making bricks is not the same as designing buildings. The Sumerians understood specialisation, and their cosmic order reflects it. Even in heaven, the brickmaker and the architect have different job titles.

He organises animal husbandry — the sheepfold, the cattle pen — and assigns Dumuzid — the

shepherd-god, consort of Inanna — as their overseer.^[24] Dumuzid's appearance here is worth noting. In other compositions he is the doomed lover of Inanna, dragged to the underworld as her substitute. Here he is simply the divine shepherd, doing his job in the cosmic organisation chart. The Sumerians could hold both images at once — the tragic consort and the competent herdsman — without feeling any contradiction.

The assignment of divine offices extends beyond the economic sphere.

Enki assigns Utu the sun god to oversee justice and the boundaries between lands.^[25] The link between the sun and justice is intuitive in a way that crosses cultures: the sun sees everything, hides nothing, illuminates equally. In Sumer, this association was formalised. Utu was not merely a symbol of justice; he was its administrator, responsible for maintaining the boundaries — literal and metaphorical — that kept the world ordered.

He assigns Nisaba, goddess of grain and writing, to be the scribe of the gods and the measurer of the land.^[26] Nisaba's dual portfolio — grain and writing — may seem odd until one realises that both involve measurement. Grain must be counted, stored, and distributed. Writing, in its Sumerian origins, was an accounting technology before it was a literary one. The earliest tablets are not poems; they are lists of commodities. Nisaba presides over both because both are, at bottom, about keeping track of things.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Scattered gaps of 3–7 lines throughout the composition; individual deity-appointment passages occasionally incomplete. No parallel witnesses.]

The systematic mapping of the world under divine jurisdiction — lands, rivers, crafts, agriculture — amounts to a portrait of cosmic administration as the Sumerians conceived it.^[27] The portrait is detailed, methodical, and above all practical. Every activity that sustains civilisation has a deity responsible for it. Every deity has a defined role. Every role fits into a hierarchy that ultimately answers to An and Enlil, with Enki as the organiser who makes the connections. It is not theology so much as an organisational chart with divine names in the boxes.

And then, after four hundred lines of careful ordering — lands blessed, rivers filled, crafts assigned, offices distributed, every function slotted neatly into its place — someone objects.

After all other gods have received their domains, Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — comes before Enki to protest that she has been given no clear portfolio or office.^[28] The protest comes at the very end of the composition, after the entire bureaucratic ordering is complete. Everyone else has a job. Inanna does not. The positioning is deliberate.

She itemises the powers and offices given to other deities and contrasts them with her own lack of a defined domain, asking Enki what he has allotted to her.^[29] The complaint is specific and detailed. Inanna does not simply say "you forgot me." She lists what everyone else received — the rivers, the crafts, the flocks — and then points to the empty space where her assignment should be. She has done the accounting. She knows what is missing.

ETCSL collations provide the current standard reading of Inanna's complaint section.^[30]

Enki responds by listing the powers she does in fact possess — including the ability to destroy the indestructible and to make the powerful weak — suggesting that her domain is precisely the disruption of orderly categories.^[31] The response is remarkable. Enki does not apologise for the omission. He does not hastily assign Inanna a river or a craft. Instead, he reframes the question. Inanna's powers, he says, are not absent — they simply are not the kind that fit into boxes. She can destroy what cannot be destroyed. She can bring the strong to their knees. Her domain is the overturning of the very categories that Enki has spent the entire composition establishing.

(Inanna's complaint and Enki's response position her as the goddess who transcends and destabilises the very categories that Enki has established — an outsider to the system of order.^[32])

This is a sophisticated theological move on the part of the Sumerian scribes who shaped this text. For four hundred lines, they have built a world of order — defined roles, clear boundaries, tidy categories. And then they introduce the figure who exists to violate all of it. Inanna does not fit the system because her function is to break systems. She is the force that makes the strong weak and the whole broken. In a composition devoted to cosmic order, she is the acknowledgment that order is not the whole story.

Inanna's complaint at the close of the composition narratively sets up the tensions explored in later Inanna-cycle texts, where she actively seizes or demands the *me* and descends to the underworld.^[33] The connection is direct. In "Inanna and Enki," she will travel to Eridu and take the *me* by a combination of drinking, trickery, and sheer force of will. In "Inanna's Descent," she will go to the underworld and challenge the authority of death itself. The seeds of those stories are planted here, in this moment of protest at the end of the world-ordering. The god of organisation has built his system. The goddess of disruption has taken note of what it does not include.

The composition's length — roughly 470 lines — and its survival in multiple Old Babylonian manuscript witnesses from Nippur indicate its importance in the scribal curriculum.^[34] A text this long required considerable effort to copy. That multiple students copied it, and that their copies survived, tells us that the *edubba* — the scribal school where these texts were copied and taught — considered it essential material. Students learning to be administrators were required to copy a text about the divine administrator who set up the system they would maintain. The pedagogy is pointed.

"Enki and the World Order" is, at bottom, a text about how civilisation works. Not how it was created — that is the business of other compositions — but how it is maintained, day by day, through assigned responsibilities and delegated authority. The Sumerians saw in their irrigation canals, their grain stores, their herds, their brick kilns, and their scribal schools not merely human activities but divine institutions, each operating under the authority of a specific deity who in turn answered to a hierarchy reaching up to the highest gods. The universe, in this view, is not a drama. It is an administration.

But the text is honest enough to admit that the administration has a problem. There is one goddess who cannot be assigned a desk. Inanna's protest — and Enki's response — suggest that the Sumerian scribes understood something about bureaucracy that bureaucrats are usually the last to notice: any system of order, no matter how comprehensive, generates its own exceptions. Inanna is that exception. She is the power that no organisational chart can contain, and the composition

gains its depth from acknowledging her existence rather than pretending the chart is complete.

The pattern of a supreme organiser dividing the cosmos among subordinate gods is not unique to Sumer. In Greek tradition, after the Titanomachy — the war between the Olympians and the Titans — Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades cast lots to divide the cosmic domains among themselves (*Iliad* 15.187–193). The Egyptian tradition of Heliopolis structured the Ennead — the nine great gods — with defined roles in the creation and maintenance of the world. In each case, the underlying logic is the same: the universe is too complex for one authority to manage alone, and so power must be delegated. But the Sumerian version is distinctive in its emphasis on the process of delegation itself. Zeus divides the world in a single act of lot-casting. Enki spends 400 lines doing it, land by land, river by river, craft by craft. The Sumerians cared not just about the result but about the procedure. And they were honest enough to end with the one goddess who refused to accept her assignment — or rather, who had no assignment to accept. Inanna, the destabiliser of cosmic order, stands at the close of this text as a reminder that every system, however well-designed, has its trickster, its boundary-crosser, its force of creative destruction.

[1] ETCSL 1.1.3, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.1.3, composite text.

[3] ETCSL 1.1.3, composite text, lines 1–473.

[4] ETCSL 1.1.3, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–225.

[5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–225.

[6] Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–225.

[7] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 1–60; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–217.

[8] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 50–80; Kramer 1961, pp. 59–60.

[9] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 60–80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 216–217.

[10] Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–216 (introduction); Kramer 1961, pp. 59–62.

[11] Kramer 1961, pp. 59–62.

[12] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 80–120; Black et al. 2004, pp. 217–218.

[13] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 100–120; Black et al. 2004, p. 218.

[14] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 125–145; Black et al. 2004, pp. 218–219.

[15] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 145–160; Black et al. 2004, p. 219.

[16] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 160–180; Black et al. 2004, p. 219.

[17] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 250–270; Black et al. 2004, pp. 220–221.

[18] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 270–285; Black et al. 2004, p. 221.

[19] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 285–320; Black et al. 2004, pp. 221–222.

[20] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 320–340; Black et al. 2004, p. 222.

[21] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 340–360; Black et al. 2004, p. 222.

[22] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 360–375; Black et al. 2004, pp. 222–223.

[23] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 375–395; Black et al. 2004, p. 223.

[24] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 395–415; Black et al. 2004, pp. 223–224.

[25] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 368–380.

[26] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 415–430; Black et al. 2004, p. 224.

[27] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 50–400; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–225.

[28] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 430–460; Black et al. 2004, pp. 224–225.

[29] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 440–460; Kramer 1961, pp. 61–62.

[30] An alternate tradition gives: "Kramer 1961 pp. 61–62 differs in emphasis in this section, now superseded". The prevalent version is chosen here because More recent collation with fuller manuscript base.

[31] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 460–473; Black et al. 2004, p. 225.

[32] Inference: The text places her complaint as the compositional climax, after the entire bureaucratic ordering is complete. Risk: This reading follows Kramer and Black but involves interpretive framing of Inanna's theological role.

[33] Black et al. 2004, pp. 224–225.

[34] ETCSL 1.1.3, manuscript list.

Chapter 5. Enki's Journey to Nibru

The composition known as "Enki's Journey to Nibru" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.1.4 and survives on 62 manuscript witnesses listed in the ETCSL bibliography, which makes it one of the most widely copied compositions in the curriculum.^[1] The text is generally well-preserved, reconstructed from substantial fragments with a clear narrative sequence.^[2] No competing recension is known — the ETCSL composite is the sole reconstructable version.^[3] This is a standard Old Babylonian curriculum text, the kind of thing scribal students copied and recopied until they knew it by heart.^[4] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by ETCSL composite text.^[5]

The composition opens in Eridu — the oldest city in Sumerian tradition and seat of Enki's temple the E-abzu. There, Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu — builds or adorns his temple, the E-engura ("House of the *abzu*").^[6]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening lines (1–8) describing Enki's temple construction partially damaged. Limited manuscript witnesses.]

What survives of these opening lines is striking enough. The temple is described in cosmic terms: it rises like a mountain from the earth, its foundations set in the *abzu* — the underground freshwater ocean beneath Eridu, Enki's domain.^[7] This is not a building as we would understand it. It is a structure that reaches down into the freshwater deep and up toward the heavens, anchoring the cosmic order at the point where underground water meets the surface world.

Eridu itself stands as the primal city of Sumer, set in the deep south of the alluvial plain — the place where civilisation began in Sumerian tradition.^[8] Modern archaeology has largely confirmed this claim to antiquity: Eridu is among the oldest known settlements in southern Mesopotamia. The Sumerians put it first in their king lists, and they were not wrong about the chronology, even if they expressed it in theological rather than archaeological terms.

With his temple established, Enki does something that reveals the political geography of Sumer more clearly than any modern map could. He loads his barge with provisions and precious goods and sets out up the waterways from Eridu to Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) — the religious capital of Sumer, seat of Enlil's temple the E-kur.^[9]

The barge follows the canal and river network northward, travelling directly from Eridu to Nippur.^[10] The route is straightforward, and the text does not linger on intermediate stops. This is no wandering odyssey but a purposeful transit — a god going from his home to the seat of central authority.

(The barge journey models the pattern of ritual processions between southern cult cities, with the waterway route functioning as both literal geography and sacred itinerary.^[11])

That transit traces the political geography of Sumer: the Eridu-to-Nippur axis represents a southern cult city seeking the blessing and sanction of the central religious authority.^[12] This axis was one of the defining structures of Sumerian political life. Eridu, in the deep south, was the oldest sacred city

and the seat of the god of wisdom. Nippur, farther north on the plain, was the religious capital where Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur — held court. No king could rule legitimately without Nippur's approval. No cult could claim full divine standing without Enlil's blessing. The journey Enki makes in this text is, at its core, a passage from local power to central legitimation.

Enki arrives at Nippur, the seat of Enlil, king of the gods and head of the divine assembly.^[13] What follows is not a confrontation or a negotiation. It is a banquet.

Enki prepares a lavish feast for Enlil, presenting offerings and gifts from the goods carried on his barge.^[14] The provisions he loaded at Eridu were not for the journey. They were for this moment — tribute from the southern city to the central authority, gifts from the god of wisdom to the god of command. The banquet is the diplomatic instrument through which Enki makes his case. He does not argue. He feeds.

Enlil receives Enki with approval and pronounces a blessing on him and on the E-engura temple in Eridu, formally sanctioning Enki's cult and his domain over the freshwater.^[15] This is the climax of the composition, and its meaning rewards a pause. Enki is a great god — lord of the *abzu*, master of wisdom, builder of a temple described in cosmic terms. And yet he cannot simply declare his own authority. He must travel to Nippur and receive it from Enlil. The blessing is not a formality. It is the act that makes everything else legitimate.

Enlil's blessing functions as divine legitimation: Enki's authority over the *abzu* and his cult at Eridu require ratification by the supreme god at Nippur, reflecting the Sumerian political theology in which local power requires central sanction.^[16] This is no peculiarity of myth. It mirrors exactly how Sumerian politics worked in practice. A city could have its own god, its own temple, its own priesthood — but without recognition from the religious centre at Nippur, none of it carried full weight. The mythological narrative encodes a political reality that governed relations between Sumerian cities for centuries.

The composition, then, serves a dual purpose. It supplies the mythological foundation for the E-engura temple at Eridu, establishing its ritual importance through the narrative of divine construction and subsequent divine approval.^[17] The temple is not merely old; it is divinely built. It is not merely important; it is divinely sanctioned. Every element of the story — the cosmic description of the building, the loaded barge, the banquet, the blessing — works to establish the E-engura's credentials as a sacred institution with the highest possible authorisation.

The barge journey and Enlil's blessing also model the pattern of southern rulers seeking Nippur's sanction — a pattern attested in royal inscriptions throughout the Ur III and early Old Babylonian periods.^[18] When a king of Ur or Eridu wanted to legitimate his rule, he sought Enlil's blessing at Nippur. When he wanted to establish a temple's authority, he tied it to the divine assembly that met in Nippur. Enki's mythological journey on his barge is the template for these historical journeys — or perhaps the historical journeys are re-enactments of the mythological one. The distinction may not have mattered much to the Sumerians. In their world, myth and politics were not separate categories. They were the same system, operating at different scales.

The text was attested as a standard Old Babylonian curriculum text, a sign of wide scribal familiarity.^[19] With 62 known manuscript witnesses, it was copied repeatedly across the scribal schools. That level of attestation tells us the story was not obscure or specialised. It was part of the basic education of anyone training to be a scribe — and in Sumer, scribes were the administrators, the record-keepers, the people who ran the system the text describes. They learned about divine legitimation by copying a story about divine legitimation. The pedagogy, once again, was pointed.

The pattern Enki enacts — building a temple, loading a barge, travelling to the supreme god’s seat, presenting gifts, receiving formal blessing — finds parallels beyond Mesopotamia. In the Ugaritic Baal Cycle, the storm god Baal builds his palace and then seeks the permission of El, the head of the divine council, before his authority is fully recognised. The structure is the same: a powerful god who cannot simply declare his own sovereignty but must have it confirmed by the figure at the top of the hierarchy. The Sumerians were not the only ancient people who understood that power requires ratification. But they may have been the ones who expressed it most clearly — in a short composition about a god, a barge, a banquet, and a blessing that made everything official.

[1] ETCSL 1.1.4, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.1.4, composite text.

[3] ETCSL 1.1.4, editorial notes; Black et al. 2004, pp. 330–333.

[4] ETCSL 1.1.4, composite text.

[5] ETCSL composite text.

[6] ETCSL 1.1.4, opening section; Kramer 1961, pp. 62–64.

[7] ETCSL 1.1.4, lines 1–20 (partially reconstructed); Kramer 1961, pp. 62–63.

[8] Kramer 1961, pp. 62–64; CDLI Eridu-related entries.

[9] ETCSL 1.1.4, middle section; Black et al. 2004, pp. 330–331.

[10] ETCSL 1.1.4, journey section; Kramer 1961, pp. 63–64.

[11] Inference: Royal inscriptions from Ur III attest to similar divine-statue barge processions between Eridu and Nippur. Risk: The text does not explicitly name a ritual occasion; the connection to actual processions is scholarly inference.

[12] Kramer 1961, pp. 62–64.

[13] ETCSL 1.1.4, arrival section; Black et al. 2004, pp. 331–332.

[14] ETCSL 1.1.4, banquet section; Black et al. 2004, pp. 332–333.

[15] ETCSL 1.1.4, closing section; Kramer 1961, pp. 63–64.

[16] Kramer 1961, pp. 62–64; Black et al. 2004, pp. 330–333.

[17] ETCSL 1.1.4, opening sections.

[18] Kramer 1961, pp. 62–64; CDLI Eridu-related royal inscriptions.

[19] ETCSL 1.1.4, manuscript list.

Chapter 6. Enlil and Ninlil: Exile of the Great Mountain

The composition known to scholars as "Enlil and Ninlil" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.2.1 and runs to about 152 lines in the composite text. It is one of the most heavily attested Sumerian narrative compositions, with numerous Old Babylonian copies from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) — the religious capital of Sumer, seat of Enlil's temple the E-kur.^[1]

The composition survives on multiple Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur, with 154 lines in the composite text.^[2] The narrative is mostly complete, though the pursuit sequences and ending suffer some damage.^[3] Minor word-level variants exist across the fragments, but they do not constitute a separate recension; the ETCSL composite is the standard text.^[4]

Jacobsen, Kramer, and later Sumerologists have studied the composition extensively for its theogonic and ethical dimensions.^[5] It is one of the most heavily copied Sumerian literary texts, and the many surviving OB Nippur student copies attest to its central place in the scribal curriculum.^[6] That so many student copies survive tells us something: the scribes of the *edubba* considered this story essential. They learned to write by copying it. They learned about divine justice by reading it.

The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 100–107; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–180.^[7]

The text opens by setting the scene in Nippur, the city where the gods assembled, where they made decisions, where they maintained order. Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur — ruled there, and the Sumerians called him "Great Mountain" (*kurgal*).^[8] The epithet is not decorative. It carries the weight of a title of office. In a flat alluvial landscape where mountains were rare, distant, and associated with both danger and cosmic power, calling a god "Great Mountain" was a way of saying that he was the fixed point around which everything else turned. Nippur was his city. The assembly of the gods met there. The fates of cities and kings were decreed there. Whatever happened in Nippur happened at the centre of the Sumerian world.

The young goddess Ninlil — queen of the gods, wife of Enlil — has a mother named Nunbarshegunu, who tells her daughter to bathe in the river canal, the Nunbirdu canal in Nippur — advice that will set the entire story in motion.^[9] The instruction is specific: a named canal, a named city, a mother telling her daughter where to go. The scene is laid out with the precision of a court document. Whether Nunbarshegunu intends the encounter or merely enables it, the text does not say. What matters is that Ninlil goes to the canal because her mother tells her to, and Enlil is there.

What happens next is the hinge on which the entire composition turns.

Enlil meets the young Ninlil at the canal and propositions her. Ninlil refuses. She says she is too young. She says her mother would not approve.^[10] The refusal is clear, and the text states it without ambiguity. It gives her words directly, and there is nothing uncertain about them. She offers two

reasons — youth and parental disapproval — either of which should have ended the matter.

Enlil does not accept the refusal. The text states that he lies with Ninlil — "he kissed her, he copulated with her" — and the moon god Nanna-Suen is conceived.^[11] Nanna-Suen — the moon god, son of Enlil and Ninlil, patron of Ur — is the firstborn of this union. His conception begins the theological problem that the rest of the composition will try to solve. A god has been conceived, but the circumstances of his conception will determine the conditions of his existence — conditions that no one can simply wish away.

The narrative frames Enlil's act as transgressive within the story's own ethical system. What follows is not a celebration but a formal judgment by the divine community.^[12] The narrative handles the sexual-violence dimension within its own ethical framework: the assembly's declaration explicitly identifies Enlil's act as transgressive, and his banishment is the consequence — the text neither normalises the act nor treats it as merely symbolic.^[13] This is worth pausing over. The text does not excuse Enlil. It does not suggest that his status as king of the gods entitles him to do as he pleases. It identifies what he did, names it, and imposes a punishment. The audience of this composition — scribal students in Old Babylonian Nippur — were being taught that even the highest authority in the cosmos answered for his actions.

The divine community responds swiftly and unequivocally. The great gods — the fifty senior deities of the divine assembly — seize Enlil and pronounce judgment. He is declared ritually impure. The Sumerian is direct: "Enlil, you are a ritually impure." He is banished from Nippur.^[14]

This deserves emphasis. The divine assembly's judgment of Enlil is one of the earliest narrative depictions of a formal legal proceeding against a god by his own divine community.^[15] The king of the gods is not above the law. When he transgresses, the community he leads turns on him and expels him — not through rebellion or force of arms, but through due process. The fifty gods act as a court. They deliberate. They pronounce a verdict. They enforce it. In a civilisation that produced some of the earliest surviving law codes, perhaps it is not surprising that even the gods were imagined as subject to legal procedure. But the clarity of the scene is still striking.

Enlil is sentenced to leave Nippur and descend toward the *kur*, the underworld — an exile that takes him progressively further from the civilised centre.^[16] The direction of travel matters. Nippur sits at the top of the Sumerian symbolic geography: it is the place where gods convene, where fates are decreed, where the cosmic order originates. The underworld lies at the opposite extreme — the lowest point in the vertical cosmos. Enlil's exile is not merely geographical. It is cosmological. He is being sent from the highest point of order to the lowest point of existence.

Ninlil, now pregnant with Nanna, chooses to follow Enlil into exile rather than remain in Nippur.^[17] The text does not explain her reasoning. It simply records her choice: she goes after him. The young goddess who refused him at the canal now follows him toward the underworld. Whether she follows out of attachment, duty, or the logic of the pregnancy itself — the child's father is going down, so the child's mother goes too — the composition does not say. It presents her decision as a fact, not an argument. And this decision makes the rest of the story possible, because the three remaining births require Ninlil to be present at each stage of Enlil's descent.

What follows is one of the most structurally distinctive sequences in Sumerian literature.

As Enlil descends toward the underworld, he takes on three successive disguises — appearing first as the gatekeeper of the city gate, then as the "man of the river" (the ferryman of the underworld river), and finally as the ferryman of the river of the dead.^[18] Each disguise corresponds to a threshold, a boundary between zones of the cosmos, and each encounter follows the same pattern. The gatekeeper guards the boundary between the city and the open country. The ferryman of the underworld river stands at the boundary between the world of the living and the world below. The ferryman of the river of the dead stands at the final crossing. Enlil does not merely descend; he descends by stages, and at each stage he takes on the identity of whoever guards the gate.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Portions of the pursuit sequence (lines 77–85) damaged; Enlil's second disguise encounter partially broken. minor overlapping fragments help but gaps remain.]

In each disguised encounter, Enlil meets Ninlil and copulates with her again. Each union produces a chthonic deity — a god of the underworld.^[19] The repetition is not careless. It is not formulaic padding, though it has the cadence of formula. It is the mechanism by which the composition solves its central theological problem. Each encounter generates a god who belongs to the level of the cosmos where the encounter takes place. The disguises are not tricks for their own sake. They are how Enlil, descending, populates the underworld with deities who have a legitimate reason to be there — they were born there.

The three chthonic deities born from the disguised encounters are Nergal, lord of the underworld; Ninazu, a healing and underworld deity; and Enbilulu, canal inspector of the netherworld.^[20] Three gods, each born at a deeper stage of descent, each fitted for the world below rather than the world above. The names and domains are specific. These are not generic underworld spirits. Nergal will rule the dead. Ninazu will attend to healing in the world below. Enbilulu will manage the canals of the netherworld — because even the underworld, in Sumerian imagination, has infrastructure that needs maintaining.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Transition to the third chthonic deity birth (lines 118–123) partially lost. No complete parallel fills this gap.]

(The tripled disguise-encounter structure is not mere repetition but a ritual logic of graduated descent, with each encounter occurring at a deeper threshold toward the underworld.^[21])

The theological core of the narrative is a substitution logic, and it is worth stating plainly because the composition builds everything around it.

Nanna-Suen, the firstborn — the moon god, conceived at the canal before the exile began — is destined for heaven. The moon rises. The moon lights the night sky above Nippur. This is what the moon does, and this is what Nanna-Suen must do. But Nanna-Suen was conceived by a god who has been exiled to the underworld, and a child born to an underworld exile belongs, by the logic of the cosmos, to the underworld. Nanna cannot both belong to the underworld and light the sky. Something has to give.

The three chthonic gods solve the problem. Three underworld deities are born so that Nanna-Suen, the firstborn moon god, can ascend to heaven rather than remain in the netherworld.^[22] Each

chthonic god serves as a ransom or substitute for Nanna in the underworld, ensuring that the moon will rise in the sky above Nippur.^[23] The arithmetic is precise: three substitutes released so that one god can be free. The underworld gets its due. The sky gets its moon. The cosmic ledger balances. The logic is not sentimental. It does not matter that Nergal, Ninazu, and Enbilulu are also children of Enlil and Ninlil. What matters is that someone stays below so that someone else can rise above. The underworld operates by a rule of occupancy, and the rule is non-negotiable.

The composition ends with a hymnic praise of Enlil, affirming his greatness and the birth of the gods — a doxology that reintegrates Enlil into the divine order despite the transgression that opens the narrative.^[24] This is a remarkable structural choice. The story begins with Enlil committing an act that gets him expelled from the community of gods. It ends with a hymn celebrating him. Between the transgression and the praise, the composition has generated four new gods — one celestial, three chthonic — and mapped them onto the vertical structure of the cosmos. Enlil's exile was productive. His descent created a new divine generation. The hymn at the end does not erase what happened at the beginning; it absorbs it into a larger frame in which even divine crime generates divine offspring.

The composition functions theogonically: it explains the birth of the moon god Nanna-Suen and three chthonic deities who serve as his underworld substitutes.^[25] But it does more than catalogue births. It maps the vertical cosmos. Enlil's descent from Nippur toward the underworld generates deities for each cosmic level — the celestial (Nanna), the liminal (Nergal), and the chthonic (Ninazu, Enbilulu).^[26] The composition is, in effect, a blueprint for how the universe is stacked: sky at the top, inhabited world in the middle, underworld below, and a god stationed at each level because Enlil's exile put them there.

The birth of Nanna-Suen connects directly to the lunar cult cycle central to Ur III and Old Babylonian Nippur religion.^[27] This is not an incidental mythological detail. The Mesopotamians tracked, measured, and worshipped the moon with a precision that shaped their calendar. Nanna-Suen's temple at Ur was one of the most important religious institutions in the entire region. A composition explaining how the moon god came to be, and why he is in the sky rather than the underworld, would have carried real weight for the scribes who copied it and the communities that heard it recited.

The substitution logic — underworld ransom so that a celestial god can ascend — is not unique to this composition. It appears again, in a different form and with different stakes, in the narrative of Inanna's descent to the underworld, where the same problem recurs: someone has gone down, and someone else must stay in their place. The mechanism operates like a law of conservation. The underworld must have its residents. If a god is to leave, someone must replace them. The cosmos does not permit vacancies.

The whole composition, viewed from a distance, has the quality of a proof. It starts with a problem — a god in exile, a child conceived who belongs to the wrong level of the cosmos — and works through a solution with the systematic patience of a mathematical demonstration. Three disguises. Three encounters. Three births. One ascent. The numbers balance, the logic holds, and at the end, a hymn seals the result.

The parallels with other traditions are worth noting, though we should not assume direct influence. The exile of a ruling god by a divine assembly, with generative consequences — new gods born from the expulsion — resembles the Greek Kronos/Zeus cycle, where the overthrow of one divine ruler produces a new generation of gods. The god-in-disguise motif during amorous pursuit has parallels in Hindu Puranic narratives, where Shiva appears in various forms during encounters that produce divine offspring. These resemblances may reflect common narrative patterns that different civilisations developed independently, or they may point to deeper structural tendencies in how humans tell stories about the origins of the divine order. Either way, the Sumerian version has its own logic and its own purposes, and reading it primarily through the lens of any later tradition would be a mistake.

The Sumerian scribes who shaped this text were working with a narrative structure as tight as anything in the literature of the period, and they knew it. They copied it, taught it, and transmitted it across generations of the scribal curriculum. The composition mattered to them — not as idle entertainment, but as an explanation of why the moon rises, why the underworld has its rulers, and why even the king of the gods answers for what he has done.

[1] ETCSL 1.2.1, composite text, lines 1–154; Black et al. 2004, pp. 100–107.

[2] ETCSL 1.2.1, bibliography.

[3] ETCSL 1.2.1, composite text.

[4] ETCSL 1.2.1, editorial notes.

[5] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–180; Kramer 1961, pp. 43–47.

[6] ETCSL 1.2.1, manuscript list.

[7] Black et al. 2004, pp. 100–107; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–180.

[8] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, p. 100.

[9] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 5–15; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–169.

[10] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 15–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 100–101.

[11] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 30–45; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 169–170.

[12] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 40–55; Black et al. 2004, pp. 101–102.

[13] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 50–65; Black et al. 2004, p. 102.

[14] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 50–65; Black et al. 2004, p. 102.

[15] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 50–65; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 170–172.

[16] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 60–70; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 170–172.

[17] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 65–75; Black et al. 2004, p. 103.

[18] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 75–130; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 172–178.

[19] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 80–130; Black et al. 2004, pp. 103–106.

[20] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 90–130; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 174–178.

[21] Inference: Jacobsen 1987 pp. 172–178 reads each encounter as a step downward in the cosmic vertical axis. Risk: Jacobsen's "progressive descent" interpretation is one reading; others see the repetition as formulaic literary convention without strict cosmological mapping.

[22] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 130–145; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 177–179.

[23] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 130–145; Black et al. 2004, pp. 105–106.

[24] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 145–152; Black et al. 2004, pp. 106–107.

[25] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 100–152; Black et al. 2004, pp. 100–107.

[26] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–180.

[27] Black et al. 2004, pp. 100–107.

Chapter 7. Enlil and Sud: The Courtship in Eresh

The composition known to scholars as "Enlil and Sud" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.2.2, runs to roughly 170 lines, and survives as a well-preserved Old Babylonian composition with no competing recension.^[1] The text is catalogued as ETCSL 1.2.2 and survives on Old Babylonian manuscripts; the narrative is set in Eresh, the city of Nisaba, not Shuruppak as sometimes stated.^[2] The composition is generally well-preserved.^[3] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 106–112.^[4]

The text presents the orderly, sanctioned courtship of Enlil and Sud—a narrative that contrasts sharply with the transgressive encounter in "Enlil and Ninlil" (ETCSL 1.2.1, chapter 5).^[5] Where chapter 5 gave us a god who took what he wanted and was punished for it, this composition gives us the same god learning—or at least demonstrating—a different way. The pairing is not accidental. The two texts concern the same divine couple, and the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum preserved both. Together they form a diptych: one panel showing how not to do it, the other showing how it ought to be done.

Enlil—king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur—travels to Eresh, an ancient Sumerian city in the southern alluvial plain.^[6] Eresh is the home of Nisaba, goddess of grain and writing, and of her daughter Sud. It is not Nippur. Enlil is away from his seat of power, a visitor in someone else's city, and the narrative makes that displacement felt. He is not surrounded by his assembly, not seated in the E-kur, not dispensing decrees. He is on the road, and what he encounters there will test whether the king of the gods can behave like something other than a king.

He encounters the young goddess Sud standing in the street, is struck by her beauty, and propositions her directly.^[7] The approach is blunt. No preamble, no negotiation, no intermediary. Enlil sees a young woman and tells her what he wants. To a reader who has just finished chapter 5, the scene carries an unmistakable echo. The king of the gods, encountering a young goddess, making a direct sexual advance—the pattern is identical to the canal scene in "Enlil and Ninlil." The text seems to be setting up the same catastrophe.

But the outcome is different.

Sud rejects Enlil's initial advance; offended by his bluntness, she rebukes him and tells him she is not a woman to be taken casually.^[8] The refusal is sharp and articulate. Sud does not merely decline; she tells him why his behaviour is unacceptable. She has standing in her community, she has a mother, she has a name. She is not available for the kind of encounter Enlil is proposing. Here the two narratives diverge. In "Enlil and Ninlil," the refusal was overridden. In "Enlil and Sud," it holds. The young goddess speaks, and the king of the gods listens—or at any rate, he stops.

What happens next is the real subject of the composition.

Chastened by the rejection, Enlil undertakes a proper courtship: he sends his minister Nusku as

envoy to Sud's mother, the goddess Nisaba, to negotiate a formal marriage.^[9] Nusku is Enlil's trusted vizier, the god who carries his messages and executes his commands. Dispatching him to Nisaba is no casual errand. It is a formal diplomatic mission: the supreme god sending his chief minister to the household of the young goddess he wishes to marry, to open negotiations with her mother. The shift from direct proposition to mediated courtship is the hinge on which the entire story turns. Enlil does not try again. He does not insist. He changes his approach entirely, and the mechanism he adopts — envoy, mother, negotiation — is precisely the mechanism of proper Sumerian marriage procedure.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Portion of the bridal negotiation dialogue between Enlil's envoy and Nisaba (lines 55–62) partially damaged. Single manuscript tradition.]

Nisaba, goddess of grain and writing, acts as the mother who negotiates the marriage terms — both Sud's protective parent and a literate, authoritative figure in her own right.^[10] This is worth pausing over. Nisaba is not merely a mother in the domestic sense. She is the patron deity of the scribal craft, the goddess who presides over the *edubba* — the scribal school where these texts were copied and taught — and over every act of writing, accounting, and record-keeping in Sumer. That the marriage negotiations pass through her is doubly significant. As a mother, she exercises the parental authority Sumerian custom required. As the goddess of literacy, she brings to the negotiation the same precision and formality that governed contracts, deeds, and legal proceedings. The marriage of Enlil and Sud will not be an impulse acted upon. It will be a documented transaction, handled by the deity who invented documentation.

Nisaba's prominence in the negotiation reflects her dual nature as both mother goddess and goddess of writing and scholarship — the patron deity of the scribal craft.^[11] For the scribal students copying this text in the *edubba*, the resonance would have been immediate. Their own patroness was the one setting the terms of the most important divine marriage in the pantheon. Every time they picked up a stylus, they were under her authority. Every time they read this text, they saw her exercising that authority over the king of the gods himself.

With the negotiations established, the text turns to the material substance of the agreement.

Enlil sends a lavish array of bridal gifts to Nisaba and to Sud's household: jewellery, precious metals, fine garments, and food provisions.^[12] The catalogue is detailed, and the detail is the point. This is not a vague mention of "gifts." The text enumerates specific items — types of metal, categories of cloth, kinds of food — with the exhaustiveness of an inventory. The effect is deliberately cumulative. Each item added to the list increases the weight of Enlil's commitment. He is not merely expressing interest. He is putting resources on the table, and the text wants the audience to know exactly how much.

The gift catalogue follows the pattern of Sumerian bride-price conventions attested in legal and administrative texts from the same period.^[13] This correspondence is no coincidence. The composition is modelling ideal behaviour, and the model it chooses is the legal one. A proper Sumerian marriage required a bride-price paid by the groom's family to the bride's family. The price was negotiated, agreed upon, and delivered before the marriage could proceed. What Enlil does in the mythological narrative is exactly what a wealthy Sumerian household head would do in practice: assemble the bride-price, send it through a trusted representative, and wait for

acceptance.

(The detailed gift-list functions as a literary model of the ideal bride-price, reflecting and prescribing the customs of the earthly _edubba audience.^[14])

Nisaba accepts the gifts and agrees to the marriage on behalf of her daughter.^[15] The acceptance is Nisaba's act, not Sud's. This too follows Sumerian legal custom precisely. The bride's consent was mediated through her family — specifically through the senior female authority in the household. Sud will marry Enlil because her mother has agreed to the terms. The arrangement is contractual, and the contracting parties are Enlil (represented by Nusku) and Nisaba (representing her daughter's household). Nothing about this is romantic in the modern sense. But within the Sumerian system, this is what a proper marriage looked like, and the text is at pains to show every step being followed correctly.

The marriage ceremony takes place; Sud is conducted to Enlil's household with full ritual propriety.^[16] Transferring the bride from her mother's house to her husband's is the final element of the marriage protocol, and the text presents it with the same care it has given to every preceding step. The procession is formal. The ritual is observed. Nothing is improvised, nothing is seized, nothing is taken without permission.

And then something happens that elevates the entire composition from social narrative to theology.

Upon her marriage to Enlil, Sud is formally renamed Ninlil — "Lady of the Wind/Air" — taking the feminine counterpart of Enlil's name and becoming queen of the gods.^[17] The renaming is a theological act, not merely a change of personal name: through the act of sacred marriage, Sud acquires the divine status, prerogatives, and cosmic role of Ninlil.^[18] The significance of this cannot be overstated. In Sumerian thought, a name was not a label. It was an identity — a set of powers, functions, and relationships embedded in the word itself. To change a name was to change the nature of the being who bore it. Sud was a young goddess in her mother's city. Ninlil is queen of the gods, consort of the supreme deity, co-ruler of the divine realm. The marriage does not simply move Sud from one household to another. It transforms her into a different kind of being.

The composition closes with praises of Ninlil in her new exalted status, confirming her place as Enlil's consort and co-ruler of the divine realm.^[19] The hymnic ending is not ornamental. It seals the transformation. Sud is gone; Ninlil exists. The young woman who stood in the street and rebuked the king of the gods for his presumption has become his equal, his partner, his queen. And she did not get there by submitting to his initial advance. She got there by refusing it — by insisting on the procedure that the rest of the text then meticulously enacts.

The two Enlil marriage narratives present complementary models: "Enlil and Ninlil" (chapter 5) narrates a transgressive union followed by divine punishment and exile, while "Enlil and Sud" presents the same divine pair united through proper courtship, negotiation, and ritual.^[20] Read side by side, the two compositions form an argument. Chapter 5 shows what happens when the proper channels are bypassed: exile, divine judgment, and a long, complicated descent through the underworld to produce enough substitute gods to balance the cosmic ledger. Chapter 6 shows what happens when the channels are respected: gifts, negotiation, consent, ceremony, and a

transformation that elevates everyone involved.

(The two compositions may have functioned as contrasting exempla in the scribal curriculum — one modelling transgression and its consequences, the other modelling correct social procedure.^[21])

The pairing is especially pointed because both texts belonged to the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum at Nippur. The same students who copied the tale of Enlil's transgression also copied the tale of his proper courtship. They learned both stories. They could compare them. And if the *edubba* was in the business of teaching future administrators how the world worked — how authority functioned, how social relations should be conducted, how even the gods were subject to rules — then the juxtaposition was surely deliberate. One text shows the cost of acting without restraint. The other shows the reward of acting within the system.

The composition models the ideal divine marriage protocol that earthly ceremonies reflect, including bride-price, envoy negotiations, maternal consent, and a naming ceremony.^[22] Every step Enlil follows corresponds to an attested feature of Sumerian marriage practice. The envoy corresponds to the intermediary who opened negotiations between families. The bride-price corresponds to the documented payments that sealed the agreement. The maternal consent corresponds to the legal authority of the bride's senior female relative. The naming ceremony corresponds to the ritual act that formalised the bride's entry into her new household and status.

The courtship protocol mirrors attested Sumerian marriage customs, making this text a primary source for reconstructing OB marriage ritual and gender norms in divine narrative.^[23] For modern scholars, that correspondence makes "Enlil and Sud" invaluable. We do not have many direct descriptions of Sumerian wedding ceremonies. We have contracts, legal provisions, lists of goods exchanged — the administrative record of marriages. But in this composition we have the ceremony itself, narrated step by step, performed by the gods. The mythological narrative does what administrative texts cannot: it shows us the sequence, the rhythm, the social logic of a Sumerian marriage as the Sumerians themselves imagined it should be conducted.

ETCSL default readings.^[24]

The parallels with other traditions are suggestive, though direct influence should not be assumed. Formal divine courtship with family negotiation appears in the Hindu Shiva-Parvati cycle, where Shiva's marriage to Parvati is conducted through elaborate negotiations with her family — a structure remarkably similar to the Enlil-Nusku-Nisaba protocol in this text. Bride-price and marriage-negotiation customs appear across Mesopotamian, Hittite, and biblical traditions, suggesting that the formal exchange of goods for marital consent was a widespread feature of ancient Near Eastern social organisation. And the divine renaming — Sud becoming Ninlil through the act of marriage — finds parallels in the Hebrew Bible, where Abram becomes Abraham and Jacob becomes Israel at moments of theological transformation. In each case, the new name marks a new relationship with the divine order, a new set of obligations and powers. The Sumerian version is the earliest attested instance of this pattern, and the most structurally explicit.

The composition, viewed whole, is a manual disguised as a story. It teaches its audience — the scribal students who copied it, the communities who heard it — how marriage ought to work, from first encounter to final transformation. It begins with a blunt advance and a firm refusal. It ends with a queen of the gods in her new name and her new station. Between those two points, every

step of the proper procedure is demonstrated, every convention honoured, every custom observed. The gods do it right, and the result is not exile or punishment but elevation. The lesson is clear, and the Sumerians wrote it down so that no one could claim they had not been told.

[1] ETCSL 1.2.2, composite text, lines 1–170.

[2] ETCSL 1.2.2, bibliography.

[3] ETCSL 1.2.2, composite text.

[4] Black et al. 2004, pp. 106–112.

[5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 106–112; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–168.

[6] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 1–15; Black et al. 2004, p. 108.

[7] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 15–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 108–109.

[8] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 30–45; Black et al. 2004, pp. 109–110.

[9] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 45–65; Black et al. 2004, pp. 110–111.

[10] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 55–80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 111–112.

[11] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 55–80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 111–112.

[12] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 80–110; Black et al. 2004, pp. 112–113.

[13] Black et al. 2004, pp. 106–112 (introduction).

[14] Inference: The close correspondence between the narrative gift-list and attested legal bride-price formulae. Risk: The text may be aspirational or mythologically exaggerated rather than a direct reflection of actual practice.

[15] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 110–125; Black et al. 2004, pp. 113–114.

[16] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 125–145; Black et al. 2004, pp. 114–115.

[17] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 140–160; Black et al. 2004, p. 115.

[18] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 150–170; Black et al. 2004, p. 115.

[19] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 160–170; Black et al. 2004, p. 115.

[20] Black et al. 2004, pp. 108–109 (introduction); Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–168.

[21] Inference: Both were part of the OB Nippur curriculum and concern the same divine couple. Risk: No ancient colophon or catalogue explicitly links them as a didactic pair.

[22] Black et al. 2004, pp. 106–112.

[23] ETCSL 1.2.2, commentary; Black et al. 2004, pp. 106–112.

[24] An alternate tradition gives: "Black et al. 2004 restore a few damaged signs differently from ETCSL, but differences are minor". The prevalent version is chosen here because Standard composite; Black et al. differences do not affect narrative interpretation.

Chapter 8. Ninurta's Exploits: The Battle with Asag

The composition known as "Lugal-e" — from its Sumerian incipit, "O king" — is catalogued as ETCSL 1.6.2 and runs to roughly 729 lines, making it one of the longest Sumerian literary compositions preserved.^[1] It is also one of the most copied. Numerous Old Babylonian manuscripts from Nippur — the religious capital of Sumer (Sumerian: Nibru), seat of Enlil's temple the E-kur — and from other scribal centres attest its wide circulation in the *edubba* curriculum, the scribal school system through which these texts were studied, copied, and transmitted.^[2] A text that many students were required to copy was a text the institution considered important. The sheer volume of surviving witnesses tells us how the Sumerians ranked their own literature, and by that measure Lugal-e ranked very high indeed.

No single tablet preserves the complete composition. The ETCSL text is a composite assembled from many overlapping witnesses — an editorial reconstruction that no ancient reader ever held in their hands as a single document.^[3] This is, as always, the condition under which we read Sumerian literature: what appears as continuous narrative on the modern page is in fact a mosaic of fragments, carefully fitted together by scholars working with shards of clay that different scribes inscribed in different cities, sometimes centuries apart. The tablets break off mid-line. The signs are worn. Reconstructors fill gaps from parallel witnesses and mark what remains uncertain. What we call "the text" is a collaboration between the ancient scribes who wrote it and the modern scholars who pieced it back together. The fact that so many manuscripts survive from so many sites, however, makes the composite considerably more reliable than for compositions attested in only one or two witnesses. Where gaps appear in one manuscript, another often fills them. The overlapping coverage is not complete — no single witness preserves the full 729 lines, and gaps remain, particularly in the stone-fate section — but the overall narrative is secure, and the major episodes are well attested across multiple witnesses.

Jacobsen devotes forty pages to the text and its cosmological implications, making it a standard reference in all surveys of Sumerian literature.^[4] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 163–191 and Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–272.^[5]

ETCSL composite text, standard editorial reconstruction from OB manuscripts.^[6]

The story, as the tablets preserve it, goes as follows.

The composition opens by invoking Ninurta — warrior god, champion of the gods, son of Enlil — a deity defined not by wisdom or craft or fertility but by war.^[7] Where Enki solves problems through cunning and Inanna through desire and political force, Ninurta solves them by applying overwhelming violence directly. He is the martial arm of the pantheon, the god the assembly sends when something needs destroying, and the opening lines make this clear with the directness Sumerian hymnic poetry favours. Ninurta is terrifying. His power is terrifying. His purpose is to deploy that power on behalf of the divine order. The invocation accumulates epithets and images of devastation in the manner typical of Sumerian praise poetry: it enumerates the hero's strength, celebrates his weapons, and presents his capacity for destruction as a virtue rather than a threat. In the Sumerian theological system, the capacity to destroy is the capacity to maintain order. They are

not separate attributes. They are the same attribute viewed from different angles.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening lines (1–20) partially damaged in several witnesses; invocation and initial battle context fragmentary. Composite reconstruction from multiple OB manuscripts restores most of the opening.]

His weapon is named. In a literary tradition where significant objects carry identities of their own, Ninurta's mace is called Sharur—literally "smiter of thousands"—and it is not merely an instrument but a character.^[8] Sharur is sentient. It speaks. It evaluates situations, delivers reports, and recommends tactics. Throughout the composition, the mace serves as Ninurta's battlefield counsellor: gathering intelligence about the enemy, assessing threats, urging its master to action, and—when the situation turns desperate—flying to Nippur to report to Enlil himself.^[9] The relationship between warrior and weapon is one of the text's most distinctive features. Ninurta has the raw power; Sharur has the judgment. Together they form a military apparatus more sophisticated than either component alone. The sentient mace is not merely a literary device. It is a theological statement about divine warfare: even the champion of the gods does not fight alone. Even the most powerful warrior requires counsel. Strength without intelligence is not enough, and the text embodies that principle in the mace that speaks.

The Ninurta-Sharur dynamic also serves a narrative function the text exploits repeatedly. A warrior fighting a monster in the wilderness has no one to talk to. But a warrior whose weapon speaks to him is never without a dialogue partner. Sharur lets the text present interior deliberation as conversation, strategy as speech, doubt as dialogue. When Ninurta hesitates, Sharur urges him forward. When the battle turns, Sharur reports to Enlil. The weapon becomes the narrative mechanism through which the audience learns what the hero is thinking and what the enemy is doing. Without Sharur, the battle would be spectacle. With Sharur, it is drama.

The threat they face matches their combined capacity.

Asag is a monstrous demon of sickness, born of An—heaven—and Ki—earth.^[10] The parentage matters. This is not a minor malevolent spirit, not a local troublemaker, not one of the *galla*—the underworld demons who enforce the laws of the dead—or any similar functionary of the infernal bureaucracy. Asag is a being whose origins reach to the two fundamental components of the cosmos itself. He is what happens when heaven and earth produce something neither of them intended—a being of cosmic parentage but chaotic purpose, sprung from the fundamental elements yet turned against the order those elements were supposed to sustain. He has established himself in the *kur*—a word meaning mountain, netherworld, or foreign land depending on context—that liminal zone beyond the borders of the settled world where hostile powers gather and threats emerge. And from that stronghold he has raised an army. But this is not an army of soldiers or demons or beasts. This is an army of stones.

The stone army is described in vivid terms: stones rise up en masse from the mountains as warriors, forming a vast hostile force that advances on the settled world.^[11] The image is both literal and geological. The mountains themselves, the raw substance of the earth's skeleton, have been mobilised against civilisation. Ninurta faces not merely an enemy with an army but an uprising of the inorganic world—stone against flesh, mountain against plain, the wild unformed material of the earth against the order the gods have built upon it. For an audience that lived in the flat alluvial

plain of southern Mesopotamia, where stone was a scarce and expensive import from the mountains to the north and east, the image of mountains coming to life and marching against the settled lands carried a particular resonance. The mountains were where the stone came from. The mountains were foreign. The mountains were where hostile forces gathered. An army of stones from the mountains was an army composed of everything that lay beyond the borders of civilisation — everything that was not field, not canal, not city.

And Asag's power extends beyond the physical. His *me-lam* — the terrifying divine radiance that emanates from gods, monsters, and sacred objects — is so intense that it disrupts the natural order itself.^[12] The fish boil in the rivers. The vegetation withers. The *me-lam* that should signal divine authority has become, in Asag's possession, a weapon of cosmic destruction. The world he threatens is not merely the political order of the gods but the biological order of nature — the capacity of water to sustain life, of soil to produce food, of the fundamental systems that keep the living world functioning. When Asag's radiance touches a river, the river kills its own fish. When it touches the land, the land kills its own crops. The demon does not need to burn or poison or flood. His mere presence turns the mechanisms of life against themselves. He is sickness, and sickness is what he does.

Ninurta advances against this enemy. The outcome is not what the opening invocation led the audience to expect.

He is overwhelmed. The demon's power exceeds even what the champion of the gods anticipated, and Ninurta suffers what the text calls a tactical retreat — the warrior god driven back from the field.^[13] The moment shocks in context. Sumerian hymnic literature celebrates Ninurta as invincible, as the irresistible force of the pantheon, as the weapon that never fails. The opening of this very composition has just finished enumerating his terrifying powers in language designed to make the audience feel that nothing could possibly stand against him. And yet the first engagement ends with Ninurta withdrawing. The hymnic build-up makes the reversal all the more effective. The higher the praise, the harder the fall, and the text has raised its hero to an extraordinary height before dropping him.

The text is willing to show its hero failing. That willingness tells us about the seriousness of the threat and the sophistication of the narrative. Asag is not a monster constructed to make the hero look good by falling quickly. Asag is a genuine crisis, and the narrative is not going to pretend otherwise. A story in which the hero wins easily on the first try is not a story worth 729 lines. A story in which the hero is beaten back, regroups, and wins on the second attempt is a story about something — about resilience, about the necessity of divine support, about the difference between raw power and legitimated power. The retreat is not a blemish on Ninurta's record. It is the narrative mechanism that makes his eventual victory meaningful.

It is at this point that Sharur shows why a sentient weapon is more than a literary ornament. The mace travels to Enlil's temple in Nippur — crossing the distance between the battlefield in the *kur* and the religious capital of Sumer — to report the dire situation and obtain divine encouragement for Ninurta.^[14] The mission is both practical and theological. Practically, Ninurta needs reinforcement — not troops, but the assurance that the supreme god supports his campaign and that the resources of the divine hierarchy stand behind him. Theologically, the scene establishes a principle that runs through much Sumerian mythological literature: even the divine warrior

cannot operate without the sanction and backing of the divine hierarchy. Ninurta is powerful, but he is not autonomous. He is Enlil's son, Enlil's champion, and when the battle goes badly, the appeal must go to Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur. The scene also gives the audience a view of the battle from two perspectives: from the field, where Ninurta struggles, and from Nippur, where the senior gods learn what is happening. The mace bridges the two locations, the courier who carries the news of crisis from the front lines to the capital.

Enlil responds. Through Sharur, who carries words between father and son, Enlil sends back encouragement, urging Ninurta to renewed combat.^[15] The content of the encouragement matters less than the fact of it. What Ninurta needed was not new weapons or additional troops but the knowledge that his campaign had divine backing—that the supreme authority in the pantheon was watching, approving, and expecting him to finish what he started. The message from Enlil is not a plan. It is a mandate. It transforms Ninurta's retreat from a defeat into a pause. He was not beaten. He was waiting for confirmation that the full weight of the divine order stood behind his sword arm. Now he has that confirmation, and he goes back. The pattern is worth noting because it recurs in other Sumerian and later Mesopotamian literature: the hero meets an obstacle too great for individual strength, seeks divine sanction or support, and returns empowered not by new weapons but by new authority. Strength is a given. Authority must be conferred.

The second engagement is everything the first was not.

Encouraged by Enlil's message, Ninurta returns to battle and engages Asag with full divine fury.^[16] The hesitation is gone. The caution is gone. What comes now is the full deployment of divine martial power, and the text describes it in terms that make the initial skirmish look like a preliminary exercise. The difference is not in Ninurta's weapons—he carried the same mace, the same arsenal, the first time. The difference is in his authority. He fights now not as a warrior trying his strength but as a warrior executing a commission from the king of the gods. The distinction may seem theological rather than practical, but in Sumerian thought no such separation exists. Authority is power. Legitimate authority is greater power. A warrior fighting on his own is strong. A warrior fighting with Enlil's mandate is irresistible.

The battle is cosmic upheaval rendered as narrative. Storms rage across the landscape. The earth shakes beneath the combatants. Mountains tremble as though the geological foundations of the world are coming apart. The sky darkens as Ninurta unleashes his arsenal—not merely Sharur but the full range of weapons and powers at the divine warrior's disposal.^[17] The description is not metaphorical. In Sumerian cosmological thought, a battle between beings of this magnitude would literally affect the physical structure of the world. When a god fights a primordial demon, the storms are real, the earthquakes are real, the darkness is real. The cosmos itself is the arena, and the cosmos shows the damage. The text piles image upon image: storms that blacken the sky, earthquakes that crack the ground, floods that churn the rivers, darkness that swallows the light. Each image escalates the scale of the conflict. By the time the text reaches the climax, the battle has become indistinguishable from a natural catastrophe—or rather, the natural catastrophe has become indistinguishable from the battle. This is how the Sumerians explained extreme weather and geological upheaval. Somewhere, the gods were fighting.

Ninurta defeats Asag. The demon falls in a climactic confrontation that restores the

possibility — though not yet the reality — of cosmic order.^[18] The distinction matters, and the text is careful to make it. Killing the monster is not the same as fixing what the monster broke. Asag is dead, but the world he disrupted is still disrupted. The natural order has been shattered — the rivers are still wrong, the waters are still churning, the landscape is still in chaos — and merely removing the cause does not automatically restore what was lost. The body of the defeated demon lies in the *kur*, but the *kur* itself is still a place of disorder. Victory in battle, the text is saying, is necessary but not sufficient. What comes next will require a different kind of action entirely — not the warrior's strength but the engineer's intelligence.

The transition from combat narrative to hydraulic engineering is one of the most remarkable moments in Sumerian literature, and it is worth pausing to appreciate what the text does. The hero has won the battle. In most combat mythologies, this is where the story ends — the monster falls, order is restored, the hymns of praise begin. Lugal-e is not most combat mythologies. In Lugal-e, the battle is the midpoint — not the climax but the precondition for the real work that follows. And the real work has not yet started.

After Asag's defeat, a new crisis emerges. The primeval waters — the *kur* waters, the subterranean flood that the old, pre-battle arrangement of the world had held in check — rush up from beneath the earth and inundate the land, threatening to return the world to its pre-civilised state.^[19] The defeat of Asag, it turns out, has removed a structural element from the cosmos. Whatever role the demon played in the underground architecture of the world — however inadvertently, however malignantly — his destruction has left a gap. Through that gap the deep waters pour upward, flooding the surface, swallowing the fields, turning the cultivated land back into the formless, watery condition that preceded the separation of earth and water. The hero who killed the monster has accidentally uncorked the flood. The cure has introduced a new disease. This is a narrative complication of genuine sophistication. The text does not present Ninurta's victory as an unalloyed triumph. It presents it as an intervention with unintended consequences — the kind of consequences that follow from disrupting a system without fully understanding how its parts connect. Asag was terrible, but Asag was also, in some structural sense, load-bearing. Remove him, and something collapses. The text does not moralize the point. It simply narrates it, and lets the audience draw the inference that even divine action can produce effects the actor did not predict.

The consequences are immediate and catastrophic. The rising waters prevent the fresh water of the Tigris from flowing in its proper course. Agriculture ceases. Canals cannot function. The irrigation system on which Mesopotamian civilisation depends is rendered useless. Famine threatens the gods and the land alike.^[20] This is not an abstract disaster. The audience for this composition — the scribal students in the *edubba*, the temple administrators, the literate classes of Old Babylonian cities — understood irrigation with a specificity modern readers may struggle to match. They knew what it meant when the Tigris could not flow. It meant no barley would grow, no fields would be watered, no surplus would be stored, no temple would be provisioned. It meant the end of everything they knew. The cities of Sumer existed because water reached the fields through canals. Remove the water, and the cities die. The text understood this, and it presents the flood crisis not as a mythological abstraction but as the most concrete of practical emergencies: the fields are drowning, and the harvest is lost.

Ninurta's response to this second crisis reveals a dimension of the warrior god the hymnic opening did not prepare the audience for. He does not fight the waters. He does not brandish Sharur at the

flood. He does not seek another monster to slay. Instead, he builds.

Ninurta heaps up a great dam of stones—the very stones that had formed Asag’s army—to hold back the primeval waters.^[21] The narrative logic is precise and satisfying. The stones that served chaos are now pressed into the service of order. The materials of destruction become the materials of construction. Asag’s army, defeated and scattered across the battlefield, is reassembled—not as a military force but as infrastructure. The warrior has become an engineer, and his building material is the wreckage of his own victory. Nothing is wasted. Nothing is discarded. The enemy’s weapons become the hero’s tools. It is a remarkably efficient vision of cosmic management: chaos provides the raw materials for order, and the god who can see this—who can look at a defeated army and see a dam—is the god who truly saves the world.

(The damming episode functions as an aetiology for the Mesopotamian irrigation system and the geography of the Tigris river basin—Ninurta’s stones become the mountains that channel the rivers.^[22])

The dam restrains the hostile waters and channels the Tigris to flow properly, restoring irrigation and agriculture to the land.^[23] Ninurta’s victory thus creates the fertile landscape of Mesopotamia—the river system, the irrigated plains, the geography on which the entire civilisation rests. This is not a small claim. The text is saying that the physical shape of the world—the reason the Tigris flows where it flows, the reason the mountains stand where they stand, the reason water reaches the fields—results from Ninurta’s engineering after his battle with Asag. The landscape is not natural. It is constructed. It is a dam built by a god from the corpses of a defeated army, and the rivers that flow through it are the diverted waters of a primordial flood. Every time a Sumerian farmer opened a canal gate and watched the water flow into his field, he was, according to this text, benefiting from an act of divine hydraulic engineering performed by a warrior god standing knee-deep in the wreckage of a cosmic battle.

And then the composition does something no other Sumerian text does at this scale. It stops narrating events and begins cataloguing materials. The dramatic arc gives way to something closer to an inventory, and the inventory goes on for over two hundred lines.

After establishing the dam, Ninurta turns to address the individual stones that formed Asag’s army, decreeing the fate of each one—rewarding those that aided him and cursing those that fought against him.^[24] The stone-fate catalogue is the longest single section of the composition, encompassing roughly 250 lines and addressing dozens of individual stones and minerals.^[25] Two hundred and fifty lines. In a composition of 729 lines total, more than a third is devoted to a god standing among the wreckage of a battle, pointing at rocks one by one and telling each of them what it will become. By any narrative measure, this is extraordinary. The climax of the battle has already passed. The dam has been built. The crisis has been resolved. And yet the text devotes its largest section not to the drama that preceded it but to the administrative work that follows. It is as though someone had written an epic about a general who wins a great war, and then devoted more than a third of the epic to the general’s post-war survey of captured military equipment, item by item, assigning each piece to its new peacetime function.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Portions of the stone-fate assignment section (lines 330–370) damaged, with gaps in the individual verdicts for some stones. Overlapping manuscripts cover different

subsections, but no single witness is complete.]

The format is repetitive by design. Ninurta addresses a stone. He recalls its conduct during the battle—whether it supported him or opposed him, whether it stood firm in Asag’s ranks or wavered, whether it showed courage in the service of chaos or cowardice. He decrees its fate—its future use, its status in the material world, its value or worthlessness, its place in the hierarchy of substances civilisation will employ. Then he moves to the next stone. The pattern repeats, stone after stone, mineral after mineral, with variations in the verdict but not in the structure. The repetition is not a failure of imagination. It is the point. The catalogue is comprehensive because Ninurta’s authority is comprehensive. Nothing escapes his judgment. No stone is too insignificant to receive its fate.

Stones that are praised and given beneficial fates include diorite, decreed worthy of bearing royal inscriptions—a fate that corresponds to its actual use in Mesopotamia, where some of the most important royal monuments were carved on diorite.^[26] The hard, dark stone that withstands weathering and holds fine carving is, in Ninurta’s decree, rewarded for its loyalty. Its physical properties—durability, density, resistance to erosion—become moral properties. Diorite endured. Diorite stood firm. Therefore diorite will carry the words of kings.

Lapis lazuli is honoured for its beauty and its association with heaven—the deep blue stone the Sumerians prized above almost all others and that appears throughout their material culture in jewellery, inlays, and temple furnishings.^[27] Its colour—the blue of the sky, the blue of the gods’ abodes—is treated as evidence of celestial loyalty. A stone that looks like heaven must have sided with the gods of heaven. Therefore it will be honoured, set in gold, placed in temples, worn by the great. The reasoning is circular, but the circularity is instructive. The Sumerians are explaining why the world is the way it is—why some stones are precious and others are common—by anchoring the explanation in a narrative of moral choice. The hierarchy of materials is not arbitrary. It is earned. It is just.

These are stones that stood with Ninurta—or at least did not stand against him—and their reward is to be elevated, to be precious, to be worthy of the finest uses Mesopotamian craft could devise. The beneficial fates are specific. They are not vague blessings but precise assignments to particular roles in human material culture. This stone will be used for this purpose. That stone will be used for that purpose. The catalogue is, among other things, an encyclopaedia of Mesopotamian craft knowledge, organised as a series of divine decrees.

Stones that are cursed include those that served Asag faithfully. They are condemned to be broken, ground, or used for menial purposes.^[28] Where the rewarded stones are carved and polished and set in gold, the cursed stones are smashed and scattered and put to work in foundations and roadbeds—useful, perhaps, but without honour. The punishment is not destruction but degradation. The cursed stones will exist, but they will exist as rubble. They will serve, but they will serve without recognition, without beauty, without the touch of a craftsman’s skill. They will be the stones no one names. They will be the stones that disappear into walls and foundations and road surfaces, doing the necessary work of civilisation without any of its glory. The verdict is permanent. A stone cursed by Ninurta remains cursed. Its nature is fixed by the decree, and the decree is final.

The catalogue includes building stones such as limestone and bitite, stones used as weights and tools such as hematite, and decorative stones, reflecting a comprehensive Sumerian mineralogical knowledge embedded in mythological narrative.^[29] The scope is encyclopaedic. The scribes who

composed this section were not merely telling a story. They were assembling, within the framework of that story, a systematic inventory of the mineral world as they understood it. Every stone has a name. Every stone has a use. Every stone has properties—hardness, colour, weight, workability—that the text either states or implies. And every stone has a reason for being what it is—a reason that traces back to its behaviour during a cosmic battle that took place before human memory began. The catalogue is simultaneously mythology and mineralogy, narrative and reference work, theology and practical handbook. Hematite—the heavy, dark stone whose name in Greek means "blood stone"—is assigned to the world of weights and tools, where its density and hardness make it practical for standardised measures. Limestone and bitite find their places in the building trades, destined for the walls of temples and houses, for the foundations of cities, for the utilitarian structures no one admires but everyone depends upon. Each assignment is both a narrative event and a data point, and the accumulation of data points produces, by the end of the catalogue, something that approaches a systematic mineralogy of the ancient Near East.

(The stone-fate catalogue may reflect the practical mineralogical knowledge of the scribal schools, embedded in narrative form for pedagogical transmission.^[30])

The stone-fate assignments suggest a connection to mineralogical lore and temple-building ritual knowledge, since the fates decreed correspond to the actual uses of these stones in Sumerian material culture.^[31] A student copying this text in the *edubba* would learn not only a mythological narrative but also a practical vocabulary of stones and their applications. The Sumerian lexical tradition—the enormous compilations of word lists, material catalogues, and technical vocabularies that formed the backbone of scribal education—included lists of stones and minerals. The stone-fate section of Lugal-e covers much of the same material, but in narrative form rather than as a dry enumeration. The composition teaches on two levels at once: it tells you why the world is the way it is, and it tells you what diorite is good for. The mythological explanation and the practical information are not separate. They are the same thing. In Sumerian thought, knowing what a stone does and knowing why it does it are not two forms of knowledge. They are one.

The effect of the catalogue, read in its entirety, is cumulative rather than dramatic. It does not build to a climax. It accumulates. Each stone added to the inventory extends the reach of Ninurta's ordering authority—one more element of the material world brought under divine jurisdiction, one more substance assigned its proper place and function. By the time the last fate has been decreed, nothing in the mineral world remains unaccounted for, unclassified, or unassigned. The chaos of Asag's stone army has been converted—stone by stone, verdict by verdict—into a taxonomic system. What was a mob is now an inventory. What was an army is now a catalogue. The warrior god has done what warriors do: he has imposed order on disorder. But the order he has imposed is not military. It is administrative. It is the order of the list, the inventory, the scribal record. It is the order of the *edubba* itself—the order of classification, documentation, and systematic knowledge. The god has become a scribe, and his weapon has become a stylus.

The composition has one more transformation to perform, and it is the most personal of all.

After the stone-fate decrees, Ninurta's mother comes to the *kur* to see her son's victory.^[32] She is identified in this passage as Ninmah—the "exalted lady"—a name under which the mother goddess is widely known in Sumerian literature. She has come to the place of battle, the place of the dam, the place where the stones received their fates. She has come to see what her son has built.

The visit is not casual. The mother goddess traversing the distance from the settled world to the *kur* — to the wild, hostile territory where her son fought and won and then did something more important than winning — carries a weight the text clearly intends the audience to feel. She has come to witness the transformation, and in coming she will be transformed herself. The arrival of the mother at the site of the son's triumph carries emotional weight even across the vast distance between the Old Babylonian period and the present. The warrior has fought, built, judged, and ordered. Now his mother comes to see what he has done. The composition knows this moment matters, and it gives it the space it deserves.

What follows is not merely a reunion. It is a naming ceremony — the same kind of theological act we saw in "Enlil and Sud" in chapter 6, where the young goddess Sud was renamed Ninlil upon her marriage to Enlil. Here the mechanism is the same, but the occasion is different. In chapter 6, the renaming culminated a courtship. Here, the renaming culminates a war. Ninurta honours his mother for her role and, in recognition of his victory at the mountain, renames her Ninhursaja — "Lady of the Mountain," from *hursag*, "mountain" — giving her the name by which she is most commonly known in the Sumerian pantheon.^[33] Ninhursaja — mother goddess, lady of the mountain — receives her identity from her son's achievement. The mountain is the dam. The dam is Ninurta's work. The name is the seal that connects the mother goddess to the landscape her son created.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Closing hymnic section (lines 680–729) has minor gaps in the praise formula and the mother-renaming passage. Multiple manuscripts preserve the ending with minor variation.]

The renaming is not cosmetic. It is cosmological. Ninurta has just created a mountain — the dam of stones that holds back the primeval waters and channels the Tigris. By naming his mother "Lady of the Mountain," he gives her dominion over the very landscape he has constructed. The mountain is hers. The dam is hers. The geography that makes Mesopotamian civilisation possible is placed under her authority. The renaming establishes an aetiology for Ninhursaja's principal epithet and connects the mother goddess to the landscape created by Ninurta's damming of the waters.^[34] The connection is not abstract. It is architectural. The dam is a physical structure made of physical stones, and the goddess who now presides over it is the goddess of the physical earth — of birth, of sustenance, of the material conditions that allow life to continue. In a single act, Ninurta has given his mother a new name, a new domain, and a new place in the cosmic order. The son transforms the mother's identity, just as he transformed the landscape. Both acts are acts of naming. Both acts create something that did not exist before. And both acts demonstrate the Sumerian conviction that naming is not description but creation — that to give a thing its name is to give it its nature.

The composition closes with a hymnic praise of Ninurta, celebrating his martial exploits and his role as cosmic organiser — the warrior who defeated chaos and built the world.^[35] The closing lines gather together the threads of the narrative — the battle, the dam, the stone-fates, the mother's renaming — and present them as a single achievement, a unified act of world-making that began with a mace and ended with a catalogue. Ninurta is not praised merely for killing Asag. He is praised for what he did after killing Asag: for building the dam, for assigning the fates, for creating the landscape, for naming his mother. The martial victory was the precondition. The real accomplishment was the ordering of the world that followed. The text knows the difference between destruction and construction, and it awards its highest praise to the construction. This is a

striking theological position for a hymn addressed to a warrior god. Ninurta's defining attribute is martial violence. His epithets celebrate his capacity to destroy. And yet when the text sums up his achievements, the building and the ordering and the naming receive the most sustained attention. The warrior's greatest work is not the battle. The warrior's greatest work is the administration that follows the battle. It is a vision of divine heroism that places the bureaucrat above the soldier — or rather, that sees no contradiction between the two, because in Sumerian thought the capacity to organise is simply the capacity to destroy redirected toward productive ends.

Lugal-e is, at its structural core, a text about transformation — about converting one thing into another through divine intelligence and authority. The *kur* — hostile, chaotic, filled with monstrous power — is transformed into the mountain that channels life-giving water. The stones that formed a rebel army are transformed into the materials of civilisation. A demon of sickness is transformed into a corpse. A dam is transformed into a landscape. A mother's name is transformed into a theological title. A battlefield is transformed into an irrigation system. At every level, the narrative moves from disorder to order, from threat to resource, from chaos to system. The pattern is consistent and deliberate. It is not merely a feature of one section or one episode. It is the organising principle of the entire composition, from the opening invocation to the closing hymn.

The composition explains the creation of the Tigris river system and the fertile plains of Mesopotamia as a result of Ninurta's damming of the primeval waters after defeating Asag.^[36] This is aetiological thinking at its most ambitious. The text does not explain the origin of a single custom or a single divine name. It explains the origin of the entire physical landscape — the rivers, the mountains, the irrigation system, the geological substrate of civilisation itself. Every farmer who dug a canal, every builder who quarried stone, every jeweller who set lapis lazuli in gold was, according to this text, taking part in a system Ninurta established in the aftermath of a cosmic battle. The mundane was sacred. The practical was mythological. The two categories were, in Sumerian thought, the same.

The *kur*, in this reading, is a place of both threat and transformation: the hostile mountain becomes, through Ninurta's action, the source of the stones that build civilisation and the dam that channels life-giving water.^[37] The same place that threatened to destroy the world is, after Ninurta's intervention, the reason the world works. This is not irony. It is Sumerian cosmological logic, and it runs deeper than the individual narrative. The raw materials of chaos are the raw materials of order. The difference is not in the material but in the organisation. The stones are the same stones whether they serve Asag or serve Ninurta. What changes is their assignment, their function, their place in a system. What Ninurta provides is not new substance but new structure. He is not a creator who makes something from nothing. He is an organiser who makes something useful from something dangerous. The distinction matters. Sumerian cosmology, as Lugal-e presents it, is not about creation *ex nihilo*. It is about imposing order on pre-existing material. The world was not made. It was arranged. And the one who arranged it was not a creator god working from a plan but a warrior god improvising with the rubble of a battlefield. The theological implications are considerable: the cosmos is not a designed artefact but a reorganised disaster, and its order is not pristine but salvaged.

The composition exemplifies a pattern scholars call the Chaoskampf — a young warrior god defeats

a primordial chaos being to organise the cosmos—a pattern found across ancient Near Eastern mythologies.^[38] The pattern is well attested, but it is important to be precise about the direction of influence and the chronology of the evidence.

Lugal-e predates the Babylonian Enuma Elish—the composition in which Marduk defeats Tiamat and reshapes the cosmos from her body—by several centuries. The Old Babylonian manuscripts of Lugal-e predate all known copies of Enuma Elish, which was composed no earlier than the late second millennium BCE.^[39] The structural parallels between the two compositions are extensive and well documented: a young warrior god, commissioned by the elder gods, defeats a primordial chaos being who commands an army of monstrous allies, and then reorganises the physical world from the materials of the defeated enemy. The correspondence is too detailed to be coincidental. But the influence, if influence there is, runs from Sumerian to Babylonian, not the other way around. Lugal-e should not be read as a derivative of the Marduk-Tiamat combat. If anything, the Enuma Elish drew on the tradition Lugal-e represents, adapting the Sumerian pattern of Ninurta and Asag to the Babylonian context of Marduk and Tiamat. It substituted the patron god of Babylon for the champion of Nippur but kept the fundamental structure of the narrative: battle, victory, cosmic reorganisation.

(Lugal-e represents the Sumerian prototype of the Chaoskampf tradition that later influenced the Babylonian Enuma Elish's Marduk-Tiamat battle.^[40])

The parallels extend beyond Mesopotamia. The Vedic tradition preserves the story of Indra's battle with Vrtra—a serpentine demon who blocks the waters, preventing them from flowing and fertilising the land, until the warrior god slays him and releases the rivers. The structural correspondence with Lugal-e is striking: in both traditions, a warrior god defeats a monster that is blocking or damming the waters, and the victory produces the river system that sustains civilisation. The specific mechanism differs—Indra releases waters Vrtra was hoarding, while Ninurta dams waters that have been released—but the pattern of warrior god, water-related chaos, and the resulting creation of a functioning hydrological system is shared. The Greek tradition offers Zeus against Typhon—a storm god battling a monstrous chthonic adversary to secure divine sovereignty and cosmic order. In each case, the pattern is the same: young god, primordial monster, cosmic reorganisation. The Sumerian version in Lugal-e is the earliest attested instance, and it remains the most detailed. What distinguishes Lugal-e from its parallels is not merely the battle itself but the aftermath. Neither the Enuma Elish nor the Indra-Vrtra hymn devotes anything like the same attention to the post-victory organisation of the material world. The stone-fate catalogue—that extraordinary 250-line inventory of minerals, uses, and divine judgments—has no counterpart in any of these parallel traditions. The Sumerian text is not content to narrate the victory and move on. It insists on cataloguing the consequences, stone by stone, as though the victory means nothing until every piece of the defeated enemy has been accounted for and assigned its proper function.

The composition's wide attestation across multiple Old Babylonian sites and its length indicate its central importance in the scribal curriculum and Sumerian literary tradition.^[41] The students who copied this text—line after line, stone after stone, fate after fate—were not merely practising their cuneiform. They were learning how the world was made. They were learning that the landscape they inhabited was not accidental but engineered, not natural but constructed, not given but won through combat and intelligence and administrative patience. The mountains were a dam. The rivers were channels. The stones beneath their feet had names and histories and judgments passed upon them by a god who stood among them after the battle and pointed at each one in turn. The

world was an ordered system, and the order had a story, and the story was this one. Seven hundred and twenty-nine lines, copied by hand onto wet clay by students who would grow up to manage the irrigation canals and stone quarries and temple storehouses the story claimed to explain. The myth was the manual. The narrative was the curriculum. And the god who won the battle was also the god who filed the paperwork.

[1] ETCSL 1.6.2, composite text, lines 1–729.

[2] ETCSL 1.6.2, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, pp. 163–191.

[3] ETCSL 1.6.2, editorial notes; Black et al. 2004, p. 163 (introduction).

[4] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–272.

[5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 163–191; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–272.

[6] An alternate tradition gives: "Jacobsen 1987 pp. 233–272 provides a literary translation that smooths over gaps and occasionally follows different manuscript readings, especially in the stone-fate section". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL represents the broader manuscript base; Jacobsen used for literary context.

[7] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 163–165.

[8] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 163–165.

[9] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 20–50; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 235–238.

[10] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 30–70; Black et al. 2004, pp. 165–167.

[11] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 50–80; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 238–240.

[12] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 60–90; Black et al. 2004, pp. 166–167.

[13] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 90–130; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 240–243.

[14] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 130–160; Black et al. 2004, pp. 168–169.

[15] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 160–180; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 243–245.

[16] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 180–220; Black et al. 2004, pp. 169–171.

[17] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 200–240; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 245–248.

[18] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 240–270; Black et al. 2004, pp. 171–172.

[19] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 270–320; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 248–252.

[20] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 290–330; Black et al. 2004, pp. 173–175.

[21] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 330–370; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 252–255.

[22] Inference: Jacobsen 1987 pp. 252–255 explicitly reads this as landscape aetiology. Risk: The text may have had additional meanings (ritual, theological) beyond geographical aetiology.

[23] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 370–400; Black et al. 2004, pp. 175–177.

[24] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 400–650 (approximate); Black et al. 2004, pp. 177–188.

[25] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 400–650; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 255–266.

[26] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 420–440 (approximate); Black et al. 2004, pp. 178–180.

[27] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 420–440 (approximate); Black et al. 2004, pp. 178–180.

[28] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 440–500 (approximate); Jacobsen 1987, pp. 258–262.

[29] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 400–650; Black et al. 2004, pp. 177–188.

[30] Inference: The stone names correspond to known Sumerian mineral terminology attested in lexical lists from the same OB period. Risk: The extent to which the catalogue was used as a teaching text for mineralogy vs. pure literary entertainment is uncertain.

[31] Black et al. 2004, pp. 163–164 (introduction).

[32] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 650–690; Black et al. 2004, pp. 189–190.

[33] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 690–720; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 267–270.

[34] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 690–729; Black et al. 2004, pp. 190–191.

[35] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 720–729; Black et al. 2004, p. 191.

[36] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 400–460; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 248–255.

[37] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 252–266.

[38] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–234; Kramer 1961, pp. 80–83.

[39] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–234; Black et al. 2004, p. 163.

[40] Inference: The OB dating of Lugal-e manuscripts predates all known copies of Enuma Elish by several centuries; structural

parallels (warrior god, chaos monster, cosmic reorganisation) are extensive. Risk: Direct textual transmission from Lugal-e to Enuma Elish is not documented; the relationship may be indirect, through a shared tradition.

[41] ETCSL 1.6.2, manuscript list.

Chapter 9. Ninurta's Return to Nibru

The composition known as "Angim" —from its Sumerian incipit, conventionally rendered "Angim dimma," meaning "on a day that was" —is catalogued as ETCSL 1.6.1 and runs to 208 lines.^[1] It survives on Old Babylonian manuscripts and was a recognised component of the scribal curriculum, though scribes copied it less often than its companion piece Lugal-e (ETCSL 1.6.2).^[2] A bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian version of the composition exists, but only the Sumerian text falls within the scope of the present work.^[3] That bilingual version tells us something about the text's longevity: scribes still cared about it long after Sumerian had ceased to be a spoken language.

The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 181–186.^[4]

ETCSL 1.6.1 composite text, standard Sumerian recension.^[5]

Jacobsen identifies Angim as the sequel to Lugal-e, treating the two compositions as a narrative pair: the cosmic battle (Lugal-e) followed by the triumphant but dangerous homecoming (Angim).^[6] The pairing is apt. Lugal-e (chapter 7) told the story of Ninurta —warrior god, son of Enlil, champion of the gods—defeating the demon Asag and his stone army, then damming the primeval waters and decreeing the fates of every stone on the battlefield. Lugal-e ended with Ninurta victorious, the landscape reorganised, his mother renamed Ninhursaja in honour of the mountain he had built. But Lugal-e left something unaddressed. What happens when the warrior comes home?

The story, as the tablets preserve it, goes as follows.

The narrative opens with Ninurta departing the *kur* —the mountain, the hostile realm beyond the borders of the settled world —after his victory over Asag and the stone army, as narrated in Lugal-e.^[7] He is laden with the trophies of battle: he carries the defeated Asag's weapons and the spoils of the *kur*, displaying them as evidence of his martial triumph.^[8] He is not marching in orderly formation with his weapons stowed. He is blazing across the landscape like a storm that has forgotten how to stop.

The text describes Ninurta's homeward march in terms of overwhelming, terrifying martial splendour. His *me-lam* —the terrifying divine radiance that emanates from gods, monsters, and sacred objects—blazes with such intensity that it alarms all who behold it.^[9] The warrior god travels with the full panoply of battle: storms, weapons, captured enemies, and divine radiance that makes the landscape itself tremble.^[10] He moves through the world not as a returning champion but as a natural disaster in progress —a concentration of destructive force that has not yet received the message that the battle is over.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Portions of the triumphal procession description (lines 80–100) are damaged; details of the trophy display are fragmentary. The bilingual Akkadian version preserves some corresponding passages but is out of scope for this work.]

And this is where the composition finds its subject. The gods themselves—including the great

deities of the pantheon—are alarmed by Ninurta’s approach. His uncontained battle-fury threatens the cosmic order he has just saved.^[11]

The irony is precise. The gods sent Ninurta to fight Asag because Asag threatened the world. Now Ninurta is coming home, and the gods are afraid—not of Asag, who is dead, but of Ninurta, who is alive and burning with the same force that killed Asag. The champion has become the threat. The weapon the gods drew against chaos has not been resheathed. The composition devotes roughly a quarter of its lines to the gods’ fearful reactions, a proportion disproportionate to any other section and one that marks this theme as the structural centre of the work.^[12]

(The gods’ fear of their own champion constitutes the central dramatic tension of Angim—the composition explores the problem that martial power, once unleashed for cosmic defence, is itself a threat to cosmic stability.^[13])

The text shows the gods cowering, hiding, or reacting with visible anxiety as Ninurta draws near to Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru)—the religious capital of Sumer, seat of Enlil’s temple the E-kur.^[14] This is the city from which Enlil—king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur—dispatched him to fight in the first place. And the inhabitants of that city, divine inhabitants included, now watch the horizon with the same apprehension they would have felt watching Asag’s approach. The saviour and the threat have become indistinguishable. Ninurta has not changed his nature. He has simply not changed back.

The *me-lam* that blazes from Ninurta’s body is not something he can turn off like a lamp. It belongs to what he is. The battle awakened capacities that do not sleep on command.

Enlil perceives the danger his son’s unchecked martial rage poses and acts to address it.^[15] His response is not force. It is diplomacy. He does not meet Ninurta at the gate with a greater display of power. He does not command him to stop. He does something far more calculated: he sends his minister Nusku to meet Ninurta and convey a message meant to soothe the warrior’s fury and channel his return into an orderly, celebratory arrival.^[16]

Enlil’s speech to Nusku and Nusku’s relay to Ninurta occupy a section where some lines are damaged.^[17]

The choice of intermediary matters. Enlil does not go himself. He sends Nusku—his vizier, his trusted minister. The message is not a command but a reframing. Instead of telling Ninurta to suppress his battle-fury, Enlil offers a channel for it: ceremony, recognition, the institutional framework of the homecoming celebration as a structure within which the warrior’s rage can be expressed, acknowledged, and gradually dissipated. The father does not confront the son. The father contains the son—not by force but by form.

Ninurta arrives at Nippur, where the E-kur stands as the centre of the Sumerian divine order.^[18] The arrival unfolds as a ceremonial event: Ninurta enters the city precincts and approaches the E-kur.^[19] The fact that the text frames this as ceremony rather than crisis tells us Enlil’s intervention has already begun to work. The *me-lam* has not ceased. The trophies are still on display. The warrior is still terrifying. But the context has shifted. What was a menacing advance is now a

triumphal procession. The form changes the meaning without changing the substance.

Ninlil—queen of the gods, wife of Enlil—plays a significant role in welcoming and soothing Ninurta. She receives him with maternal warmth that helps dissipate his martial fury.^[20] If Enlil's contribution was the formal framework, Ninlil's is the emotional one. Her welcome is not institutional but personal, and the text presents this warmth as genuinely effective in a way official channels alone could not have been. The *me-lam* that could not be commanded to cease can, it seems, be soothed by the presence of the mother. Even a god who has just killed a cosmic demon and reorganised the landscape of the world is still, in some irreducible sense, his mother's son.

The combined effect of Enlil's paternal authority and Ninlil's maternal reception transforms Ninurta's dangerous battle-rage into integrated, socially productive divine power.^[21] The fury dissipates under the combined pressure of ceremony and affection, the father's authority and the mother's warmth. Both are necessary. Neither suffices alone. Authority alone would be confrontation. Warmth alone would be too slight against the scale of the *me-lam*. Together, they accomplish what neither could do separately: they bring the storm inside without letting it destroy the house.

(The pacification pattern — parental authority reintegrating a dangerously autonomous warrior — may reflect a broader Sumerian theological concern with the proper subordination of martial power to the civic-religious order centred on Nippur and the Ekur.^[22])

The composition concludes with a hymnic passage celebrating Ninurta in his now-pacified state—the terrifying warrior reintegrated into the divine order as Enlil's obedient champion.^[23] The closing lines praise both Ninurta's martial prowess and the restored harmony of the divine household, framing the narrative as a movement from dangerous excess to sanctioned order.^[24] The praise is double-edged: it celebrates the power that nearly destroyed the world alongside the restraint that prevented the destruction. Ninurta is honoured for being terrifying and for ceasing to be terrifying. In the Sumerian theological framework, these are not contradictions. The capacity to destroy and the capacity to submit to authority are both attributes of the ideal divine warrior. One without the other is either impotence or chaos.

Angim works as a sustained meditation on the danger of divine martial power: the gods' own champion, having saved the cosmos, now threatens it with the very force that achieved that salvation.^[25] The composition complements Lugal-e by addressing what the longer text leaves implicit: what happens when the warrior returns home still burning with battle-fury.^[26] Lugal-e ended with the stone-fates decreed and the mother renamed, but it did not show the warrior walking back through the gate of the city he had saved. Angim shows that walk, and it reveals that the walk is more dangerous than the battle.

The problem Angim identifies is not unique to Sumerian theology. The composition survives on multiple Old Babylonian manuscripts, and the existence of a bilingual version shows sustained scribal interest reaching into the later Akkadian-speaking period.^[27] Kramer includes Angim in his overview of the Ninurta myths, placing it within the broader cycle of warrior-god narratives that

forms a major strand of Sumerian literary output.^[28] The text endured because its subject endured. Every culture that sends warriors to fight on its behalf must eventually face the question of what to do when the warriors come back. The power that was necessary abroad is dangerous at home. The fury that saved the community now threatens it.

The parallels are instructive. Achilles' wrath in the Iliad endangers Greeks and Trojans alike and requires divine and human mediation to resolve — a warrior whose fury, unleashed for the defence of his people, becomes a threat to those same people when it cannot be contained. Cuchulainn's *riastrad* — the warp-spasm of the Irish Tain Bo Cuailnge — leaves him so hot with battle-rage after combat that the women of Emain Macha must cool him in three vats of water before he can safely re-enter the community. The Norse berserker tradition preserves the same pattern: the warrior who fights with supernatural fury and must be ritually pacified before returning to social life. In each case, the problem is the same: martial power, once activated, does not deactivate on command. The community it was deployed to protect must receive, channel, and absorb it.

The Sumerian solution is institutional and familial at once. Enlil provides the authority of the state. Ninlil provides the warmth of the family. The result is not the suppression of Ninurta's power but its integration. The *me-lam* does not vanish. It is domesticated. The warrior does not cease to be terrifying. He becomes terrifying within a framework that assigns his terror a proper place and function.

At 208 lines, Angim is a fraction of Lugal-e's 729. But brevity does not measure significance. Lugal-e told the story of the battle and the building and the ordering. Angim tells the story of the moment between the victory and the peace, the dangerous interval when the warrior is still a warrior and the city is not yet safe from its own defender. It is the shortest distance in the narrative — from the *kur* to the gate of Nippur — but the most perilous crossing in the entire Ninurta cycle.

[1] ETCSL 1.6.1, composite text, lines 1–206.

[2] ETCSL 1.6.1, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 192 (introduction).

[3] Black et al. 2004, p. 192 (introduction).

[4] Black et al. 2004, pp. 181–186.

[5] An alternate tradition gives: "Black et al. 2004 pp. 181–186 offers minor translation differences in the rendering of Ninurta's epithets and the gods' fearful reactions". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL provides the composite base; Black et al. used for literary context and alternate renderings.

[6] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–234.

[7] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, pp. 192–193.

[8] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 10–25; Black et al. 2004, pp. 193–194.

[9] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 25–50; Black et al. 2004, pp. 193–194.

[10] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 30–55; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–234.

[11] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 50–80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 194–195.

[12] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 60–85; Black et al. 2004, pp. 194–195.

[13] Inference: The text devotes roughly one quarter of its lines to the gods' fearful reactions, disproportionate to any other section; Black et al. 2004 p. 192 describes this as the core theme. Risk: The text does not provide an explicit authorial statement of theme; this is structural analysis supported by scholarly consensus.

[14] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 60–85; Black et al. 2004, pp. 194–195.

[15] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 100–130; Black et al. 2004, pp. 195–196.

[16] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 110–140; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–234.

[17] This passage reconstructs the lacuna at etcsL 1.6.1, lines 80–100 (within the lacuna zone) from the parallel account in surrounding intact lines establish the pattern of diplomatic mediation through Nusku; confidence: medium.

[18] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 140–160; Black et al. 2004, pp. 196–197.

[19] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 150–170; Black et al. 2004, pp. 196–197.

[20] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 160–185; Black et al. 2004, pp. 197–198.

[21] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 170–195; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–234.

[22] Inference: Angim’s structure mirrors the political theology of Enlil’s supremacy attested across the Sumerian literary corpus; the warrior returns to and submits before the father-god’s city. Risk: The political reading is scholarly interpretation (Jacobsen), not explicit in the text.

[23] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 195–206; Black et al. 2004, p. 198.

[24] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 200–206; Black et al. 2004, p. 198.

[25] Black et al. 2004, pp. 192–193 (introduction).

[26] Black et al. 2004, p. 192.

[27] ETCSL 1.6.1, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 192.

[28] Kramer 1961, pp. 80–83.

Chapter 10. Ninurta and the Turtle: Enki's Trick

The composition known as "Ninurta and the Turtle" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.6.3 and survives on a small number of Old Babylonian tablets.^[1] The text is heavily damaged: no complete witness exists, and gaps riddle the opening, middle, and conclusion.^[2] Few copies survive, and the text's limited attestation shows it circulated less widely than Lugal-e (ETCSL 1.6.2) or Angim (ETCSL 1.6.1) within the scribal curriculum.^[3] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text.^[4]

ETCSL 1.6.3 is a fragmentary Sumerian text in which Ninurta's recovery of the tablet is stated or implied in the surviving lines.^[5]

Black et al. describe the composition briefly as a text in which Enki's cunning undercuts Ninurta's heroic deed, placing it as a comic or satirical counterpoint to the martial Ninurta cycle.^[6] The description is apt, and we should take it seriously. This is the third movement in a triptych. Lugal-e (chapter 7) gave us the cosmic battle — Ninurta against Asag, the stone army, the damming of the primeval waters. Angim (chapter 8) gave us the dangerous homecoming — the warrior blazing with uncontained *me-lam*, the parents who soothe him back into the divine order. Now comes the punchline.

The story, as the fragments preserve it, goes as follows.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening section (lines 1–15) heavily damaged; the context for the theft of the Tablet of Destinies and Ninurta's recovery of it is largely lost. The Akkadian Anzud myth provides a parallel narrative of the tablet theft, but that text is out of scope and cannot be used to fill Sumerian gaps.]

The narrative presupposes that Anzud — the divine lion-headed eagle — has stolen from the *abzu*, the underground freshwater ocean beneath Eridu that serves as Enki's domain.^[7] What Anzud stole was the Tablet of Destinies — the tablet that confers supreme cosmic authority on its possessor. The opening lines that would have set this scene are largely destroyed, and we must reconstruct the premise from what the surviving text assumes rather than states.

Ninurta — warrior god, son of Enlil, champion of the gods — defeats Anzud and recovers the stolen Tablet of Destinies, an act of heroic service to the divine order.^[8] This much is clear from the fragments. The hero has done what heroes do. He has fought the thief, destroyed the threat, and reclaimed the object of power. In Lugal-e he slew the demon Asag and his stone army. In Angim he came home still burning with battle-fury. Here, in a shorter and less well-preserved composition, he has defeated Anzud and recovered the most potent artefact in the Sumerian theological system. The pattern is clear: Ninurta fights, Ninurta wins. What varies is what happens next.

After recovering the Tablet of Destinies, Ninurta apparently seeks to keep its power for himself rather than returning it to the proper divine authority.^[9] The warrior who performed a heroic deed now overreaches by claiming the supreme cosmic prerogative for himself.

(Ninurta's attempt to retain the Tablet of Destinies constitutes the hubristic act that the narrative punishes — the warrior who performed a heroic deed now overreaches by claiming the supreme cosmic prerogative for himself.^[10])

And here is where the composition diverges from everything we have read about Ninurta so far. In Lugal-e, the warrior channelled his post-battle energy into engineering — he dammed the waters, decreed the stone-fates, built a mountain for his mother. In Angim, his parents' combined authority and warmth soothed his unchecked fury, and he submitted, eventually, to the institutional order of the E-kur. In both texts, the pattern resolved in Ninurta's favour: the warrior was powerful, the warrior was dangerous, but the warrior ultimately served the cosmic order. This composition asks a different question. What if the warrior decides that the cosmic order should serve him?

Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu — perceives that Ninurta's possession of the Tablet of Destinies threatens the cosmic balance, and devises a stratagem to humble the warrior.^[11] The tablet belongs to the *abzu*. Ninurta recovered it from Anzud, but recovery is not ownership. The hero performed a service. He was not granted a permanent commission. Enki, whose domain the tablet was stolen from, now watches as his rescuer becomes a new kind of threat — not the brute chaos of Anzud but the far more dangerous ambition of a legitimate divine warrior who has decided that holding the tablet makes him supreme.

Enki's response is not force. Enki does not raise an army, does not summon the divine assembly, does not appeal to Enlil. He does something far more characteristic: he builds a trap.

Enki creates a turtle — a creature fashioned by divine craft — and sets it as a trap for Ninurta.^[12]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Middle section (lines 50–80) fragmentary; details of the turtle's creation by Enki and the precise mechanism of the trap are partially lost. No other Sumerian witness fills these gaps.]

The details of the turtle's creation are partially lost in the damaged middle section, but the outcome survives with enough clarity to reconstruct the essential action. The turtle seizes Ninurta — by the feet or legs, according to the surviving text — and drags him into a pit Enki has dug.^[13] The image is deliberately absurd. Consider the contrast. In Lugal-e, Ninurta fought a primordial demon of cosmic parentage, born of heaven and earth, whose *me-lam* boiled the fish in the rivers and whose stone army marched against civilisation itself. The battle shook the foundations of the world. Mountains trembled. The sky went dark. And now this same warrior, this slayer of Asag, this conqueror of the *kur*, is seized by a turtle and dragged into a hole.

Ninurta, the mighty warrior who defeated Anzud and (in Lugal-e) slew the demon Asag, is now trapped in a pit by a turtle — a deliberately comic reversal of his martial prowess.^[14] The comedy is not accidental. It is the point.

Trapped in the pit, Ninurta cannot free himself; the warrior god who conquered the *kur* is now helpless in a hole dug by the trickster god.^[15] The disproportion is the joke. The most powerful combatant in the Sumerian pantheon, the god who exists to destroy threats through overwhelming

force, has been neutralised by a reptile and a ditch. His mace Sharur, which flew between the battlefield and Nippur carrying intelligence during the Asag campaign, is useless against a pit. His *me-lam*, which made the gods themselves cower during his homecoming in Angim, does not impress a turtle. Everything that made him formidable in the heroic narratives is irrelevant here, because Enki has chosen a method of defeat that bypasses every attribute of the warrior class. Force cannot solve a turtle. Rage cannot climb a pit.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Conclusion (lines 100–end) is damaged; the final resolution or judgment is unclear — whether Ninurta is eventually released, whether the Tablet is returned to its proper custodian, and what moral the text draws are all uncertain. No Sumerian source fills these gaps; the ending remains unresolved in the surviving record.]

Enki likely addresses Ninurta in the pit with a speech rebuking his arrogance, based on the pattern of trickster-teaches-warrior narratives and the fragmentary traces of a divine speech in the late section.^[16]

Whether Ninurta is eventually released, whether the Tablet of Destinies is restored to its proper custodian in the *abzu*, what moral the text explicitly draws — these questions cannot be answered from the surviving fragments. The conclusion is too badly damaged. Traces of a divine speech in the late section suggest Enki may have addressed the trapped warrior with a rebuke, but confidence in this reconstruction is low, and the words themselves are lost. The clay has broken where the lesson would have been spoken.

The composition works as a comic or satirical counterpoint to the heroic Ninurta narratives (Lugal-e and Angim), deliberately deflating martial pride through trickster cleverness.^[17] The text is didactic in function: it punishes hubris by showing that Ninurta's arrogance after recovering the Tablet of Destinies is checked by Enki's superior cunning — wisdom defeats brute force.^[18]

Together with Lugal-e and Angim, this composition forms a Ninurta triptych: cosmic battle, triumphant return, and comic deflation — a range of registers that suggests the Sumerian scribes could treat heroism with both exaltation and mockery.^[19] The progression is worth noting. In Lugal-e, Ninurta is the saviour of the cosmos. In Angim, he is a threat to the cosmos who must be pacified by his parents. In this text, he is the butt of a joke. The same figure, the same divine warrior, the same mace-wielding champion — and the scribal tradition presents him in all three modes without apparent contradiction. The Sumerians, it seems, did not require their gods to keep a single register. A god could be terrifying in one composition and ridiculous in the next, and both portraits could be true at once. This is not inconsistency. It is range.

The principle at work is older than the tablets. Every culture that celebrates martial virtue eventually discovers the need to satirise it. The warrior who can destroy any enemy is also the warrior who can be undone by his own pride, and the laughter that follows his fall serves a theological function as real as the awe that accompanied his triumph. The Sumerians built both responses into the same literary cycle, and the fact that "Ninurta and the Turtle" survives at all — fragmentary, marginal, copied far less often than its grander companions — tells us that someone, somewhere in the scribal tradition, thought the punchline was worth preserving.

[1] ETCSL 1.6.3, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.6.3, composite text.

[3] ETCSL 1.6.3, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–201.

[4] ETCSL composite text.

[5] An alternate tradition gives: "Kramer 1961 pp. 82–83 provides an early summary that fills narrative gaps with interpretive inference going beyond what is preserved in the Sumerian text". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL preserves the actual text; Kramer used cautiously for context, with his interpretive additions flagged.

[6] Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–201.

[7] ETCSL 1.6.3, lines 1–15 (fragmentary); Kramer 1961, pp. 82–83.

[8] ETCSL 1.6.3 (narrative premise recoverable from surviving lines); Kramer 1961, pp. 82–83.

[9] ETCSL 1.6.3 (mid-section, surviving lines); Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–200.

[10] Inference: The surviving text and scholarly summaries consistently describe Ninurta's ambition as the trigger for Enki's countermeasure; Black et al. 2004 p. 199 frames this as hubris-punishment. Risk: The fragmentary state of the text means that the precise nature and extent of Ninurta's overreach cannot be confirmed from the Sumerian alone.

[11] ETCSL 1.6.3 (mid-section); Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–200.

[12] ETCSL 1.6.3 (mid-section, surviving lines); Black et al. 2004, p. 200.

[13] ETCSL 1.6.3 (surviving lines in mid-to-late section); Black et al. 2004, p. 200.

[14] Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–201.

[15] ETCSL 1.6.3 (late section, surviving lines); Black et al. 2004, pp. 200–201.

[16] This passage reconstructs the lacuna at ETCSL 1.6.3, late section from the parallel account in narrative pattern consistent with other Enki-as-trickster episodes in the Sumerian corpus; confidence: low.

[17] Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–201; ETCSL 1.6.3.

[18] ETCSL 1.6.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–201.

[19] Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–201 (contextual placement within the Ninurta cycle).

Chapter 11. Inanna and Enki: The Theft of the ME

The composition known as "Inanna and Enki" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.3.1 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets primarily from Nippur.^[1] The text is classified as single-prevalent-reconstructed: the ETCSL composite is the standard scholarly reconstruction, but significant gaps remain in the *me* catalogues across all known witnesses.^[2] The narrative framework is otherwise clear.^[3] Scribes in Old Babylonian schools copied the composition widely, confirming its place in the standard *edubba* curriculum and its importance to Sumerian intellectual tradition.^[4] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–70.^[5]

The narrative concerns the transfer of the *me* — the divine powers or cultural norms underpinning all aspects of civilisation — from Eridu, Enki's cult centre, to Uruk (Sumerian: Unug), the city of Inanna.^[6] The theological subtext reflects an Eridu-to-Uruk transfer of cultural and religious centrality, mapping a historical shift in political and sacral prestige.^[7]

To grasp what is at stake in this transfer, one must grasp what the *me* are. The *me* form a comprehensive taxonomy of Sumerian civilisation: kingship, priesthood, truth, descent to the underworld, crafts, musical instruments, and dozens more domains, each governed by a specific *me*.^[8] They are not merely divine possessions. As Kramer's extensive analysis shows, the *me* are the cosmic blueprints that make civilisation possible.^[9] Everything from the throne of kingship to the art of lamentation has its own *me*.^[10] Without them, a city is just a settlement. With them, it is the centre of the world.

The story, then, is about who holds the blueprints. And it begins with a journey.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening lines 1–20 partially damaged; Inanna's initial preparations for the journey to Eridu are fragmentary. Other manuscripts preserve portions of the opening.]

Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — resolves to travel from Uruk, the great walled city of southern Mesopotamia (Sumerian: Unug), to Eridu. Eridu is the oldest city in Sumerian tradition and the seat of Enki's temple, the E-abzu. It is the dwelling place of Enki, god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath the city.^[11] The opening lines that would have described her preparations are partially damaged, but the trajectory is unmistakable. She is going south, to the oldest city, to the god who holds the *me* in his underground domain.

The journey itself is not the point. What matters is where she is going and why. Eridu is not merely another city. It is where the *me* reside — the complete inventory of civilisational powers, stored in the *abzu*, the underground freshwater ocean beneath Eridu, Enki's domain. Inanna's Uruk is a great city, powerful in its own right, but it lacks what Eridu holds: the divine authorisation for everything. And Inanna, whose character throughout the Sumerian literary corpus is defined by acquiring power through cunning and personal daring rather than through the established divine hierarchy, has decided to acquire it.^[12]

Inanna arrives at Eridu and presents herself at the *abzu*, Enki's temple-residence.^[13] She does not come as an invader. She does not come with an army. She comes as a guest.

Enki instructs his minister Isimud to welcome Inanna, and a banquet is prepared.^[14] The hospitality is genuine. Enki is the god of wisdom, and wisdom does not require rudeness. A guest has arrived at his house, and a guest must be fed and served. Nothing in the surviving text suggests that Enki suspects what Inanna intends — if, indeed, she has a plan at all at this stage. The text does not tell us whether her scheme is premeditated or opportunistic. It tells us only what happens next.

Enki and Inanna drink beer together; as Enki grows increasingly intoxicated, he offers the *me* to Inanna in a series of gift-giving speeches.^[15] This is the hinge of the entire composition, and it deserves close attention. The god of wisdom — the cleverest mind in the Sumerian pantheon, the architect of solutions to problems that stump even the divine assembly — gets drunk and gives away the foundations of civilisation. The irony is structural and, one suspects, deliberate. Enki's defining attribute is his intelligence. His defining vulnerability, in this text, is beer.

The *me* appear in lengthy catalogue sections listing roughly one hundred divine powers; these catalogues recur multiple times as Enki offers them and Inanna accepts.^[16]

*[At this point the tablet breaks. The lengthy catalogues of _me are fragmentary in multiple places; individual me names are broken or illegible across several passages. Partial overlapping manuscripts restore some items but the full list of approximately one hundred me cannot be completely reconstructed.]_*

Among the securely readable *me* offered by Enki are: the office of en-priesthood, the office of lagar-priesthood, godship, the exalted and enduring crown, the throne of kingship, the noble sceptre, truth, descent to the *kur*, the art of lovemaking, the kissing of the phallus, the art of prostitution, the art of forthright speech, the art of slanderous speech, the art of the elder, heroship, power, enmity, straightforwardness, the destruction of cities, lamentation, rejoicing, deceit, the craft of the metalworker, the craft of the leatherworker, the craft of the builder, the craft of the basketmaker, wisdom, attentiveness, holy purification rites, the kindling of fire, the shepherd's hut, fear, terror, dismay, and the troubled heart.^[17]

*(The approximately one hundred _me collectively constitute a Sumerian map of the total inventory of civilisation and its institutions, encompassing crafts, religious offices, emotions, sexual practices, social virtues and vices, and political powers.^[18])_*

The list repays examination. It is not a catalogue of virtues. It is a catalogue of everything. Kingship sits beside the art of prostitution. Truth sits beside deceit. Lamentation sits beside rejoicing. The destruction of cities is a *me* — a necessary function of civilisation, not an aberration from it. Fear, terror, and dismay are not failures of the cosmic order; they are components of it. When the Sumerians sat down to enumerate the elements that compose a functioning world, they included everything humans do and feel and build and destroy, without flinching and without moralising. This is not a list of what civilisation should be. It is a list of what civilisation is.

Inanna accepts each group of *me* with formulaic acceptance speeches.^[19] The repetition belongs to the text's literary architecture. Each offer and each acceptance is a transaction — a formal transfer of authority. Enki speaks, Inanna accepts, the *me* change hands. The process has the rhythm of a legal proceeding, which is precisely what it is. In Sumerian legal and literary convention, a gift freely offered and formally accepted is binding. Even if the giver was drunk.

Having accepted all the *me*, Inanna loads them onto her boat, the Boat of Heaven (Ma-anna), and departs Eridu for Uruk.^[20] She does not linger. She does not wait for Enki to sober up and reconsider. She loads the cargo and sails. The Boat of Heaven — a vessel grand enough to carry the entire inventory of civilisation — heads north along the waterways, away from the oldest city in the world and toward the city that intends to replace it at the centre of things.

Enki sobers up and realises that the *me* are gone from the *abzu*.^[21] One can imagine the moment. The god of wisdom, patron of clarity and cunning, opens his eyes in his own temple and discovers that he has given away the foundations of his authority while drinking beer with a guest. The *abzu* is empty of its most precious contents. The cosmic blueprints for civilisation are on a boat, sailing away.

Enki asks his minister Isimud what has become of the *me* he gave to Inanna, and Isimud confirms that Enki granted them freely while drinking.^[22] This exchange is crucial. Enki does not deny what he did. He cannot. He has a witness — his own minister, who watched the entire transaction. The *me* were not stolen. They were given. The title of this chapter calls it a theft, following conventional usage, but the text itself is more precise. What happened at the banquet was a gift, made voluntarily by a god too drunk to understand the consequences. The ambiguity between gift and theft is the moral centre of the composition.

But Enki is not the god of wisdom for nothing. He may have made a catastrophic error, but he will not accept its consequences without a fight.

Enki dispatches Isimud and a series of sea monsters and creatures to intercept Inanna's boat and recover the *me* at various stopping points along the waterway between Eridu and Uruk.^[23] The pursuit unfolds in a repeated formulaic pattern: at each stopping point, Isimud and his accompanying creatures confront Inanna and demand the return of the *me*.^[24]

At each encounter, Inanna's minister Ninshubur — her faithful handmaiden and *sukkal* — repels the attackers, and Inanna sails on with the *me* intact.^[25] Ninshubur is one of the most reliable figures in Sumerian literature. Wherever Inanna goes, whatever trouble she courts, Ninshubur is there — loyal, competent, and apparently unbeatable. In the Descent of Inanna (chapter 14), Ninshubur will raise the alarm when her mistress fails to return from the underworld. Here, she serves as the military arm of Inanna's expedition, turning back each wave of attackers Enki sends.

Enki's attempts to recover the *me* repeat at multiple stopping points along the journey, each one failing.^[26] The repetition serves a literary and theological purpose. Each failed interception reinforces the irreversibility of what has happened. Enki cannot take back what he gave. His sea monsters cannot defeat Ninshubur. His minister cannot persuade Inanna to return the cargo. The god of wisdom, who in other compositions solves every problem through cleverness and indirection, has met a problem cleverness cannot solve: a legally valid gift, freely given, to a recipient who has no intention of giving it back.

Inanna arrives safely at the quay of Uruk with the Boat of Heaven bearing the *me*.^[27] The *me* are unloaded and installed in the E-ana, the "House of Heaven," Inanna's great temple in Uruk.^[28]

The text catalogues the *me* once more as they are received in Uruk, confirming that the full set of civilisational powers has been transferred.^[29] The repetition of the catalogue at the destination is not padding. It is verification. The same inventory offered in Eridu is now confirmed as present in Uruk. Nothing has been lost in transit. Nothing has been held back. Every *me* that Enki offered and Inanna accepted — every office, every craft, every emotion, every virtue, and every vice — is now installed in the E-ana. Uruk has acquired the complete inventory of civilisation.

Uruk rejoices at the arrival of the *me*; Enki, having failed to retrieve them, accepts the new reality and establishes good relations with Uruk.^[30]

*(Enki's acceptance of the transfer, without further conflict, suggests the text functions as an aetiology legitimating Uruk's possession of the _me— a theological charter rather than a narrative of permanent enmity between the cities.^[31])_*

This ending matters. Enki does not persist in hostility. He does not declare war on Uruk or curse Inanna or plot a long-term revenge. He accepts. The *me* are in Uruk now, and the world adjusts. The reconciliation transforms the entire narrative from a story about theft into a story about succession — an ordained transfer of primacy from the oldest city to the ascendant one, awkward and contested along the way but accepted in the outcome. Eridu remains sacred. Eridu remains ancient. But the *me* are no longer there.

The composition provides an aetiology for the presence of the *me* in Uruk's E-ana temple and legitimates Uruk's claim to cultural supremacy over Eridu.^[32] This is what the text is for. It explains why Uruk — not Eridu, not Nippur, not any other city — holds the blueprints of civilisation. It does so not through a simple decree or a genealogy of divine favour but through a story about beer, cunning, a boat, sea monsters, and a goddess who took what was offered and refused to give it back. The aetiology sits embedded in narrative, and the narrative is lively enough to survive four thousand years of copying.

Jacobsen reads the composition in the context of Inanna's broader character as one who acquires power through cunning and personal daring rather than through the established divine hierarchy.^[33] The observation captures something essential. In the previous chapters of this book, we have seen gods who operate within the system — Enki solving problems for the divine assembly, Enlil exercising established authority, Ninurta fighting on behalf of the cosmic order. Inanna does not operate within the system. She goes to the system's custodian, gets him drunk, takes what she wants, and sails home. The *me* were not assigned to Uruk by divine council. They were not earned through cosmic battle. They were acquired through audacity and beer, and the acquisition held because a gift is a gift, even when the giver regrets it.

The pattern has parallels that cross both oceans and millennia. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and brought it to humanity — a culture hero's transgressive theft that establishes civilisation. In Polynesian tradition, Maui stole fire from the underworld, a trickster figure acquiring civilisational knowledge through cunning and daring. The structural resemblance is clear: in each case, the essential technologies or powers of civilisation are not created by their recipients but taken from a prior custodian, and the taking is presented as necessary, admirable, or at least irreversible. The Sumerian version is distinctive in one respect: the custodian is neither destroyed nor permanently diminished. Enki survives, accepts, and makes peace. The transfer of the *me* is a succession, not a

revolution. The old order yields to the new, and both continue to exist. In this, the Sumerians may have been more realistic than the Greeks. Revolutions are dramatic, but successions are how power usually changes hands — not through fire and punishment but through a transaction that cannot be undone, followed by an adjustment everyone learns to live with.

- [1] ETCSL 1.3.1, bibliography.
- [2] ETCSL 1.3.1, manuscript list and apparatus.
- [3] ETCSL 1.3.1, composite text.
- [4] ETCSL 1.3.1, manuscript list; Kramer 1961, pp. 64–68.
- [5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–70.
- [6] Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–64 (introduction).
- [7] Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–64 (introduction).
- [8] Kramer 1961, pp. 64–68.
- [9] Kramer 1961, pp. 64–68.
- [10] Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–64 (introduction).
- [11] ETCSL 1.3.1, opening sections; Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–64.
- [12] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 112–113.
- [13] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 64.
- [14] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 64.
- [15] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 64–66.
- [16] ETCSL 1.3.1, catalogue sections; Kramer 1961, pp. 64–68.
- [17] ETCSL 1.3.1, *me* catalogues (securely readable items); Kramer 1961, pp. 64–68.
- [18] Inference: The catalogues include items from all these domains. Risk: The exact number and sequence of items remain uncertain due to lacunae.
- [19] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 64–66.
- [20] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 66.
- [21] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 67.
- [22] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 67.
- [23] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 67–68.
- [24] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 67–69.
- [25] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 67–69.
- [26] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 67–69.
- [27] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 69–70.
- [28] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 69–70.
- [29] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 70.
- [30] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 70.
- [31] Inference: The text ends with reconciliation, not ongoing conflict. Risk: The damaged state of the ending means this reconciliation may be less emphatic than the reconstruction implies.
- [32] Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–64 (introduction).
- [33] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 112–113.

Chapter 12. Inanna and Ebih: The Destruction of the Mountain

The composition known as "Inanna and Ebih" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.3.2 and survives on numerous Old Babylonian copies from multiple sites, which place it in the standard scribal curriculum.^[1] It is, in fact, exceptionally well-preserved—one of the most extensively attested Sumerian compositions in the surviving record.^[2] The numerous consistent Old Babylonian copies yield a stable composite text with minimal significant variation, and the text is classified as single-prevalent.^[3] That so many scribes copied it, across so many sites, tells us something about its recognised pedagogical and literary value within the *edubba* tradition.^[4] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–77.^[5]

The composition is a sustained exercise in divine martial rhetoric: a hymnic-narrative genre piece that showcases Inanna's self-praising speeches and sublime destructive imagery.^[6] The previous chapter dealt with cunning—with a goddess who acquired the foundations of civilisation through beer and audacity, loading the *me* onto a boat while their custodian slept off a hangover. This chapter deals with force. Pure, uncompromising, annihilating force, applied by a goddess who has decided that a mountain will bow, and who will hear no counsel to the contrary.

The rhetorical structure of the text escalates deliberately: a hymnic opening establishing Inanna's power, the mountain's defiance, An's futile warning, and overwhelming destruction, all framed by matching hymnic passages.^[7] The architecture is not subtle. It is not meant to be. The text is a war machine, and it builds momentum exactly the way a war machine should—steadily, visibly, and with no intention of stopping.

The text opens with an extended hymnic passage praising Inanna's terrifying martial power and her *me-lam*—the terrifying divine radiance that emanates from gods, monsters, and sacred objects.^[8] This is Inanna—goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star—but in this composition the love is offstage and the war is everything. She declares her supremacy in battle: she is the goddess who overwhelms lands, who roars at the earth, who crushes those who do not show her proper reverence.^[9]

The self-praise is not modesty's opposite. It is something else entirely. In Sumerian literary convention, a god's declaration of power is at the same time a statement of cosmic fact. When Inanna announces that she overwhelms lands and crushes the irreverent, she is not boasting. She is describing how the universe operates. The hymnic opening calibrates—it tells us the magnitude of the force about to be deployed, so that when it arrives, we understand what we are seeing.

Mount Ebih—a great mountain in the eastern ranges, identified by scholars with the Jebel Hamrin—refuses to bow before Inanna and does not prostrate itself in reverence.^[10]

The offence requires explanation. In the Sumerian theological system, reverence is not optional. It is structural. The hierarchy of the cosmos holds together through acknowledgement—gods acknowledge greater gods, mountains acknowledge gods, lands acknowledge their divine patrons.

When a mountain does not bow, it is not merely being rude. It is asserting that the hierarchy does not apply to it. It is claiming autonomy from the cosmic order. And Inanna, who has just spent thirty lines declaring herself the overwhelming force of that order, is not the sort of deity who tolerates exceptions.

The text describes Ebih's luxuriant vegetation, its wild animals, and its general splendour; the mountain flourishes, self-sufficient, indifferent to Inanna's authority.^[11] This is not incidental detail. It is the reason the mountain can afford its defiance. Ebih is not a barren crag cowering at the edge of civilisation. It is magnificent — thick with forests, teeming with wildlife, glorious in its own right. Its refusal to submit is not the desperation of the weak but the confidence of the strong. It has everything it needs. It does not need Inanna's approval.

Ebih's refusal enrages Inanna, and she resolves to destroy the mountain.^[12] The decision is immediate and absolute. There is no negotiation, no embassy, no graduated escalation of diplomatic pressure. The mountain has refused to bow. The mountain will be destroyed. The logic is clean, and it is terrifying.

But Inanna does something unexpected before she strikes. She seeks authorisation — or, more precisely, the appearance of it.

Inanna travels to An — the sky god, father of the gods — to seek his support and sanction for her planned assault on Ebih.^[13] An is the highest authority in the divine hierarchy. His approval would make the assault a cosmic mandate rather than a personal vendetta. Inanna, whatever her reputation for impulsiveness, understands the difference.

An warns Inanna against attacking Ebih and counsels caution: the mountain is fearsome, and its power should not be underestimated.^[14] This is the father of the gods speaking. His word should carry the weight of the sky itself. In the normal order of divine affairs — the order that operates in the Enlil texts, in the Enki texts, in the proceedings of the divine assembly — a warning from An would settle the matter. The subordinate god would defer, the plan would be abandoned, and the cosmic hierarchy would assert its authority over individual ambition.

Inanna rejects An's warning outright; she declares she will attack Ebih regardless of his counsel.^[15]

(Inanna's defiance of An's counsel and her subsequent independent triumph demonstrate her supremacy even over the highest authority in the divine hierarchy.^[16])

The rejection is the theological crux of the composition. The sky god said no, and it did not matter. This is not how the Sumerian divine hierarchy is supposed to work, and the text knows it. The whole point of the An episode is to establish that Inanna operates outside the constraints that bind other gods. Enlil commands and is obeyed. Enki advises and is heeded. An warns and is ignored. The hierarchy is real, the hierarchy is acknowledged — and Inanna simply walks through it. She sought sanction, was refused, and will proceed regardless, because her power does not derive from the institutional structure of the pantheon. It derives from what she is.

Inanna unleashes her full martial fury against Mount Ebih, attacking with weapons of war and

cosmic power.^[17]

The destruction sequence escalates in detail: Inanna sends fire and flood against the mountain, devastating its forests and killing its wildlife.^[18] The escalation is relentless. This is not a surgical strike. It is not the application of measured force to a military objective. It is annihilation. Every element that made Ebih beautiful — the forests, the animals, the splendour that underwrote the mountain's confidence — is systematically consumed.

Inanna pours fire over the mountain's flanks; the vegetation withers and the animals flee or die.^[19] The flourishing landscape described earlier in the text — the luxuriant proof of Ebih's self-sufficiency — is now fuel. What made the mountain magnificent makes the destruction more spectacular. The text dwells on this. It wants us to see the forests burning. It wants us to see the animals dying. It wants us to understand that what is happening is not merely punishment but transformation: the mountain that was alive is being made dead, and the goddess doing it considers this an appropriate response to insufficient reverence.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Minor gaps in lines 140–155 affecting the description of Inanna's assault on the mountain; some details of the destruction sequence are broken. The numerous manuscript copies allow near-complete restoration; only isolated words remain uncertain.]

The mountain Ebih is utterly destroyed; it lies devastated and submissive before Inanna's power.^[20] The word "submissive" is worth noting. The mountain now bows. The mountain now prostrates itself. The mountain now does what it refused to do when the cost was merely pride. The defiance has been answered, and the answer is total. Ebih did not wish to acknowledge Inanna's supremacy. Ebih now has no choice. Nothing remains of its former splendour to sustain resistance. The forests are ash. The wildlife is gone. The magnificent self-sufficiency that let the mountain stand apart from the cosmic order has been stripped away, and what remains is obedience — enforced, absolute, and permanent.

Inanna declares victory over Ebih, celebrating her triumph in a self-praising speech that mirrors the opening hymnic section.^[21] The symmetry is deliberate. The composition opened with Inanna declaring her power in the abstract. It closes with Inanna declaring her power in the concrete. The same voice, the same register, the same *me-lam* — but now the declarations are not predictions. They are history. She said she would overwhelm. She overwhelmed. She said she would crush the irreverent. The irreverent is crushed. The closing hymn validates the opening hymn, and the intervening narrative is the proof.

The text closes with a hymnic frame celebrating Inanna's irresistible destructive power: no force in heaven or earth can withstand her once she has resolved to act.^[22] This is the final statement, and it carries the weight of demonstration rather than mere assertion. We have watched the demonstration. We have seen the mountain burn. The closing frame does not ask us to take Inanna's supremacy on faith. It asks us to acknowledge what we have just witnessed.

The composition shows Inanna acting independently of the divine hierarchy: she defies An's warning, attacks alone, and triumphs, asserting her rank among the gods through deeds rather than permission.^[23] This is the theological contribution of the text, and it is distinctive. In the Enlil

compositions, authority descends through the hierarchy: Enlil decrees, the gods obey, the world conforms. In the Enki compositions, the god of wisdom works within the system — advising, persuading, solving problems through cleverness while respecting institutional structures. Inanna does neither. She informs the hierarchy of her intentions, is told to desist, and proceeds. Her authority is self-generated. Her mandate is her own power. She does not need An's permission, and she proves it by not having it.

The motif of Inanna as irresistible destroyer echoes through royal hymns and inscriptions invoking her patronage in warfare.^[24] This is not merely literary. The kings of Sumer claimed Inanna's favour in war, and when they did, the image they invoked was precisely this one — the goddess who burns mountains, who reduces landscapes to ash, who answers defiance with annihilation. The text is, among other things, a template for royal propaganda. If your city's patron goddess can do this to a mountain, imagine what she can do to your enemies.

Kramer identifies the text as key evidence for understanding Inanna's martial aspect, which exists alongside her roles as goddess of love and political power.^[25] The coexistence is important. The modern reader might assume that a goddess of love and a goddess of war are contradictions — that tenderness and annihilation require different personalities. The Sumerians evidently disagreed. The same Inanna who will descend to the underworld out of something that might be curiosity, ambition, or grief (chapter 14), who adores her shepherd-husband Dumuzid and weeps when he is taken from her (chapter 15), who navigates the complex politics of the *me* with charm and guile (chapter 10) — this same Inanna pours fire on a mountain because it did not bow. These are not different goddesses. They are different aspects of the same divine personality, and the Sumerian scribes who copied this text alongside the love songs and descent narratives saw no contradiction in it.

Jacobsen briefly discusses the composition in the context of Inanna's martial character, noting the "deity vs. mountain" topos as a significant pattern in Sumerian literary tradition.^[26] The pattern extends beyond this single text. When a Sumerian deity confronts a landscape feature — a mountain, a hostile terrain, a geographical obstacle — the confrontation is always theological. The landscape is never merely landscape. It stands for a domain that has not yet submitted to the divine order, and the deity's destruction of it is an act of cosmic incorporation. What was outside the system is brought inside, forcibly, and what was wild is made subject.

Parallel patterns in other traditions are worth noting briefly. In Ugaritic mythology, the storm-god Baal wages war against mountains and landscape features in episodes that echo this same deity-versus-landscape structure, though the specific theological contexts differ substantially.^[27] In the Greek tradition, Athena — the goddess who defies patriarchal counsel and triumphs through her own power and judgment — shows a martial independence that offers a structural parallel to Inanna's rejection of An's authority, though again the cultural frameworks diverge.^[28] The "deity vs. landscape" motif parallels Norse Thor's battles with giants of mountain and frost, and Hindu Indra's shattering of Vritra the mountain-serpent. The resemblances are structural rather than genealogical, but they suggest that the image of a god destroying a mountain — the irresistible force meeting the immovable object, and the immovable object losing — is one that human civilisations discover independently, because it answers a question every theology must eventually address: what happens when the established order encounters something that refuses to acknowledge it?

The Sumerian answer, in this text, is unambiguous. What happens is fire.

- [1] ETCSL 1.3.2, bibliography.
- [2] ETCSL 1.3.2, composite text.
- [3] ETCSL 1.3.2, manuscript list.
- [4] ETCSL 1.3.2, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 71 (introduction).
- [5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–77.
- [6] Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–72 (introduction).
- [7] Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–72 (introduction).
- [8] ETCSL 1.3.2, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, p. 71.
- [9] ETCSL 1.3.2, opening hymnic section; Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–72.
- [10] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004, p. 72.
- [11] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004, pp. 72–73.
- [12] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004, p. 73.
- [13] ETCSL 1.3.2, lines approx. 50–75; Black et al. 2004, pp. 73–74.
- [14] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004, p. 74.
- [15] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004, p. 74.
- [16] Inference: She acts alone and succeeds despite the sky god’s explicit warning. Risk: Some scholars read An’s warning as formulaic rather than a genuine power-contest between the two deities.
- [17] ETCSL 1.3.2, lines approx. 100–155; Black et al. 2004, pp. 74–76.
- [18] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004, pp. 75–76.
- [19] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004, p. 76.
- [20] ETCSL 1.3.2; Black et al. 2004, pp. 76–77.
- [21] ETCSL 1.3.2, closing section; Black et al. 2004, p. 77.
- [22] ETCSL 1.3.2, closing lines; Black et al. 2004, p. 77.
- [23] ETCSL 1.3.2, lines 50–75; Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–72 (introduction).
- [24] ETCSL 1.3.2; Kramer 1961, pp. 83–85.
- [25] Kramer 1961, pp. 83–85.
- [26] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 112–114.
- [27] Cf. Jacobsen 1987, pp. 112–114.
- [28] Cf. Kramer 1961, pp. 83–85.

Chapter 13. Inanna and Shu-kale-tuda: The Gardener's Crime

The composition known as "Inanna and Shu-kale-tuda" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.3.3 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur.^[1] The text breaks badly in places, especially in the descriptions of the three plagues that drive the central action.^[2] The ETCSL composite is the only standard reconstruction, but every witness leaves the plague descriptions full of gaps, classifying the text as single-prevalent-reconstructed.^[3] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 78—84.^[4]

The composition fuses sexual violence, divine pursuit, and cosmic justice into a distinctive narrative shape: crime, three escalating plagues, judgment.^[5] The previous chapter showed Inanna as the irresistible destroyer — the goddess who burned a mountain because it would not bow. This chapter shows something different: Inanna as the relentless pursuer. She is not wielding force against a defiant landscape. She is hunting a man who wronged her, and the entire land will suffer until she finds him.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening lines 1—15 are damaged; the initial context for the gardener's circumstances is partially lost. Some manuscripts preserve fragments of the opening.]

Shu-kale-tuda is a mortal gardener who tends a garden but struggles: his garden fails repeatedly and his crops wither.^[6] The opening, though damaged, sketches a portrait of futility. Here is a man whose single task is to make things grow, and he cannot do it. The earth refuses him. His plants die. His labour produces nothing. In a civilisation built on irrigation agriculture, where the canal and the furrow stood between survival and starvation, a gardener whose garden will not flourish is a man at the edge of existence.

Shu-kale-tuda looks to the stars for guidance and plants a tree — possibly a poplar or Euphrates poplar — that provides shade and finally allows his garden to flourish.^[7] The detail is worth noting. He looks upward, to the heavens, and finds the knowledge he needs. He plants a shade-tree, and under its canopy his garden recovers. For the first and last time in the narrative, Shu-kale-tuda does something right. The garden grows. The shade holds. The mortal who could not make anything live has, by reading the stars, discovered how to cultivate. It is the single achievement of his life, and it will make possible the single act for which he will be remembered.

Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — wearied from traversing heaven and earth, lies down to rest in the shade of the garden.^[8] The image is striking in its vulnerability. The goddess who burned Mount Ebih, who overwhelmed kingdoms, who declared her supremacy over the sky god himself, is tired. She sleeps. In the shade of a mortal gardener's tree, the most dangerous deity in the Sumerian pantheon closes her eyes and trusts the world to behave itself while she rests.

Shu-kale-tuda discovers the sleeping goddess and rapes her.^[9]

The text states the act without elaboration, and we will follow the text. There is nothing to explain

and nothing to mitigate. A mortal found a sleeping goddess and violated her. The Sumerian scribes who recorded the composition did not soften the crime, and neither should we. What matters to the narrative is not the psychology of the act but its consequences, and those consequences will consume the rest of the composition.

When dawn comes, Inanna awakes, discovers the violation of her body, and is filled with rage; she resolves to find and punish the one who committed the act.^[10] The awakening is the hinge of the story. Everything before it was prologue—a failing garden, a shade-tree, a sleeping goddess. Everything after it is pursuit. Inanna does not weep. She does not appeal to the divine assembly. She does not seek counsel from Enlil or arbitration from An. Alone and at once, she decides that the guilty will be found and the guilty will be punished. The decision is absolute, and it will not waver across three plagues and the suffering of an entire civilisation.

Inanna searches the land for the perpetrator but cannot identify or find him; Shu-kale-tuda hides among the human population.^[11] This is the operational problem that drives the rest of the narrative. Inanna knows what was done to her. She does not know who did it. Shu-kale-tuda is a mortal, one man among millions, and he has done the only intelligent thing available to him: he has disappeared into the crowd. A goddess who can shatter mountains cannot, apparently, pick one guilty human out of the mass of the innocent. The sheer scale of humanity hides the perpetrator, and how Inanna answers that problem will define the theological logic of the composition.

Inanna sends the first plague upon the land to force the revelation of the guilty man.^[12] If she cannot find the criminal by searching, she will make the world unendurable until the criminal is exposed. The logic is simple and terrible: punish everyone until someone produces the guilty one. The land did not commit the crime. The land will pay for it. This is not justice by any standard a modern reader would recognise. It is compulsion—divine compulsion, applied to the collective because the individual cannot be reached.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Significant portions of the three plague descriptions are broken; the specific nature and effects of the first and second plagues are only partially recoverable. The Nippur tablets do not offer sufficient overlap to fully restore these passages. Black et al. mark the plague sections as heavily fragmentary and offer only cautious partial translation.]

The first plague involves the corruption of water.^[13]

The first plague strikes the wells or water supply of the land: Inanna fills the wells of the Land with blood, or otherwise fouls them.^[14] The fragmentary text permits only cautious reconstruction, but the essential image survives: the water turns to blood, or something like blood. The wells that sustain every city, every field, every life in southern Mesopotamia become instruments of horror. In a land where fresh water was not merely important but sacred—where Enki, god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu, ruled over the underground freshwater ocean—to corrupt water is to attack the foundations of existence. The entire theological architecture of civilisation rested on the canal and the reservoir.

Shu-kale-tuda survives the first plague by following advice from his father—or from Enki—to hide among the cities of men.^[15] The counsel is pragmatic and effective. The plague falls on the land indiscriminately, but a man can survive what a land cannot, if he shelters in the right place. The cities are dense with people, and among people, one man is invisible. The strategy that protected

Shu-kale-tuda before the plagues protects him during them: anonymity. The guilty man hides not in a cave or a wilderness but in civilisation itself, using the very fabric of human society as camouflage.

Inanna sends a second plague upon the land, escalating her assault.^[16]

[At this point the tablet breaks. The nature of the second plague is largely lost in the broken text.]

The nature of the second plague is largely lost. The clay has broken precisely where we most need it to speak, and no reconstruction is available. We know the pattern — Inanna sends a plague, the land suffers, Shu-kale-tuda survives — but the specific shape of this second affliction is gone. The Nippur scribes copied it, generation after generation. Time erased it anyway.

Shu-kale-tuda again survives by hiding among the population of the cities.^[17] The same strategy, the same result. The plague falls, the land convulses, and the gardener crouches in the crowd. There is something grimly impressive in the consistency of his method. He has no divine patron strong enough to shield him. He has no weapon, no *me-lam*, no cosmic authority. He has only the capacity to be unremarkable, and he deploys it with the discipline of a survivor.

Inanna sends a third plague upon the land: this final affliction is described as affecting travel or blocking the roads.^[18]

The third plague involves the obstruction of roads or travel.^[19]

The escalation is notable. If the first plague attacked the water and the third attacked the roads, the pattern is one of systematic strangulation: first the sustenance, then the movement. A civilisation that cannot drink and cannot travel is a civilisation paralysed, cut off from every resource and every escape. Inanna is not merely punishing the land. She is closing it down, sealing every exit, eliminating every refuge, until the man she seeks has nowhere left to hide. The text shows that crimes against the divine cannot be hidden: the entire land suffers for one man's transgression until the guilty individual is exposed.^[20]

Shu-kale-tuda goes to the god Enki and seeks his counsel on how to escape Inanna's wrath.^[21] This is the critical turn. The gardener who has survived three plagues through cunning anonymity now seeks a more permanent solution. He goes to Enki — the god whose domain is wisdom, whose method is stratagem, whose interventions in other narratives have diverted the course of divine anger and rearranged the outcomes of cosmic conflicts. If anyone in the Sumerian pantheon can devise a way to evade the wrath of Inanna, it is Enki.

Despite Enki's counsel, Inanna ultimately locates Shu-kale-tuda; Enki's wisdom cannot ultimately protect the guilty from divine justice.^[22] The failure matters theologically. In "Inanna and Enki" (chapter 10), Enki's stratagems failed to keep Inanna from carrying off the *me* — the divine powers and cultural blueprints that govern civilisation. Here, his counsel fails again. The god of wisdom can delay divine retribution; he cannot prevent it. Inanna's pursuit is not a problem cleverness can solve, because it is not a puzzle. It is an absolute. The goddess was violated, and the violator will be found. No amount of cunning changes the terms of that equation.

Inanna finds Shu-kale-tuda and brings him to judgment; she pronounces sentence upon him.^[23] The hunt is over. Three plagues, three survivals, one appeal to the wisest god in the pantheon—and none of it was enough. Inanna has done what she resolved to do at dawn on the morning after the crime: she has found the guilty man. The scene of judgment is not a trial. There is no defence, no deliberation, no assembly of gods weighing evidence. There is a goddess and the man who raped her, and she pronounces what she has carried across the entire narrative.

Shu-kale-tuda is condemned to death by Inanna.^[24] The sentence is final. No god intercedes. No divine mechanism of mercy activates. Shu-kale-tuda dies because Inanna wills it, and what Inanna wills in matters of vengeance is not subject to appeal.

The composition concludes with a paradox: although Shu-kale-tuda is destroyed, his name will be remembered and his story will be told—his infamy is preserved by the very narrative that condemns him.^[25]

(The paradox of the ending—the criminal is condemned but his name is eternally preserved—functions as a literary reflection on the nature of narrative itself: the story that punishes also immortalises.^[26])

The ending deserves attention, because it is the most sophisticated moment in the composition. Shu-kale-tuda is dead. Inanna's justice has been fulfilled. The gardener who violated the sleeping goddess has paid with his life, and the cosmic order has reasserted itself. But the text does not stop there. It tells us that Shu-kale-tuda's name will endure—that his story will be told, that he will not be forgotten. The criminal achieves, through the narrative of his crime and punishment, the one thing his gardening could never give him: permanence. The story that condemns him also preserves him. The text that records his destruction is the instrument of his immortality. The Sumerian scribes who shaped this ending grasped something every literary tradition eventually discovers: that to tell a story about someone, even a story of condemnation, is to grant them a kind of life that outlasts the death the story narrates. We are reading about Shu-kale-tuda now, four thousand years after his sentence was pronounced, and his name has not been forgotten. The paradox holds.

The parallel patterns in other traditions are instructive. The Greek narrative of Artemis and Actaeon offers a structural echo: a mortal transgresses against the body of a goddess, and the goddess hunts and destroys him.^[27] The mechanism differs—Actaeon is transformed into a stag and torn apart by his own hounds, while Shu-kale-tuda is simply condemned—but the theological architecture is the same. A goddess's body is inviolable. Violation produces pursuit. Pursuit produces annihilation. The divine feminine, in both traditions, is not a passive victim but an active avenger, and the vengeance is total.

The pattern of escalating plagues sent upon a land as divine punishment and compulsion echoes through the Hebrew Bible, where afflictions fall upon Egypt until the enslaved people are released.^[28] The structural parallel is precise: the land suffers collectively for the actions of its ruler (or in this case, for the concealment of a criminal within its population), and the plagues escalate until the divine demand is met. The same theme—collective punishment until a hidden guilty

individual is revealed — appears in the Achan episode of Joshua 7, where Israel suffers military defeat because one man has stolen consecrated goods. It appears, too, in the opening of Homer's *Iliad*, where Apollo sends plague upon the Greek camp because Agamemnon refuses to return a priest's daughter. In each case, the logic is identical: the community harbours a transgressor, the divinity cannot or will not strike the individual directly, and the collective endures suffering until the guilty party is produced. It is a theology of shared accountability — the community is responsible for what it shelters — and the Sumerians articulated it as clearly as any tradition that followed.

The composition, for all its fragmentary state, is complete in its moral architecture. A man committed a crime against a goddess. The goddess searched for him. The land suffered. The guilty was found. The guilty was destroyed. And the story survived, carrying the criminal's name through millennia, proving its own final paradox with every reading.

[1] ETCSL 1.3.3, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.3.3, composite text.

[3] ETCSL 1.3.3, manuscript list.

[4] Black et al. 2004, pp. 78—84.

[5] Black et al. 2004, p. 78 (introduction).

[6] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 78—79.

[7] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 79.

[8] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 79.

[9] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 79—80.

[10] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 80.

[11] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 80.

[12] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 80—81.

[13] This passage reconstructs the lacuna at etcsL 1.3.3, plague section 1 from the parallel account in Fragmentary lines read by Black et al.; confidence: medium.

[14] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 80—81 (cautious partial translation).

[15] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 81.

[16] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 81.

[17] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 81—82.

[18] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 82.

[19] This passage reconstructs the lacuna at etcsL 1.3.3, plague section 3 from the parallel account in Partial lines in ETCSL composite; confidence: medium.

[20] ETCSL 1.3.3.

[21] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 82.

[22] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 82—83.

[23] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 83.

[24] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 83.

[25] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 83—84.

[26] Inference: The text explicitly states Shu-kale-tuda's name will not be forgotten. Risk: Some scholars may read this as a standard scribal colophon formula rather than deliberate literary irony.

[27] Cf. Kramer 1961, pp. 83—85.

[28] Cf. Black et al. 2004, p. 78.

Chapter 14. Inanna and Gudam

The composition known as "Inanna and Gudam" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.3.4 and survives on only a handful of tablets; CBS 13859 is a complete witness.^[1] The corpus as a whole is very fragmentary, even though CBS 13859 preserves a complete text.^[2] Few manuscript copies survive, and all are heavily damaged — pointing to either extremely limited circulation or catastrophic preservation failure; ETCSL reconstructs a composite from these minimal fragments.^[3] Black et al. offer only a brief summary rather than a full translation, given the extreme fragmentary state.^[4] This is the shortest and most damaged text in the Inanna cycle. It is the only known version, reconstructed from very limited fragments — a single-prevalent-reconstructed text, in the classification used throughout this book.^[5] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text.^[6]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening lines 1–20 heavily damaged; the origin and nature of Gudam are only partially described. Too few manuscripts survive to restore the opening.]

What can be recovered from the fragments is this. A fearsome creature called Gudam terrorises Uruk (Sumerian: Unug) — the great walled city of southern Mesopotamia, seat of Inanna's temple the E-ana — devouring the city's food and drink.^[7] Uruk is the city of Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — so a threat to the city is a threat to the goddess herself. The opening, which would have told us where Gudam came from and what kind of creature it was, is largely destroyed. We are left with a monster already on the rampage and no backstory to explain it.

[At this point the tablet breaks. The central narrative is substantially broken; details of Gudam's rampage and the confrontation between the monster and Inanna are largely lost. No parallel witnesses exist to fill these gaps.]

(The surviving fragments indicate a narrative structure in which a patron deity (Inanna) defends her city (Uruk) against a monstrous threat (Gudam) — a basic pattern of divine urban protection well attested in Mesopotamian literature.^[8])

The middle of the story — which presumably held the most dramatic material — is substantially broken. From what survives at either end we can infer that the basic narrative shape follows a pattern well attested in Mesopotamian literature: a patron deity defends her city against a monstrous threat. But how Inanna confronted the monster is lost.

What does survive is the resolution, and it springs a surprise. Inanna is not the one who strikes the decisive blow. A junior fisherman of hers cuts Gudam down with a double-axe.^[9] What follows is just as unexpected. Gudam, defeated, pleads with Inanna for mercy — and she grants it. Rather than destroy the creature, she sentences him to live near Zabalam, where he is to serve as a protector of her city Uruk.

By the standards of monster-slaying narrative anywhere, this is a remarkable outcome. The monster is not killed but rehabilitated, conscripted into the service of the very city he had been devouring. The predator becomes a guard dog. Whether the original text drew out this irony at greater length is impossible to say — the fragments do not allow it.

[At this point the tablet breaks. The conclusion is fragmentary; the resolution and any hymnic closing are mostly lost.]

Only the broadest narrative shape — monster threatens city, goddess defeats monster — can be recovered with confidence from the surviving fragments.^[10] That shape, however, is worth noting. A patron deity protecting a city by subduing a monstrous threat is one of the most widespread motifs in Near Eastern mythology, running through traditions from Marduk's defeat of Tiamat in Babylon onward.^[11] The Greek tradition offers its own parallels — Athena and the various monsters of the Athenian mythological landscape follow a structurally similar pattern.

What makes this particular version distinctive — to the extent that the fragments allow any judgement at all — is the mercy. In most versions of this pattern, the monster dies. Here he lives, pardoned and put to work. Whether that detail reflects a theological principle, a narrative taste, or simply the idiosyncrasy of one Sumerian scribe is a question the tablets, in their present condition, cannot answer.

[1] ETCSL 1.3.4, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.3.4, composite text.

[3] ETCSL 1.3.4, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 85 (brief summary reference).

[4] Black et al. 2004, p. 85.

[5] ETCSL 1.3.4.

[6] ETCSL composite text.

[7] ETCSL 1.3.4; Kramer 1961, pp. 83–85.

[8] Inference: The fragments name Inanna, Gudam, and Uruk, and the resolution involves Inanna's victory. Risk: The actual narrative may have been more complex than this basic pattern; the fragmentary state prevents certainty.

[9] ETCSL 1.3.4; Kramer 1961, pp. 83–85 (Inanna myths overview).

[10] ETCSL 1.3.4; Black et al. 2004, p. 85.

[11] Kramer 1961, pp. 83–85.

Chapter 15. Inanna's Descent to the Nether World

The composition known to scholars as "Inanna's Descent to the Nether World" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.4.1 and runs to roughly 415 lines in the composite text.^[1] It survives on over fifty tablets and fragments from multiple sites, including CBS 12638 and HS 1480, which makes it the most extensively attested Sumerian literary composition.^[2] Over forty Old Babylonian tablets and fragments preserve portions of this narrative — a density of attestation that tells us something about the composition's importance. Scribes of the *edubba* did not copy texts at random. They copied what mattered, and this text, on the manuscript count alone, mattered more than almost anything else in their curriculum.^[3]

The text scholars read is a composite assembled from these many overlapping witnesses; no single tablet preserves the complete narrative.^[4] The ETCSL composite draws on the forty-plus Old Babylonian fragments to produce the standard scholarly text.^[5] Every line in the reconstruction has been verified against at least one physical tablet, but the continuous narrative that results is a modern editorial achievement, not something any ancient scribe held in his hands.

Sladek's 1974 Johns Hopkins dissertation provides the foundational philological study, collating the manuscript witnesses and establishing the text on which all subsequent work relies.^[6] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 52–62; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205–232; and Sladek 1974.^[7]

This is a distinct composition from the Akkadian "Descent of Ishtar," a shorter, adapted version that shares narrative elements but must be treated as a separate work.^[8] The Akkadian text compresses, omits, and restructures; the Sumerian original is longer, more detailed, and narratively more complex. They are no more the same story than a translation is the same thing as its source.

The composition undergirds the seasonal cult of Dumuzid and the wailing rites attested in the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods.^[9] It is the most important single Sumerian text for understanding Mesopotamian eschatology — the nature of death, the geography of the afterlife, the impossibility of free return.^[10] Sladek's full philological study and continuous scholarly engagement since Kramer confirm the text's canonical status in Sumerology.^[11] Jacobsen's literary translation in *The Harps That Once...* (1987) smooths over line-level variants for narrative coherence, but it remains an influential reading.^[12]

The story, as the tablets preserve it, runs as follows.

Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — queen of heaven, wielder of political power and sexual force, resolves to descend to the *kur* — the nether world, realm of the dead beneath the earth — the domain of her elder sister Ereshkigal, queen of the underworld.^[13] The decision is stated flatly. The text does not build to it through crisis or provocation. Inanna decides, and the narrative begins.

To go, she must leave everything behind. Inanna abandons heaven and earth and her seven cities and temples to go to the nether world; the text enumerates the holy places she forsakes.^[14] The

catalogue is specific: named cities, named temples, each one explicitly relinquished. The goddess of everything is going to a place where she will have nothing, and the composition wants its audience to feel the weight of what she is putting down before she picks up what she will carry.

What she carries is power, made physical. Inanna gathers the seven *me* — the divine powers and cultural blueprints that govern civilization — and turns them into physical adornments. She places the *shugurra*, the crown of the steppe, on her head. She takes the measuring rod and line of lapis lazuli in her hand. She fastens small lapis lazuli beads around her neck. She sets twin egg-shaped beads upon her breast. She slips a gold ring onto her hand. She binds a breastplate called "Come, man, come" on her chest. She covers her body with the *pala*-garment of ladyship.^[15] Seven items. Seven powers. Each one worn, fastened, placed, or bound to the body of the goddess. The enumeration has the precision of an inventory — and, as the composition will demonstrate with merciless symmetry, what has been inventoried can be un-inventoried.

Before she departs, Inanna does something no other character in Sumerian narrative does with such cold foresight: she plans for failure. She instructs her minister Ninshubur — her faithful *sukkal* — with detailed contingency plans. If Inanna does not return within three days, Ninshubur must go to the temples of the three great gods and plead for help.^[16] Inanna specifies the order of appeal: first Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command — in Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru), the religious capital of Sumer; then Nanna-Suen — the moon god, patron of Ur — in his city; then Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu, the oldest city in Sumerian tradition.^[17] The hierarchy is deliberate. Inanna knows which gods will say no and which might say yes, and she instructs Ninshubur accordingly. This is not a goddess acting on impulse. This is a goddess who has calculated the probability of her own death and left instructions for what to do about it.

Inanna arrives at the outer gate of the nether world — the palace Ganzer — and demands entry.^[18] She does not knock. She does not request. The verb is one of command: open.

The gatekeeper is Neti. He asks her business, and Inanna tells him she has come for the funeral rites of Gugalanna — the Bull of Heaven — the husband of Ereshkigal.^[19] Whether this stated reason is sincere or a pretext is debated; the text does not resolve her actual motivation for descending. The narrative provides no other explicit motive, but the pretext may be a ruse, and scholarly opinions diverge on whether Inanna means to conquer the underworld or whether her motivation is left deliberately ambiguous.

(Whether Inanna's stated reason — funeral rites for Gugalanna — is sincere or a pretext is debated; the text does not resolve her actual motivation for descending.^[20])

Neti the gatekeeper reports Inanna's arrival to Ereshkigal — queen of the nether world, Inanna's elder sister, ruler of the dead.^[21] The reaction is not what one expects from a host receiving a visiting dignitary. Ereshkigal is angered. She instructs Neti to bolt the seven gates of the nether world and then open them one by one, applying "the rules of the nether world" at each gate.^[22] The instruction is deliberate and procedural. What drives Ereshkigal's order is not rage — or not rage alone. It is policy. The nether world has rules, and those rules apply to everyone, including the queen of heaven.

What follows is the structural and emotional centre of the composition, and it unfolds with the implacable rhythm of ritual.

At the first gate, the *shugurra* — the crown of the steppe — is taken from Inanna's head. She protests. She asks why. She is given an answer that will become the refrain of the entire descent: "Be silent, Inanna. The powers of the nether world are perfect. The rites of the nether world must not be questioned."^[23] The crown was the first thing she put on when she prepared for this journey. It is the first thing taken. The nether world begins its work at the top and moves downward.

At the second gate, the measuring rod and line of lapis lazuli are taken from her hand.^[24] The instruments of measurement — the tools with which a goddess surveys her domain, takes the dimensions of what she rules — are gone. She can no longer measure because she no longer owns anything to measure.

At the third gate, the small lapis lazuli beads are taken from her neck.^[25]

At the fourth gate, the twin egg-shaped beads are taken from her breast.^[26]

At the fifth gate, the gold ring is taken from her hand.^[27]

At the sixth gate, the breastplate called "Come, man, come" is taken from her chest.^[28] Lapis lazuli, gold, the breastplate with its seductive name — each item stripped is a layer of identity peeled away.

At the seventh gate, the *pala*-garment of ladyship is taken from her body. Inanna enters the throne room of the nether world naked and stripped of all divine power.^[29] Seven gates. Seven items. The goddess who entered the outermost gate armoured in the full regalia of divine authority now stands in the innermost chamber without a single attribute of power left. She is no longer Inanna in any sense the cosmos recognises. She is a body without rank, without office, without protection.

At each gate, the same exchange unfolds: Inanna questions the removal and is given the same answer about the perfection of the nether world's powers.^[30] The repetition is not a failure of imagination. It is the point. Each time Inanna asks, the answer is the same because the answer does not change. The nether world does not negotiate. It does not explain itself differently for different audiences. It does not care that its visitor is the queen of heaven. It has one rule, the rule applies seven times, and seven times is what it takes to reduce the most powerful goddess in the Sumerian pantheon to nothing.

*(The seven-gate stripping structure maps the progressive removal of divine status; the seven adornments correspond to the seven _me Inanna gathered at the outset, so each gate reverses one element of her divine preparation.^[31])_*

The symmetry between the preparation and the stripping is the architecture of the composition. What Inanna put on in the opening sequence — crown, rod, beads, breastplate, ring, garment — is taken from her in the same order, item by item, gate by gate. The seven adornments correspond to the seven *me* she gathered at the outset, so each gate reverses one element of her divine preparation. The structure is not merely literary. It is cosmological. It says that power, no matter how great, can be decomposed into its constituent parts, and that there exists a place where decomposition is the law.

Inanna enters the throne room, and Ereshkigal rises from her throne in anger.^[32] The seven judges of the nether world, the Annunaki, fix their eyes upon Inanna — the "eyes of death."^[33] This is not a trial. No evidence is presented, no defence offered, no deliberation undertaken. The Annunaki look at Inanna, and their gaze is the verdict. In the nether world, to be seen is to be judged.

Ereshkigal pronounces the word of wrath against Inanna. Inanna is struck dead, and her corpse is hung on a hook on the wall.^[34] The image is deliberately degrading. This is not a burial, not a laying-to-rest. The queen of heaven hangs like a side of meat in a storehouse. The nether world does not merely kill. It displays.

And beneath everything — beneath the stripping, the judgment, the death — lies the fundamental law of the nether world, stated plainly: no one who enters the nether world may leave it freely. A substitute must be found.^[35] This law will drive everything that follows. It is not a guideline, not a convention. It is the operating principle of death itself, and it has no exceptions.

The composition gives the fullest Sumerian account of underworld geography: seven gates, the throne room of Ereshkigal, the Annunaki judges, and the fundamental law that no one leaves without a substitute.^[36] The nether world is presented as a place of immutable laws: its powers are "perfect" and its rites "must not be questioned" — a formula repeated at each of the seven gates.^[37] The dead in the underworld eat dust and clay and wear feathered garments like birds — standard Mesopotamian underworld imagery shared with other compositions.^[38] The picture is consistent: a place of order without mercy, of procedure without appeal, where even the most powerful deity in the Sumerian pantheon can be reduced to a corpse on a hook.

Three days pass. Three nights. Inanna does not return. The contingency she planned for has arrived, and Ninshubur carries out the instructions.^[39]

Ninshubur goes first to Enlil in Nippur. Enlil refuses to help. His reasoning is blunt: Inanna's ambition brought this upon her.^[40] The king of the gods does not dispute that Inanna is dead. He simply declines to involve himself. The message is clear enough: if you walk into the nether world of your own volition, you get what the nether world gives.

Ninshubur goes next to Nanna-Suen in Ur. Nanna-Suen also refuses, with the same reasoning.^[41] The repetition is part of the structure. Two refusals, each from a major god, each turning away from the crisis with the same justification. Inanna predicted this. She told Ninshubur where to go and in what order, and the order was designed so that the refusals would lead, by elimination, to the one god who would say yes.

Ninshubur goes finally to Enki in Eridu, and Enki is troubled and agrees to help.^[42] Where Enlil and Nanna-Suen saw a goddess who had overreached, Enki sees a problem that demands a solution. This fits everything the Sumerian tradition tells us about Enki. He is the god who solves things. He does not moralize. He engineers.

What Enki engineers is strange and precise. He creates two beings from the dirt under his fingernails: the *kurgarra* and the *galatur* (or *kalaturru*), small sexless creatures who can slip into the nether world unnoticed.^[43] Some scholars read the *kurgarra* and *galatur* as asexual or transgender cultic functionaries, connecting the text to the broader Mesopotamian tradition of

liminal ritual personnel. They are beings who exist between categories, neither one thing nor the other, and so they can pass through boundaries that would stop anyone with a fixed identity.^[44] Their ambiguity is their advantage. The nether world watches for gods. It watches for the living. It does not watch for creatures made from dirt, too small to register, belonging to no category that the underworld's gatekeepers are trained to stop.

Enki gives the *kurgarra* the "food of life" and the *galatur* the "water of life" and instructs them to revive Inanna.^[45] The plan is not to storm the nether world or argue with Ereshkigal. The plan is to sneak in, find the corpse, and apply the remedy. Enki's solution to the problem of death is not theological. It is practical.

The *kurgarra* and *galatur* enter the nether world and find Ereshkigal in the throes of distress. Whether she suffers birthing pains or mourning groans is debated; the text is ambiguous, and the ambiguity may be deliberate. What matters is that she is in pain, and the two creatures commiserate with her suffering.^[46] They mirror her groans. When she cries out, they cry out. When she laments, they lament. This is not sympathy in the modern sense — it is a technique, and it works. Moved by their participation in her suffering, Ereshkigal offers them a gift in gratitude.

They ask for one thing: the corpse hanging on the wall.

The *kurgarra* sprinkles the food of life on Inanna's corpse, and the *galatur* sprinkles the water of life. Inanna revives.^[47]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Lines 255–270 (various manuscripts): the transition between Inanna's revival and the search for a substitute is partially damaged in several witnesses. Overlap among 40+ tablets allows reconstruction of most gaps.]

The scene is extraordinary in the context of Mesopotamian literature. Death, in Sumerian understanding, is permanent. The nether world does not give back what it takes. Yet here, through Enki's cunning and the small creatures' empathy, a reversal is achieved — not by force, not by decree, but by exploiting a gap in the underworld's defences. Ereshkigal herself was manipulated into granting the gift. The system was not broken. It was gamed.

But the system has one more rule, and this rule cannot be gamed.

The Annunaki decree that Inanna may ascend, but she must provide a substitute to take her place in the nether world.^[48] Someone must stay. The underworld's ledger must balance. This is the same law of substitution that operates in "Enlil and Ninlil" — the cosmos does not permit vacancies below any more than it permits them above.

The *galla* demons — the *galla*, underworld demons who enforce the laws of the dead — escort Inanna as she ascends, ready to seize whomever she designates.^[49] The *galla* are not tempters. They are not judges. They are collection agents. They do not eat food. They do not drink water. They do not accept bribes or hear pleas. The composition is specific about what they are not, because what they are not defines how they function: they are mechanism without mercy, enforcement without discretion. They walk beside Inanna as she returns to the light, and they will not go back empty-handed.

As Inanna returns to the upper world with the *galla* demons at her side, she meets various deities at each of her cities.^[50] The *galla* try to seize each one. But at each city, Inanna finds a god or goddess in mourning — dressed in sackcloth and covered in dust, grieving for her — and she refuses to hand over any of these mourners to the *galla* demons.^[51]

Ninshubur, who carried out the rescue instructions, who walked from temple to temple pleading for Inanna's life, is the first deity the *galla* try to seize. Inanna refuses, honouring Ninshubur's faithfulness.^[52] The logic is exact: you mourned me, you worked to save me, you will not be handed over. Loyalty is rewarded, and the reward is not a prize but the absence of destruction.

The gods Shara and Lugal are likewise found mourning and are spared by Inanna.^[53] Each encounter follows the same pattern: the *galla* reach for the mourner, Inanna says no, the party moves on to the next city. The procession is building toward something, and the audience knows it. Someone will not be mourning. Someone will not have grieved. And whoever that someone is will be the one who stays.

Inanna arrives at Uruk — the great walled city of southern Mesopotamia, seat of Inanna's own temple the E-ana — and finds Dumuzid. Dumuzid — the shepherd-god, consort of Inanna — sits on a magnificent throne, dressed in splendid garments, not mourning her absence at all.^[54]

The contrast with every other deity Inanna has met could not be sharper. Ninshubur wore sackcloth. Shara covered himself in dust. Lugal sat in the dirt. Each had done what one does when someone important is dead: signalled their loss, performed their grief, made their bodies testaments to the absence of the one who was gone. Dumuzid did none of this. Dumuzid sits on a throne. Dumuzid wears fine clothes. Dumuzid, while his consort — his wife, the goddess who chose him — was dead on a hook in the underworld, dressed himself magnificently and sat down to enjoy the authority her absence left vacant. The composition does not call this a betrayal. It does not need to. The image of the enthroned husband beside the image of the mourning minister speaks for itself.

Inanna is enraged. She fixes upon him the "eye of death" — the same gaze the Annunaki turned on her in the underworld — and hands him over to the *galla* demons as her substitute.^[55] The decision is instantaneous and absolute. There is no trial, no deliberation, no argument heard. Dumuzid did not mourn, and so Dumuzid will die. The equation is that simple, and Inanna performs it without hesitation.

Dumuzid is seized by the *galla* demons, and now he weeps. The tears come too late for Inanna, but they come. He appeals to the sun god Utu, his brother-in-law, to transform him so he can escape.^[56] The appeal is desperate and specific: change my body, alter my form, let me slip away from the grip of these things that hold me. It is the plea of someone who, moments before, sat on a throne in fine garments and now discovers what it means to be designated. The *galla* do not argue. They do not explain. They grip, and the grip is the argument.

Utu responds. He turns Dumuzid's hands and feet into the hands and feet of a snake — or a gazelle, depending on the manuscript — letting him flee from the *galla*.^[57] Utu is the god of justice and the

sun — the one who sees everything — and he does not weigh whether Dumuzid deserves the rescue. He acts because Dumuzid is his sister's husband, and kinship, in the Sumerian world, creates obligations that operate independently of merit.

ETCSL 1.4.1, "snake" transformation in some manuscripts.^[58]

The manuscript variation is worth noting: some tablets give a snake, some give a gazelle. The transformation differs in each witness, but the function is the same. Dumuzid changes form and runs. The *galla* pursue.

Dumuzid flees, but he is finally recaptured by the *galla* demons.^[59] The flight is futile. The underworld's agents do not lose their quarry. They are patient, and they are inevitable.

Some manuscripts include a passage in which a fly reveals Dumuzid's hiding place to Inanna.^[60]

In the manuscripts that include the episode, an unlikely informant resolves the search. A fly tells Inanna where Dumuzid is hiding, and she blesses the fly in return.^[61] The detail is small — literally small, an insect — but it connects this composition to a broader pattern in Sumerian narrative, where pivotal information arrives from the least expected source. The episode does not appear in all manuscripts. Some tablets include the fly; others go straight to the resolution. The ETCSL composite retains the episode, but its presence is not universal across witnesses.

Geshtinanna — goddess, sister of Dumuzid, who shares his time in the underworld — weeps bitterly for her brother and offers to take his place below.^[62] Where Dumuzid's response to Inanna's death was to put on his finest garments and sit on a throne, Geshtinanna's response to Dumuzid's condemnation is to offer her own life. The contrast between the siblings is as stark as the contrast between Dumuzid and the mourning gods. Grief, in this composition, is the measure of character, and Geshtinanna passes the test that Dumuzid failed.

Inanna decrees a compromise: Dumuzid will spend half the year in the nether world, and Geshtinanna will spend the other half. Each takes the other's place in alternation.^[63] The solution is mathematical and elegant. Six months below, six months above, two figures rotating through the same slot in the underworld's roster like workers sharing a shift. The law of substitution is satisfied: the nether world always has its occupant. The law of kinship is honoured: the sister's love halves the brother's sentence. And the law of the seasons finds its origin: when Dumuzid is below, the land mourns, the flocks diminish, the pastures turn dry; when he returns, the land revives, and the pastoral world begins again. The shepherd-god goes below with the dying grass and comes back with the new growth. The narrative and the natural cycle lock together, each explaining the other.

[At this point the tablet breaks. The seasonal alternation ending (lines 358–415) is not present in all manuscripts; final lines vary across witnesses. The composite relies on a subset of manuscripts for this conclusion. Some manuscripts end before the alternation sequence.]

This ending is not present in all manuscripts. The seasonal alternation between Dumuzid and Geshtinanna appears in a subset of the textual witnesses; other manuscripts end before this sequence, leaving the composition without the cyclical resolution. The ETCSL composite includes it, but the reader should understand that this conclusion — however satisfying its narrative logic —

rests on a fraction of the available tablets. Some ancient audiences may have known a version of the story that ended with Dumuzid's capture and nothing more: no sister's sacrifice, no seasonal compromise, no return.

This alternation provides the aetiological basis for the seasonal death and return of Dumuzid, grounding the wailing cult and the pastoral cycle of the agricultural year.^[64] The wailing rites for Dumuzid — attested in the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods — find their narrative origin here. When the shepherds mourned, they mourned for Dumuzid. When the mourning ended, Dumuzid had returned. The composition gives this cycle a story, a reason, and a structure.

Ningishzida — god of the underworld, a judge among the dead — is mentioned alongside Dumuzid in some underworld passages as a chthonic deity who dwells below.^[65] His presence in the same textual environment as Dumuzid reinforces the picture of the nether world as a place with its own population, its own hierarchy, its own permanent residents — a world that runs in parallel to the one above and that always, always, must be fed.

(The composition functions simultaneously as eschatological charter (establishing underworld law), ritual aetiology (grounding the Dumuzid wailing cult in narrative), and psychological drama (Inanna's ambition, Ereshkigal's grief, Dumuzid's betrayal through complacency).^[66])

The composition operates on three levels at once, and all three are directly present in the text. As eschatological charter, it sets out the laws of the underworld — seven gates, the Annunaki judges, the law of substitution, the impossibility of free return — with a completeness unmatched by any other Sumerian composition. As ritual aetiology, it grounds the Dumuzid wailing cult in a narrative that explains why the god dies and returns, linking the cult cycle to a specific story about specific choices. As psychological drama, it traces the intersecting trajectories of four distinct characters — Inanna's ambition, Ereshkigal's rage and suffering, Dumuzid's complacency, Geshtinanna's selflessness — each of whom acts according to a logic that the composition presents without editorial comment. The text does not tell its audience which character is right. It shows what each one does and lets the consequences speak.

To prioritise one of these functions over the others is a scholarly choice, not a textual given. The composition does all three things at once, and it does them with a narrative economy that suggests the Sumerian scribes who shaped this text knew exactly what they were building. Four hundred and fifteen lines. Seven gates. One death. One resurrection. One betrayal. One sacrifice. And a law — that the nether world must have its substitute — that holds from the first line to the last.

The parallels with other traditions are extensive and well documented. The alternation of Dumuzid and Geshtinanna — six months below, six months above — mirrors the Greek myth of Persephone, who descends to Hades and returns to Demeter while the seasons track her absence and her return.^[67] The dying-god pattern — a deity who descends, dies, and returns in a cycle tied to the agricultural year — echoes in the Egyptian tradition of Osiris, whose death, dismemberment, and cyclical resurrection share structural features with Dumuzid's fate.^[68] The descent to the land of the dead to retrieve a lost person, the encounter with an implacable ruler of the underworld, the conditions imposed on the return — these elements recur in traditions as distant as the Japanese account of Izanagi's descent to Yomi to retrieve Izanami. There, the prohibition against looking, the rotting corpse, and the establishment of death's permanence echo themes found here.

But the Sumerian composition is not the Greek, the Egyptian, or the Japanese version. The resemblances are real, but the Sumerian text has its own logic, its own structure, and its own concerns. The Akkadian "Descent of Ishtar" is the closest relative, and even that text — a shorter, adapted version — must be treated as a distinct composition with its own purposes.^[69] The Sumerian original is more detailed, more psychologically complex, and more structurally ambitious than any of its parallels or adaptations. It stands on its own terms, and it rewards attention on its own terms.

The *edubba* scribes who copied this text, generation after generation, preserved a narrative that contains within it a complete theology of death, a charter for seasonal ritual, and a drama of power, loss, and imperfect justice. The sheer number of surviving tablets — over fifty, from multiple sites — testifies to the composition's centrality in the scribal curriculum and, beyond that, in the Mesopotamian imagination. These were not idle copies. They were made by students learning their craft, and the text they learned on was this one: a story about a goddess who walked into death and came back changed, and about the price that had to be paid for her return.

No other Sumerian composition attempts as much. No other Sumerian composition achieves as much. The seven gates stand open in the clay, and after four thousand years, the formula still holds: the powers of the nether world are perfect. The rites of the nether world must not be questioned.

[1] ETCSL 1.4.1, composite text, lines 1–415.

[2] ETCSL 1.4.1, bibliography.

[3] ETCSL 1.4.1, manuscript list; Sladek 1974, full philological study.

[4] ETCSL 1.4.1, composite text.

[5] ETCSL 1.4.1, apparatus.

[6] Sladek 1974 (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins).

[7] Black et al. 2004, pp. 52–62; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205–232; Sladek 1974.

[8] Sladek 1974; Black et al. 2004, pp. 52–53 (introduction).

[9] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205–207.

[10] Sladek 1974; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205–232.

[11] Sladek 1974; Kramer 1961, pp. 83–96.

[12] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205–232.

[13] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 1–13; Black et al. 2004, pp. 52–53.

[14] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 1–13; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 207–208.

[15] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 14–25; Black et al. 2004, pp. 53–54; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 208–209.

[16] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 26–67; Black et al. 2004, pp. 54–55.

[17] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 30–67; Black et al. 2004, pp. 54–55.

[18] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 68–80; Black et al. 2004, p. 55.

[19] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 80–90; Black et al. 2004, p. 55.

[20] Inference: The narrative provides no other explicit motive, but the pretext may be a ruse. Risk: Scholarly opinions diverge on whether Inanna aims to conquer the underworld or whether her motivation is left deliberately ambiguous.

[21] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 90–115; Black et al. 2004, p. 55.

[22] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 115–130; Black et al. 2004, pp. 55–56.

[23] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 130–145; Black et al. 2004, p. 56; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 210–211.

[24] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 56.

[25] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 56.

[26] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 56.

[27] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 56.

[28] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 56.

[29] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 160–170; Black et al. 2004, p. 56; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 210–211.

- [30] ETCSL 1.4.1, gate sequence; Black et al. 2004, p. 56.
- [31] Inference: The composition explicitly pairs the gathering and the stripping. Risk: Not all scholars agree on a one-to-one correspondence between specific *me* and specific gates.
- [32] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 170–175; Black et al. 2004, p. 56.
- [33] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 164–172; Black et al. 2004, p. 57; Jacobsen 1987, p. 212.
- [34] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 168–172; Black et al. 2004, p. 57.
- [35] ETCSL 1.4.1; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 212–213.
- [36] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 1–170; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205–215.
- [37] ETCSL 1.4.1, gate sequence; Black et al. 2004, p. 56.
- [38] ETCSL 1.4.1; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 210–211.
- [39] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 173–200; Black et al. 2004, pp. 57–58.
- [40] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 57.
- [41] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 57.
- [42] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 58.
- [43] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 220–235; Black et al. 2004, p. 58; Sladek 1974.
- [44] Sladek 1974; Black et al. 2004, pp. 52–53 (introduction).
- [45] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 235–245; Black et al. 2004, p. 58.
- [46] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 245–260; Black et al. 2004, p. 58; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 214–216.
- [47] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 260–280; Black et al. 2004, pp. 58–59.
- [48] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 280–295; Black et al. 2004, p. 59.
- [49] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 285–300; Black et al. 2004, p. 59; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 217–218.
- [50] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 300–340; Black et al. 2004, pp. 59–60.
- [51] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 59–60.
- [52] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 59.
- [53] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 59–60.
- [54] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 340–355; Black et al. 2004, p. 60; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 219–221.
- [55] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 348–356; Black et al. 2004, p. 60.
- [56] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 356–375; Black et al. 2004, pp. 60–61.
- [57] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, p. 60; Sladek 1974.
- [58] An alternate tradition gives: "other manuscripts read "gazelle"". The prevalent version is chosen here because Sladek documents the variant witnesses; the ETCSL composite reflects the manuscript variation..
- [59] ETCSL 1.4.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 60–61.
- [60] An alternate tradition gives: "Other manuscripts omit the fly episode entirely". The prevalent version is chosen here because Sladek 1974 documents that the fly's role appears in some manuscripts only; it is part of the ETCSL composite but not universal across witnesses..
- [61] ETCSL 1.4.1; Sladek 1974.
- [62] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 380–400; Black et al. 2004, pp. 61–62.
- [63] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 400–415; Black et al. 2004, p. 62; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 225–228.
- [64] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 400–415; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 225–228; Kramer 1961, pp. 83–96.
- [65] ETCSL 1.4.1; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 225–228.
- [66] Inference: All three functions are directly supported by the text and scholarly commentary. Risk: Prioritising one function over others is a scholarly choice, not a textual given.
- [67] Kramer 1961, pp. 83–96.
- [68] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 225–228.
- [69] Sladek 1974.

Chapter 16. Dumuzid's Dream

The composition known to scholars as "Dumuzid's Dream" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.4.3 and runs to roughly 260 lines in the composite text, surviving on Old Babylonian tablets.^[1] The text is well-attested in Old Babylonian copies and belongs to the broader Dumuzid dying-god tradition in the scribal curriculum.^[2] Bendt Alster's 1972 monograph gives the critical edition and remains the foundational philological study — a work that established this composition as a key exemplar of Sumerian oral-poetic technique.^[3]

The text is generally well-preserved.^[4] It is classified as single-prevalent: the manuscripts agree broadly and no substantive narrative divergence appears among witnesses, as Alster's collation confirms.^[5] Minor orthographic variants appear among manuscripts, but the story they tell is the same story. The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–77; Alster 1972.^[6]

The narrative is set against the background of Inanna's Descent (ETCSL 1.4.1): Dumuzid — the shepherd-god and consort of Inanna — has been marked as Inanna's substitute in the underworld. The *galla* demons — underworld demons who enforce the laws of the dead — are coming to seize him.^[7] That is the situation as the composition opens. The sentence has been passed. The executioners are on their way. What remains is for the condemned to learn what is coming, to understand it perfectly, and to find that understanding changes nothing.

Dumuzid has a terrifying prophetic dream and wakes in distress.^[8] The text does not ease into this. There is no preamble, no scene-setting beyond what the listener already knows from the Inanna cycle. Dumuzid wakes, and he is afraid.

He summons his sister Geshtinanna — goddess and sister of Dumuzid, who will later share his time in the underworld — and recounts the dream to her, asking her to interpret it.^[9] This is the structure of the first movement: the dreamer tells, the interpreter listens. The images come in a catalogue, and each one dismantles something that defines Dumuzid as what he is — a shepherd.

The dream holds a sequence of symbolic images: reeds rise around him, a single reed trembles, twin reeds are taken one by one, trees rise around him, and water is poured on his holy hearth.^[10] Each image is specific and tactile — not the formless dread of a nightmare but the sharp, deliberate imagery of a message. This is a dream that means something, and the meaning is legible to anyone who knows the code.

The catalogue goes on. His drinking cup falls from its peg. His shepherd's crook vanishes. An eagle seizes a lamb from the sheepfold. A falcon catches a sparrow. His goats drag their beards in the dust. His sheep paw the ground with their bent limbs.^[11] The churning stick lies on the ground and the cup no longer pours.^[12] The images systematically dismantle the pastoral symbols of Dumuzid's identity as shepherd — crook, cup, flock, dairy tools — stripping away every emblem of the life he is about to lose. The flock mourns before its master does. The goats know. The sheep know. The dream has already told the animals what the dreamer has not yet accepted.

Geshtinanna reads each dream image as foretelling Dumuzid's doom: the *galla* demons are coming

to seize him.^[13]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Lines 45–55: several lines in the dream-interpretation sequence are partially damaged. Alster 1972 collates multiple witnesses that fill most gaps.]

Geshtinanna tells Dumuzid that each pastoral symbol undone in the dream stands for a specific element of his impending capture: the reeds are the demons, the fallen drinking cup is his overthrown status, the scattered flock is his dispersed protection.^[14] The interpretation is systematic. Each image receives its gloss, each gloss confirms the same conclusion, and the conclusion is always the same: they are coming for you. The reeds that rose around him were not reeds — they were the *galla*. The cup that fell from its peg was not a cup — it was his life as he knew it. The eagle in the sheepfold was not an eagle — it was the force that would tear him from everything he owned. Geshtinanna reads every sign correctly, and every sign says the same thing.

The interpretation scene has a quality that is less narrative than diagnostic. Geshtinanna does not console. She does not suggest remedies. She names each symbol, maps it to its referent, and moves on to the next. A modern physician delivering a terminal prognosis could not be more precise or less sentimental. Dream-interpretation was a recognised literary form in Sumerian composition, and this text handles it with the clinical rigour the form demanded.

Dumuzid's response to perfect foreknowledge is not acceptance. It is flight.

Dumuzid flees across the steppe, pursued by the *galla* demons.^[15] He appeals to the sun god Utu — brother of his wife Inanna and thus his brother-in-law — to transform him so he may escape.^[16] The appeal is to family. Utu is kin by marriage, and kinship in Sumerian narrative carries obligations that even gods respect.

Utu grants the transformation: Dumuzid's hands turn into gazelle hands — hooves — and his feet into gazelle feet, letting him run.^[17] The shepherd becomes the animal he once tended — or rather, the wild cousin of those animals, the gazelle of the open steppe, built for speed and distance.

(The transformation motif — Dumuzid becoming a gazelle, then other forms — may reflect an older stratum of the dying-god tradition in which the deity is literally identified with the animals of the steppe.^[18])

Dumuzid flees to a succession of hiding places, repeatedly asking for and receiving further transformations to escape the pursuing *galla*.^[19] The flight unfolds in a repetitive formulaic pattern: Dumuzid reaches a refuge, the *galla* find him, he flees again.^[20] Alster's monograph identified these formulaic repetitions — the catalogue of transformations, the recurring cycle of flight and discovery — as reflecting oral compositional patterns, the kind of incremental structure that lets a performer extend or compress a narrative while holding its rhythmic architecture.^[21]

The repetition serves the story's logic as well as its form. Each time Dumuzid runs, hides, is found, and runs again, the text tightens. The pattern stresses the inescapability of his fate — not through argument but through demonstration. He runs. They find him. He runs. They find him. The structure itself is the argument: no hiding place will hold.

Dumuzid hides in the sheepfold of his sister Geshtinanna.^[22] After the open steppe, after the transformations, after the exhaustion of divine aid, he returns to family. The sheepfold is the most Dumuzid-specific refuge imaginable — the enclosure where a shepherd is most himself, protected by the one person who has already proven she understands what is coming.

The *galla* demons arrive and interrogate Geshtinanna, demanding to know Dumuzid's location; she refuses to betray her brother despite their threats.^[23] The scene turns on a simple confrontation: power against loyalty. The *galla* stand for the entire coercive apparatus of the underworld. Geshtinanna stands for nothing but her own refusal. The text does not describe her reasoning or her fear. It describes her silence. She does not tell them.

A friend or companion of Dumuzid — sometimes identified as his unnamed friend — betrays him to the *galla*, revealing his hiding place.^[24] The contrast is immediate and absolute. Geshtinanna, who had every reason to give way — the *galla* are not known for restraint — held firm. The friend, whose bond was presumably less deep than a sister's, breaks. The text does not explain his motive. It does not need to. What matters is the structural juxtaposition: loyalty and betrayal, placed side by side, so that each lights up the other.

The contrast between Geshtinanna's absolute loyalty and the friend's betrayal is the emotional and ethical core of the narrative.^[25] This is where the composition finds its human centre — not in the dream, not in the flight, but in the moment when two people are tested and one holds while the other breaks.

The *galla* demons seize Dumuzid; the capture fulfils every element of the prophetic dream.^[26] The text does not stage this as a surprise. It has spent over two hundred lines establishing that this outcome was inevitable. The reeds that rose in the dream were the *galla* who now surround him. The cup that fell from its peg was the status now stripped from him. The flock that mourned was the world he is leaving behind. Every image has found its referent. The dream was not a warning — a warning implies the chance of avoidance. The dream was a preview.

Dumuzid is taken to the nether world; the narrative closes with the inevitability of the dream's fulfilment confirmed.^[27] There is no rescue. No sympathetic deity intervenes at the last moment. The composition ends where its first line told us it would end: with the shepherd taken, the flock scattered, and the dream proved true.

The composition dramatises the inevitability of death through a prophetic dream that unfolds exactly as foretold; foreknowledge does not enable escape.^[28] This is the theological proposition at the heart of the text, and it speaks not through doctrine but through narrative mechanics. Dumuzid knows what is coming. Geshtinanna confirms it. Utu provides supernatural aid. None of it matters. The dream was not a conditional statement — it was a fact reported in advance.

Jacobsen discusses the composition in the context of the Dumuzid cycle's pastoral imagery and the tension between the steppe — pastoral freedom, the open space where a shepherd and his flock move under the sky — and the underworld, where that freedom ends.^[29] The steppe is where Dumuzid runs. The underworld is where he is taken. The whole flight sequence traverses the space between those two poles, and the traversal can only go in one direction.

The formulaic repetitions of the flight sequence, the catalogue of transformations, and the dream-interpretation genre all reflect oral compositional patterns that Alster's monograph was the first to analyse systematically in this text.^[30] The repetitive structure is not padding. It is the sound of inevitability — the same events recurring with minor variations because the outcome cannot change, only approach. A performer reciting this text would have tightened the noose with each cycle: same flight, same discovery, same flight again, each iteration bringing Dumuzid closer to what the audience already knew was waiting.

The story of Dumuzid's dream sits at a crossroads of several traditions that reach well beyond Mesopotamia. Prophetic dreams foretelling inescapable death appear across ancient Near Eastern literature, most notably in the dreams of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Gilgamesh tradition, where foreknowledge likewise fails to prevent the dreamer's fate.^[31] The motif is not merely decorative. It raises a question that interested the Sumerian scribes and that has interested every later literary tradition that has taken it up: what is the value of knowing the future if knowing it changes nothing?

Greek tragic literature would pursue this question with sustained intensity — Cassandra sees Troy's destruction and cannot prevent it; Oedipus flees the prophecy and runs straight into its fulfilment. The structural parallel with Dumuzid's situation is close enough to suggest that the question itself is fundamental to the way human beings think about fate, rather than specific to any one culture.^[32] The betrayal by a companion while a loyal sibling protects resonates beyond Mesopotamia as well — the pattern of steadfast kin and faithless friend appears in traditions as widely separated as the Irish hero-tales and the Gospel narratives. Dumuzid's dream may be among the earliest preserved statements of a problem that has never been resolved: the relationship between knowledge and helplessness, between seeing clearly and being unable to act.

The scribes who copied this text in the Old Babylonian schools copied it because it mattered — because it said something about death that their culture considered worth preserving. What it said was simple, and it was not comforting: you can know exactly what is coming, and it will come anyway. The shepherd's crook will vanish. The cup will fall. The flock will mourn. And the dream will be proved right.

[1] ETCSL 1.4.3, composite text, lines 1–260.

[2] ETCSL 1.4.3, manuscript list; Alster 1972, pp. 7–15.

[3] Alster, B., *Dumuzi's Dream: Aspects of Oral Poetry in a Sumerian Myth* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1972).

[4] ETCSL 1.4.3, composite text.

[5] Alster 1972; ETCSL 1.4.3.

[6] Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–77; Alster 1972.

[7] ETCSL 1.4.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 71–72.

[8] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 1–20; Black et al. 2004, p. 72; Alster 1972, pp. 40–45.

[9] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 20–30; Black et al. 2004, p. 72.

[10] ETCSL 1.4.3, dream sequence; Black et al. 2004, pp. 72–73; Alster 1972, pp. 40–50.

[11] ETCSL 1.4.3; Alster 1972, pp. 40–50.

[12] ETCSL 1.4.3; Alster 1972, pp. 40–50.

[13] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 30–55; Black et al. 2004, p. 73; Alster 1972, pp. 50–55.

[14] ETCSL 1.4.3; Alster 1972, pp. 50–55.

[15] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 55–100; Black et al. 2004, pp. 73–74.

[16] ETCSL 1.4.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 74; Alster 1972, pp. 55–60.

- [17] ETCSL 1.4.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 74; Alster 1972, pp. 55–60.
- [18] Inference: The animal transformations map onto Dumuzid's pastoral identity. Risk: This is an interpretive claim; the transformations could equally be understood as standard magical flight motifs without specific pastoral-theological significance.
- [19] ETCSL 1.4.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 74–75.
- [20] ETCSL 1.4.3; Alster 1972, pp. 55–65.
- [21] Alster 1972, pp. 40–60.
- [22] ETCSL 1.4.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 75; Alster 1972, pp. 65–70.
- [23] ETCSL 1.4.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 75; Alster 1972, pp. 65–70.
- [24] ETCSL 1.4.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 75–76; Alster 1972, pp. 70–75.
- [25] Alster 1972, pp. 65–75; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 28–55.
- [26] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 230–260; Black et al. 2004, pp. 76–77; Alster 1972, pp. 75–80.
- [27] ETCSL 1.4.3, closing lines; Black et al. 2004, p. 77.
- [28] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 1–50; Alster 1972, pp. 40–60.
- [29] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 28–55.
- [30] Alster 1972, pp. 40–60.
- [31] Alster 1972.
- [32] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 28–55.

Chapter 17. Inanna and Bilulu: Vengeance for the Shepherd

The composition scholars call "Inanna and Bilulu" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.4.4 and runs to roughly 190 lines in the composite text.^[1] It is fragmentary in places.^[2] Very few manuscript witnesses survive, which suggests limited circulation compared to other Inanna and Dumuzid texts.^[3] The text is classified as single-prevalent-reconstructed: only a handful of fragmentary witnesses survive, and the ETCSL composite is the best available reconstruction.^[4] The present retelling follows that composite, supplemented by Jacobsen 1987, pp. 315–325.^[5]

Jacobsen's literary translation in *The Harps That Once...* (1987) remains the most detailed study of this composition, and his reading of the transformation scene is influential but debated.^[6] This matters because the text has gaps precisely where the most dramatic action occurs. Jacobsen offers not simply a translation but a reading — one that fills broken passages with informed conjecture. His work is indispensable, but readers must weigh how much of the narrative rests on interpretation rather than preserved text.

The narrative sits within the broader Dumuzid dying-god cycle: Dumuzid — the shepherd-god, consort of Inanna — is dead, or has been taken to the underworld, and Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — mourns and seeks vengeance.^[7] This is the final instalment of that cycle, following the Descent (ETCSL 1.4.1) and the Dream (ETCSL 1.4.3): mourning gives way to vengeance, and vengeance gives way to ritual institution.^[8] The ordering matters. In the Descent, Inanna goes down to the underworld and returns, but her return costs Dumuzid his life. In the Dream, Dumuzid foresees his own death. Here the death has already happened, and the question is no longer whether to prevent it but what to do about it.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening lines 1–20 heavily damaged; the context for Inanna's mourning is partially lost. Very few manuscript witnesses survive to restore the opening.]

What survives of the opening is enough to fix the emotional register. Inanna mourns the dead Dumuzid, her consort, the shepherd-god; her lament is rendered as bitter weeping and wandering the steppe.^[9] The steppe is the key setting. Not the city, not the temple precinct, not the irrigated fields where civilisation sustains itself, but the open, dry, ungoverned land beyond the canals — where shepherds move their flocks, where bandits operate, where the boundary between the human world and something older and less controlled grows hard to locate. Inanna does not mourn in her temple. She mourns in the landscape where Dumuzid lived and died.

Her mourning echoes the broader tradition of ritual laments for Dumuzid attested across the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods.^[10] These laments were not merely literary. Performers sang or chanted them in cultic settings as part of the seasonal observances marking the death and absence of the shepherd-god. The composition we are reading sits at the intersection of narrative myth and ritual practice, and the mourning it describes would have resonated with audiences who joined in similar laments as part of their religious calendar.

The mourning, however, is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of a hunt.

Bilulu is identified as an old woman — or bandit matriarch — held responsible for Dumuzid's death or complicit in it.^[11] Girgire is identified as her son, likewise implicated in the events surrounding Dumuzid's death.^[12] The text does not spell out the accusation in clean, legalistic terms — at least, not in the portions that survive.

(The exact nature of Bilulu's and Girgire's guilt is debated; Jacobsen interprets them as steppe bandits or desert marauders responsible for Dumuzid's death, but the fragmentary text does not spell out the accusation in full.^[13])

What we can say is that the composition blames these two figures, and that Inanna accepts the attribution as sufficient grounds for action. Whether Bilulu and Girgire killed Dumuzid directly, whether they enabled his death, or whether they stand for something more diffuse — the hostile steppe itself, personified — is a question the fragments cannot answer with certainty. Jacobsen reads them as desert marauders, and his reading fits the narrative logic: the shepherd dies in the steppe, and steppe-dwellers take the blame. But the gaps in the text leave room for other interpretations, and honesty requires acknowledging that.

Inanna confronts Bilulu and Girgire, seeking vengeance for Dumuzid.^[14]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Lines 95–130: the central section describing the encounter with Bilulu is fragmentary; the transformation scene is partly broken. Insufficient parallel witnesses exist to fill these gaps. Jacobsen fills narrative gaps interpretively.]

Here the composition reaches its climax, and here too the tablets are most badly damaged. The confrontation itself — whatever words were exchanged, whatever divine fury was displayed — is largely lost. What survives is the outcome, and the outcome is extraordinary.

Inanna transforms Bilulu into a waterskin used for pouring desert libations — specifically, the water offered to the dead in the steppe.^[15] Girgire is transformed alongside his mother, becoming a desert spirit or protective genius associated with the steppe.^[16]

The transformation of Bilulu into a waterskin and Girgire into a steppe spirit is Jacobsen's influential reading, based on the surviving fragments and his interpretive reconstruction of the broken sections.^[17]

The punishment is not destruction. It is not exile or execution in any ordinary sense. It is transformation — and not random transformation, but transformation into something useful. The woman responsible for the shepherd's death becomes the vessel through which water is poured for his spirit. The son becomes a guardian presence in the very landscape where the crime occurred. Sumerian divine justice, at its most characteristic, does not simply eliminate offenders. It repurposes them.

This repurposing is not incidental. It is the theological core of the composition.

The transformation supplies an aetiology for the desert libation practice: Bilulu-as-waterskin is the

vessel through which water is poured for Dumuzid's spirit in the steppe.^[18] The composition thus ties divine vengeance to ritual practice: punishing the guilty simultaneously creates the cultic apparatus for mourning the victim.^[19] Consider the economy of this. A single divine act does two things at once: it punishes the killer and it establishes the means by which the dead will be honoured. The waterskin that carries water to Dumuzid's spirit in the steppe is the killer, transformed. Every time the ritual is performed, every time water is poured for the dead shepherd in the open country, the punishment is re-enacted and the mourning is renewed. Vengeance and worship become the same gesture.

Divine transformation as punishment — turning offenders into objects or creatures that serve a specific purpose — is a distinctive form of Sumerian divine justice.^[20] It operates by a logic unfamiliar to most modern readers but internally consistent. The punishment fits the crime not in the sense of proportionality but in the sense of functional integration. The offender is not removed from the system; the offender is absorbed into it, conscripted into a role that serves the very order they violated. The cosmos, in the Sumerian view, wastes nothing — not even its criminals.

This stands apart from the patterns found in other mythological traditions, though the parallels are instructive. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, divine vengeance often takes the form of transformation — Arachne into a spider, Actaeon into a stag, Daphne into a laurel tree. The structural similarity is real: a god punishes by changing the offender's form rather than simply killing them. But the Sumerian version has a specificity of purpose that the Ovidian tradition does not always share. Bilulu does not become just any object. She becomes the particular object needed for the particular ritual that mourns the particular victim she is accused of killing. The transformation is not poetic justice in a general sense. It is engineering.

Seen within the Dumuzid cycle as a whole, the composition resolves the narrative arc that began with Inanna's descent to the underworld. The Descent raised the question of cosmic price — someone must stay below if someone is to return. The Dream gave Dumuzid foreknowledge of his fate. This composition, the final instalment, answers the question of what happens after: grief leads to identifying those responsible, identification leads to confrontation, and confrontation produces not merely punishment but the ritual framework through which the dead will be remembered.

The few scribes who copied this text — and they were few, given the scant manuscript evidence — were preserving something more than a revenge tale. They were preserving an explanation of how a specific desert practice came to exist, why a particular waterskin poured water for a particular god, and how the cosmos turns even its worst violations into instruments of order. Jacobsen's treatment remains the most detailed study; his reading of the transformation is influential but should be weighed with awareness that it fills significant textual gaps interpretively.^[21] The fragments are stubborn. They will not yield a complete narrative, no matter how skilfully they are read. But what survives is enough to see the shape of the whole: a goddess mourning, a goddess hunting, and a goddess who converts her enemies into the tools of worship.

[1] ETCSL 1.4.4, composite text, lines 1–190.

[2] ETCSL 1.4.4, composite text.

[3] ETCSL 1.4.4, manuscript list.

[4] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 315–325.

- [5] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 315–325.
- [6] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 315–325.
- [7] ETCSL 1.4.4; Kramer 1961, pp. 97–101.
- [8] Kramer 1961, pp. 97–101; ETCSL 1.4.4.
- [9] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 315–318.
- [10] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 315–318; Kramer 1961, pp. 97–101.
- [11] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 318–320.
- [12] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 318–320.
- [13] Inference: Jacobsen 1987, pp. 318–320, provides this interpretation from context. Risk: Other scholars may read the relationship differently given the gaps.
- [14] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–322.
- [15] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–325.
- [16] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–325.
- [17] This passage reconstructs the lacuna at etcsL 1.4.4, lines 95–130 from the parallel account in jacobson-1987, pp. 320–325; confidence: medium.
- [18] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–325.
- [19] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–325; ETCSL 1.4.4.
- [20] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–325.
- [21] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 315–325.

Chapter 18. Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nibru

The composition known as "Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nibru" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.5.1 and survives on Old Babylonian manuscripts.^[1] The text is generally well-preserved.^[2] Multiple Old Babylonian copies from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) — the religious capital of Sumer, seat of Enlil's temple the E-kur — and from Ur scribal schools confirm its place in the *edubba* curriculum, the standard body of texts that trainee scribes copied and studied.^[3] That both cities valued the text is itself significant: this is a composition about the relationship between Ur and Nippur, and the scribes of both preserved it. The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 147–155.^[4]

To understand this composition, one must first understand the political geography it encodes. Two cities dominated the landscape of Sumerian civilisation in the late third millennium: Ur and Nippur. Ur (Sumerian: Urim) — the great city of southern Mesopotamia, seat of Nanna's temple the Ekishnugal — was the economic powerhouse, wealthy from trade, agriculture, and the vast canal-fed estates of its hinterland. Nippur was the religious capital, the city where no king could rule legitimately without receiving Enlil's blessing. The axis between these two cities anchored Ur III royal ideology: Ur supplied the wealth, Nippur supplied the sanction.^[5]

Nanna-Suen — the moon god, son of Enlil, king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur — is the patron deity of Ur, and therefore the divine figure who most naturally embodies this relationship.^[6] He is a son visiting his father. He is a local god seeking the approval of the chief god. He is Ur going to Nippur. The composition works on all three levels at once, and the Sumerians would not have seen any contradiction between them. In their world, theology, politics, and family were different vocabularies for the same set of facts.

The narrative opens as Nanna decides to travel from Ur to Nippur to visit his father Enlil.^[7] The journey will go by barge — the standard mode of transport along the canals and waterways that linked the cities of the alluvial plain. But before the barge sets out, it must be loaded, and what it carries makes up one of the most revealing passages in Sumerian literature.

The text catalogues the specific goods placed aboard Nanna's barge: cattle, sheep, grain, dairy products, and other agricultural produce, presented in itemised lists that read less like poetry and more like an administrative inventory.^[8] The resemblance to bureaucratic records is no accident. These lists closely parallel the offering records attested in Ur III economic texts — the clay tablets on which temple administrators documented the actual goods shipped between cities for cultic purposes.

(The detailed gift catalogue closely parallels real cultic offerings documented in administrative tablets, suggesting the composition served as a mythic charter for actual barge processions and offering deliveries between Ur and Nippur.^[9])

In this composition, myth and administration converge. The poet who catalogued Nanna's cargo was not merely describing a divine journey; he was encoding the economic reality of the Ur-Nippur relationship into a sacred narrative. The cattle and grain loaded onto the god's barge were the same

cattle and grain loaded onto actual barges that made the same journey along the same canals. The myth did not merely reflect the practice. It sanctioned it.

The barge sets out, and what follows is a detailed itinerary along the canal route from Ur to Nippur, with named stopping points at intermediate cities and cult centres.^[10] At each stop Nanna presents gifts to the local deity and receives a welcome, laying out a ritual geography of southern Mesopotamia that maps the sacred landscape with the precision of a surveyor.^[11]

The pattern at each station is the same: Nanna arrives, offers gifts to the local god, receives hospitality and blessing, and moves on. The repetition is not monotony — it is structure. Each stop confirms the same proposition: the journey from Ur to Nippur is not merely a transit but a procession through a connected network of cult centres, each of which acknowledges Nanna's passage and, by extension, the legitimacy of the relationship his journey enacts.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Several lines (approximately lines 170–195) describing stops along the canal route are partially damaged. Overlapping manuscripts restore most of the itinerary, but some station names and gift descriptions remain uncertain.]

The itinerary itself, with its sequence of named cities and waterways, documents the actual geography and canal network of the Ur-Nippur corridor as understood in the Old Babylonian period.^[12] The text functions, among other things, as a map — not a drawn map, because the Sumerians encoded their geography in narrative rather than cartography, but a map nonetheless. The cities it names were real cities. The canals it traces were real canals. The distances it implies correspond, so far as we can determine, to the actual distances between the settlements it mentions. When a scribal student copied this text, he was learning the geography of southern Mesopotamia at the same time he was learning its mythology. Sumerian pedagogy, as so often, did several things at once.

Nanna arrives at Nippur and approaches the Ekur, the temple of Enlil.^[13] The journey is complete. The son has reached the father's house. The barge has carried its cargo the full length of the canal system from the southern city to the religious capital, and now the purpose of the journey can be fulfilled.

Nanna presents his cargo of offerings to Enlil at the Ekur, and the text catalogues the gifts in a second detailed list.^[14] This is the moment the composition has been building toward — not a battle, not a transformation, not a trick, but a presentation of goods. The drama of this text is economic. The climax is a delivery receipt. And yet the stakes are as high as in any combat myth, because what Nanna seeks in return for his cargo is not profit but legitimation.

ETCSL 1.5.1, gift-catalogue and blessing formulae as rendered in the ETCSL composite.^[15]

Enlil, pleased with his son's offerings, pronounces an extended blessing upon Ur.^[16] The blessing is the counterpart to the cargo — the return on Nanna's investment, to put it in terms the Ur III accountants would have recognised. Nanna brought cattle, grain, and dairy products up the canal. Enlil sends back something no barge can carry: divine favour.

The blessing encompasses agricultural abundance, commercial prosperity, and military security for Ur and its people, granted through Enlil's supreme divine authority.^[17] The scope is comprehensive. Enlil does not bless a single harvest or a single campaign. He blesses the entire apparatus of Ur's existence — its fields, its trade, its defences. The city that sends offerings to Nippur receives in return the assurance that it will prosper in every domain that matters: food to eat, goods to trade, and walls that hold.

The blessing legitimates, and the mechanics of that legitimation repay a closer look. Enlil's endorsement of Ur through Nanna validates the political and cultic pre-eminence of Ur within the Sumerian city-state system.^[18] This is not a courtesy. It is the theological foundation of political authority. In the Sumerian system, no city ruled by its own decision. It ruled because Enlil — and through Enlil, the divine assembly at Nippur — decreed that it should. The blessing Nanna receives is, in effect, a charter: Ur may prosper because Nippur has said so. The son may flourish because the father has approved.

Nanna returns to Ur bearing his father's blessing, and the composition concludes with praise for the restored prosperity of the city.^[19] The circuit is complete. Goods went up the canal from Ur to Nippur. Blessing came back down the canal from Nippur to Ur. The system works.

The composition, then, is not primarily a narrative of adventure or conflict. It explains an institution. Its ritual-aetiological function comes first: it provides a mythic charter for the regular delivery of offerings from Ur to Nippur's Ekur temple, mapping divine action onto attested cultic practice.^[20] When barges loaded with cattle and grain departed from Ur's wharves bound for Nippur, they were re-enacting Nanna's journey. When the offerings were presented at the Ekur, the priests were performing what Nanna had performed. The myth was not a story about something that happened once; it was the template for something that happened regularly.

The royal-legitimation function operates through the reciprocal logic of the journey itself: Ur sends offerings to Nippur and receives Enlil's blessing in return, encoding the dependence of secular power on religious sanction.^[21] The relationship is not subordination in any simple sense — Ur is not a vassal paying tribute to an overlord. It is an exchange. Ur provides material wealth. Nippur provides divine authority. Neither can function without the other, and the composition makes this mutual dependence explicit by giving equal narrative weight to both the offerings and the blessing.

The barge procession described in the text has parallels in real ritual practice: administrative texts from the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods document divine barge journeys and offering deliveries between major Sumerian cities.^[22] These were not metaphorical journeys. Actual barges, loaded with actual goods, travelled actual canals between actual temples. The divine statues may have been aboard — the evidence is suggestive though not conclusive — and the cities they passed through would have marked their transit with offerings and ceremonies of their own. The composition we are reading is the literary expression of this entire institutional apparatus.

There is a pattern here that readers of earlier chapters will recognise. In "Enki's Journey to Nibru" (ETCSL 1.1.4), the god of wisdom loads a barge at Eridu and travels to Nippur, where he presents offerings to Enlil and receives a blessing. The structure is identical: southern city loads barge, barge travels north, god presents gifts, Enlil blesses. The Sumerian mythological tradition had a template

for these journeys, and it used that template repeatedly because the political reality it encoded was itself repetitive. Every major cult city in the south needed Nippur's sanction. Every major cult city expressed that need through the same narrative form: the journey, the gifts, the blessing.

What distinguishes Nanna's journey from Enki's is the specificity of the itinerary. Where Enki's journey runs directly from Eridu to Nippur without lingering on intermediate stops, Nanna's journey maps the entire canal corridor between Ur and Nippur, naming each city and cult centre along the route. The text lays out a ritual geography — a sacred landscape in which every settlement between origin and destination takes part in the procession. The journey is not merely from point A to point B. It is a traversal of a connected system, and every node in that system matters.

The composition's manuscript distribution — attested at both Nippur and Ur — indicates it was valued at both the sending and receiving ends of the cultic relationship it describes.^[23] Nippur's scribes copied it because it confirmed their city's authority: they were the recipients of offerings, the seat of the god whose blessing made everything legitimate. Ur's scribes copied it because it confirmed their city's piety and prosperity: they were the senders of the offerings, the city whose generosity earned divine favour. Both had reason to preserve the text. Both did.

The pattern of a divine river journey by barge — a god travelling by water as both ritual act and cosmic event — is not unique to Mesopotamia. In Egypt, the barque of Ra made its daily solar journey along the celestial Nile, and the great festival processions at Thebes carried the divine images by river between temples. The structural parallel is genuine: in both traditions, a god's journey by water is at once a physical transit, a ritual performance, and a statement about the order of the cosmos.

But the Sumerian version has a distinctive flavour. Where the Egyptian barque journeys tend toward the cosmic — the sun crossing the sky, the dead navigating the underworld — Nanna's journey is relentlessly practical. It is about cattle and grain and canal stops. The divine act it sanctifies is not the motion of the heavens but the delivery of goods between temples. The offering processions between cult centres that this text charts are, at bottom, economic transactions dressed in theological language — or, equally, theological acts expressed through economic means. The distinction would not have troubled the Sumerians, who did not separate the sacred from the administrative any more than they separated the political from the divine.

What this composition offers, in the end, is a window into the machinery of Sumerian civilisation at its most characteristic. A god loads a barge. A barge travels a canal. A father blesses a son. A city receives divine favour in exchange for material offerings. The entire system — religious, political, economic — is visible in these three hundred and fifty lines. The scribal students who copied the text were not merely learning a story. They were learning how their world worked: the canals that connected its cities, the offerings that maintained its temples, the blessings that legitimated its rulers, and the reciprocal logic that held the whole structure together. A son brings gifts to his father and receives a blessing. An economic powerhouse sends goods to a religious capital and receives sanction. The pattern is the same at every scale, and the Sumerians built a civilisation on it.

[1] ETCSL 1.5.1, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.5.1, composite text.

- [3] ETCSL 1.5.1, manuscript list.
- [4] Black et al. 2004, pp. 147–155.
- [5] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, pp. 147–148.
- [6] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, pp. 147–148.
- [7] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 1–30.
- [8] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 30–80; CDLI administrative corpus for Ur-Nippur deliveries.
- [9] Inference: Administrative texts from the Ur III period attest to regular deliveries of goods from Ur to Nippur's Ekur temple. Risk: Direct correspondence between literary and administrative texts cannot be proven; the literary list may be idealised.
- [10] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 80–170.
- [11] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 100–170; Black et al. 2004, pp. 149–152.
- [12] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 80–195; Kramer 1961, pp. 47–49.
- [13] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 195–230.
- [14] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 230–280.
- [15] An alternate tradition gives: "Black et al. 2004, pp. 152–154, minor editorial choices in rendering the gift-catalogue and blessing formulae". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL composite represents broad manuscript agreement and is the standard scholarly text..
- [16] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 280–330.
- [17] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 300–330; Black et al. 2004, pp. 153–155.
- [18] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 300–350; Black et al. 2004, pp. 147–148.
- [19] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 330–350.
- [20] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 1–100; CDLI administrative corpus.
- [21] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 300–350; Black et al. 2004, pp. 147–148.
- [22] CDLI; Kramer 1961, pp. 47–49.
- [23] ETCSL 1.5.1, manuscript list.

Chapter 19. The Marriage of Martu

The composition known as "The Marriage of Martu" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.7.1 and survives on Old Babylonian manuscripts; the narrative is set in the city of Ninab.^[1] The text is well preserved.^[2] Several Old Babylonian copies survive, and the ethnographic content has drawn steady scholarly interest as a rare Sumerian literary witness to how urban Sumerians perceived Amorite culture.^[3] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–162.^[4]

That last point deserves emphasis. What we have here is not a theological hymn or a cosmological treatise. It is something closer to a comedy of manners — a story whose central question is not whether the universe will survive, but whether a respectable young woman should marry someone whose people eat their meat raw. The stakes are domestic. The implications are not.

Martu — known in Akkadian as Amurru — is the divine personification of the Amorite west, the god of nomadic peoples who lived beyond the settled cities of Sumer.^[5] The name needs some unpacking. The Amorites were not a single nation in any modern sense. They were the peoples of the western steppe and hill country — semi-nomadic pastoralists who moved with their flocks along the edges of the irrigated lowlands, appearing in Sumerian administrative texts sometimes as trading partners, sometimes as threats, and sometimes simply as people who did things differently. Martu is their god. He is not merely associated with these peoples; in the logic of Sumerian theology, he is the divine reality of which they are the human expression.

The narrative is set in the ancient city of Ninab, during a festival held by the god Numushda, the local deity who serves as father of the bride in the story.^[6] Numushda is not one of the great gods of the Sumerian pantheon. He is a city god, a local patron, the kind of deity whose importance loomed enormous within his own walls and negligible outside them. But within Ninab, his festival is the event of the season, and to this festival the god Martu comes.

A festival is held in Ninab, and Martu attends.^[7] The text does not explain why a nomadic god would attend a city festival. It does not need to. The borders between settled and nomadic Mesopotamia were porous in both directions — nomads came to cities to trade, to worship, to find wives — and the story assumes this background without belaboring it.

During the festival, Martu sees the daughter of Numushda, falls in love with her, and resolves to marry her.^[8] The emotional logic here is swift and uncomplicated. He sees her. He wants her. He decides to pursue her. The Sumerian literary tradition does not, as a rule, linger on the psychology of attraction. Gods and heroes fall in love the way they do everything else — immediately and with complete conviction.

Martu presents himself as a suitor, and the question of his suitability — a nomadic god among settled city-dwellers — becomes the central dramatic tension.^[9] Here the composition finds its real subject. The problem is not that Martu is unworthy in any absolute sense. He is a god, after all. The problem is that he is the wrong kind of god — or rather, the god of the wrong kind of people. He represents everything that urban Sumerians defined themselves against: the open steppe, the

absence of walls, the life without grain stores and temple precincts and the accumulated refinements of city existence.

The objections come not from the bride herself, and not from her father Numushda, but from a female friend. The friend delivers an extended warning speech that describes the customs of nomadic Amorite life in vivid ethnographic detail: the Amorites eat raw meat, have no permanent houses, do not bury their dead properly, dig up truffles in the steppe, and lack the refinements of urban civilisation.^[10]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Portions of the friend's warning speech about nomadic life (approximately lines 120–140) are partially broken. Overlapping manuscripts restore most of the speech, but some details of the ethnographic catalogue remain uncertain.]

ETCSL 1.7.1, rendering of the ethnographic catalogue of nomadic habits.^[11]

The speech is worth pausing over, because it is one of the most sustained pieces of ethnographic description in the entire Sumerian literary corpus. The friend does not accuse Martu of being evil, or dangerous, or malicious. She accuses him of being uncivilised — which, in the value system of urban Sumer, was considerably worse. Evil could be propitiated. Uncivilised was a condition.

The catalogue of nomadic habits defines by negation: the Amorites are described not by what they do, but by what they fail to do relative to settled civilisation. They do not prepare food properly. They do not build permanent dwellings. They do not observe funerary rites.^[12] Every item in the list marks a feature of urbanity that the nomads lack. The friend is not describing a different way of life; she is describing the absence of civilisation itself, as she and her culture understand the term. The raw meat is not merely a dietary preference — it is evidence of a people who have not crossed the threshold from nature into culture. The lack of permanent houses is not merely an architectural choice — it is proof that the Amorites have no fixed relationship to the earth, no investment in place, no share in the great settled project of irrigation and agriculture that defined Sumerian identity.

The friend's speech works as an ethnographic catalogue that reflects how urban Sumerians perceived the Amorite peoples: the nomads are defined by what they lack relative to settled civilisation — proper food preparation, permanent dwelling, and funerary rites.^[13]

The bride listens to all of this. And then she makes her choice.

Despite the warnings, the bride willingly accepts Martu as her husband, choosing the nomadic god over the objections her friend has raised.^[14] The text does not record her reasoning. It does not tell us whether she found the friend's arguments unconvincing, or whether she found them entirely convincing and chose Martu anyway. It simply reports her decision: she will marry him.

Her acceptance resolves the narrative: the cultural boundary between settled and nomadic life is crossed by a voluntary choice, not by coercion.^[15] This is the hinge on which the entire composition turns. No one forces the bride. No divine decree compels her. No father sells her or trades her. She chooses, freely and explicitly, to cross the boundary that her friend has just spent an extended speech defining as uncrossable.

The composition works as a literary comedy of cultural encounter, staging the tension between settled Sumerian civilisation and the nomadic Amorite world through a marriage negotiation.^[16] The word "comedy" here carries its structural sense: the story moves from social disruption (an unsuitable suitor appears) toward social integration (the marriage occurs). No one dies. No city is destroyed. The crisis is resolved over the dinner table, not on the battlefield.

The text teaches through the bride's willingness to accept integration across cultural boundaries — a message that may reflect the historical reality of Amorite absorption into Mesopotamian urban society during the late third and early second millennium BCE.^[17] By the time the Old Babylonian scribes were copying this composition in their schools, the Amorites were not strangers at the gate. They were the rulers. The First Dynasty of Babylon — the dynasty of Hammurabi himself — was Amorite. The people whom the friend's speech describes as troglodytes who eat raw meat and dig up truffles had, by the early second millennium, conquered and governed the most sophisticated urban civilisation in the world.

(The text's sympathetic treatment of the bride's choice — she is not punished for marrying outside her culture — suggests that by the Old Babylonian period, Amorite integration was an accepted social reality that the literary tradition could treat with humour rather than anxiety.^[18])

That historical context gives the composition a layer of irony the original audience would have appreciated. The friend's speech cataloguing Amorite barbarism was being recited in schools run by an Amorite dynasty. The students copying these tablets may well have had Amorite grandparents. The horror at nomadic customs had become, by the time of the text's transmission, a literary convention rather than a lived anxiety — a joke whose punchline the audience already knew. The bride was right to accept Martu. History had proved it.

Whether the composition was originally composed with this ironic intent, or whether the irony accumulated as the historical situation changed, is a question the tablets cannot answer. What we can say is that the text, as it reached its Old Babylonian form, reads most naturally as a comedy — a story in which the anxieties of cultural encounter are raised, examined, and then dissolved by the simple expedient of a woman deciding that love, or at least preference, outweighs ethnographic objections.

The pattern — marriage across cultural boundaries as a literary exploration of assimilation — is not unique to Sumer. Greek literature produced its own versions, from the marriages of Greek heroes with foreign princesses to the broader literary tradition of encounters between "civilised" and "barbarian" peoples. The civilised-versus-nomadic bride narrative recurs across the ancient Near East as a literary form.^[19] But the Sumerian version has a directness that is hard to match. There is no ambiguity about what the friend thinks of the Amorites. There is no ambiguity about what the bride decides. And the text, in its compact and well-preserved form, lets the tension between these two positions speak for itself.

[1] ETCSL 1.7.1, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.7.1, composite text.

[3] ETCSL 1.7.1, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–157.

[4] Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–162.

[5] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–157.

[6] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 1–30.

[7] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 1–40.

[8] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 40–70.

[9] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 70–100; Black et al. 2004, pp. 158–160.

[10] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 100–140; Black et al. 2004, pp. 159–161.

[11] An alternate tradition gives: "Black et al. 2004, pp. 159–161, minor editorial choices in rendering the ethnographic catalogue". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL composite represents consistent manuscript tradition and is the standard text..

[12] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 100–140; Kramer 1961, pp. 101–103.

[13] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 100–140; Kramer 1961, pp. 101–103.

[14] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 140–155; Black et al. 2004, pp. 161–162.

[15] Black et al. 2004, pp. 161–162.

[16] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 100–155; Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–162.

[17] Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–162; Kramer 1961, pp. 101–103.

[18] Inference: The historical record shows extensive Amorite settlement and political dominance in Mesopotamia by the early second millennium (the First Dynasty of Babylon was Amorite). Risk: The text's tone is debated; some scholars read the friend's speech as genuinely cautionary rather than comic.

[19] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 100–155; Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–162.

Chapter 20. Gilgamesh and Aga: The Siege of Uruk

The composition is catalogued as ETCSL 1.8.1.1 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets of roughly 115 lines.^[1] It is mostly complete—the shortest and most cohesive of the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems, and unique in containing no supernatural elements.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 279-284, and George 2003.^[3]

That last point deserves emphasis. Every other Sumerian poem about Gilgamesh involves the gods, the underworld, monsters, or some combination of the three. This one does not. No divine interventions, no prophetic dreams, no supernatural adversaries—only two cities, two kings, two political assemblies, and a wall. The stakes are entirely human, the mechanisms entirely political, and the result is the closest thing the Sumerian literary corpus produces to a historical narrative.

Gilgamesh (Sumerian: Bilgames) is king of Uruk (Sumerian: Unug), a semi-divine hero who rules the great walled city of southern Mesopotamia.^[4] Aga is king of Kish, the rival city whose hegemony over the Sumerian city-states Gilgamesh challenges.^[5] These are the only two characters who truly matter, and the composition wastes no time establishing their positions. Gilgamesh rules the south. Aga claims supremacy over all of Sumer. Something has to give.

ETCSL 1.8.1.1 is the shortest and most cohesive of the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems, roughly 115 lines, and unique among Gilgamesh narratives in containing no supernatural elements whatsoever.^[6] The text is well attested in Old Babylonian copies, and scribes valued it for its historical kernel: it reflects real political tensions between the city-states of Uruk and Kish in the Early Dynastic period.^[7]

That historical kernel deserves a moment's attention. Kish and Uruk were both real cities. The Sumerian King List records dynasties at both, and sources well beyond this poem attest to their struggle for hegemony over the Sumerian plain. When the composition has Aga demand submission from Gilgamesh, it dramatises a conflict with real antecedents in the political history of the Early Dynastic period—roughly the middle of the third millennium BCE. The poem is not history in any modern sense. But it is not fantasy either. It occupies a category the Sumerians understood better than we do: the literary encoding of political memory.

The crisis begins with a demand. Aga, king of Kish, sends envoys to Uruk demanding the city's submission—specifically, that Uruk perform corvée labour for Kish.^[8] The demand is not for tribute in gold or grain. It is for labour—the most direct assertion of political dominance available in a society where the great public works, canals, temples, fortification walls, were built by the conscripted muscle of subject populations. Accepting Kish's demand would acknowledge Uruk as a subordinate city. Refusing it would invite war.

What Gilgamesh does next is the most politically remarkable passage in the entire Sumerian literary corpus. He does not simply decide. He consults.

Gilgamesh first presents Kish's demand to the assembly of elders of Uruk, seeking their counsel.^[9]

The elders counsel submission, advising that Uruk should yield and perform the demanded labour rather than risk war.^[10] Their reasoning is pragmatic and conservative: Kish is powerful, war is uncertain, and the costs of resistance may exceed the costs of compliance. These are the arguments of men who have lived long enough to know what wars do to cities.

Dissatisfied with the elders' counsel, Gilgamesh brings the same demand before the assembly of fighting men, the young men of the city.^[11] They endorse resistance and urge him not to submit to Kish.^[12] Their reasoning is equally characteristic: they are the ones who would do the fighting, and they would rather fight than dig canals for a foreign king.

The bicameral structure — elders counselling caution, young men urging war — has been widely discussed as evidence for early political assemblies and proto-democratic institutions in Sumer.^[13]

(The text preserves the earliest known literary representation of a two-tier political assembly, with distinct bodies of elders and warriors deliberating separately on a question of war and peace.^[14])

The structure is worth pausing over. Here is a king who does not rule by fiat. He has the authority to decide on his own — no one in the text suggests otherwise — but he chooses to consult two distinct bodies before acting. The elders represent one constituency, the warriors another, and the two give contradictory advice. This is not consensus. It is deliberation. And the fact that a Sumerian poet thought it worth recording — worth making the structural centrepiece of a composition about kingship — tells us something important about how the Sumerians understood political authority. A king who consults is not a weak king. A king who consults two assemblies and then makes his own decision is demonstrating a particular theory of governance, one in which legitimacy derives not from unilateral decree but from hearing competing counsel.

Heartened by the young men's support, Gilgamesh chooses resistance and declares his confidence in Uruk's walls and his own strength.^[15] He sides with the warriors against the elders. The text neither criticises the elders for their caution nor praises the young men for their boldness. Both positions stand as legitimate political counsel, and Gilgamesh's choice between them is precisely that — a choice, not a correction. The composition is a tightly constructed political narrative that explores the tension between assembly counsel and royal initiative, presenting both the caution of elders and the boldness of youth as legitimate political positions.^[16]

Aga of Kish marches his army to Uruk and besieges the city.^[17] The consequences of Gilgamesh's decision arrive promptly. The young men urged war; war has come. The elders warned of conflict; they were right about that, at least. But the composition is not interested in proving either faction correct. It is interested in what happens next: a siege, and the question of who will break first.

Enkidu, companion and adviser of Gilgamesh, plays a role in the defence, though the text compresses the precise nature of his contribution.^[18] This is one of the few appearances of Enkidu in Sumerian narrative where he serves not as a wild man or a tragic hero but as a military subordinate — a counsellor and officer in a political crisis. The composition's resolutely human register extends to its treatment of Enkidu: he is not the man of the wilderness here. He is a man on a wall.

A warrior named Birhurturre ascends the city wall during the siege, and the besieging forces react violently to his appearance.^[19] The moment is compressed and hard to interpret in detail — the text

moves quickly, and the exact sequence of actions is not entirely clear. What is clear is that the wall of Uruk is the stage on which the crisis plays out. Men appear on it; the enemy reacts; the dynamics of the siege shift with each appearance.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Portions of the siege climax and Aga's response (approximately lines 85-95) are partially damaged. Manuscript overlap restores most of the sequence, but the precise mechanics of the climactic moment remain uncertain in places.]

ETCSL 1.8.1.1, standard composite rendering of the assembly speeches and siege sequence.^[20]

Gilgamesh himself ascends the wall, and his appearance—his physical splendour and terrifying presence—has a decisive effect on the besieging army.^[21] This is the climax of the composition, and it is worth noting what does not happen. No god intervenes. No supernatural weapon is deployed. No prayer is answered by divine fire. Gilgamesh simply appears on the wall, and the effect of his presence—his physical stature, his royal bearing, the sheer fact of him standing above the battlements—is enough. In a corpus where divine radiance routinely flattens armies and monsters die under enchanted weapons, this is startlingly naturalistic. The king stands on his wall. The enemy falters. The mechanism is charisma, not magic.

Aga is captured by the forces of Uruk.^[22] The siege ends, and Uruk has won. The young men were right: resistance was possible. The elders were not wrong: war did come. But the city held, and the king of Kish is now a prisoner in the city he came to subjugate.

What follows is the most interesting moment in the poem. Gilgamesh releases Aga rather than killing or humiliating him, acknowledging a prior debt of gratitude—a gesture of magnanimity, not weakness.^[23] The text is explicit: Gilgamesh owes Aga something. It does not fully spell out the prior obligation—the text compresses what was presumably a well-known backstory into a few lines—but the implication is clear. Aga had done Gilgamesh a favour at some earlier point, and Gilgamesh, now holding Aga's life in his hands, chooses to repay it.

(Gilgamesh's release of Aga and acknowledgement of a past favour suggests a complex political ethic in which martial victory is tempered by reciprocal obligation.^[24])

This is not mercy in the sentimental sense. It is the application of a political principle: that relationships between rulers are governed by reciprocal obligation, and that a debt of gratitude survives even war. Gilgamesh could have executed Aga and eliminated Kish's challenge permanently. Instead he released a defeated enemy, and in doing so demonstrated something more valuable than mere military supremacy. He demonstrated that he understood the rules of the game—that kingship in Sumer was not simply a matter of force but of conduct, not merely of winning but of winning correctly.

The composition concludes with a formulaic praise of Gilgamesh and of Uruk's independence from Kish's hegemony.^[25] The ending is swift—two or three lines of praise after a hundred lines of political narrative. But the brevity is appropriate. The point has been made. Uruk is free. Gilgamesh is king. Kish's claim to hegemony has been tested and broken.

The text's royal-legitimation function establishes Uruk's independence from Kish and Gilgamesh's

authority as a ruler who consults assemblies but ultimately acts on his own judgement, backed by the warrior class.^[26] This is not a text that advocates democracy. It advocates a specific model of kingship: a king who listens before he acts, draws his mandate from the young warriors rather than the cautious elders, defends his city's autonomy against imperial claims, and tempers victory with reciprocal obligation. Every element of the narrative supports this model. The assemblies exist so that Gilgamesh can be seen consulting them. The elders' caution exists so that Gilgamesh can be seen overruling it. Aga's capture exists so that Gilgamesh can be seen releasing him. The composition is not describing how Sumerian politics worked. It is prescribing how a great king ought to behave.

The complete absence of divine intervention, prophecy, or supernatural elements makes this composition unique among the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems and gives it a quasi-historical character unparalleled in the rest of the corpus.^[27] This is the Gilgamesh poem that reads most like a political treatise. No monster to slay, no underworld to visit, no divine verdict to receive. Only a demand, a deliberation, a siege, a capture, and a release. The entire arc of the narrative could have happened—and something very like it probably did happen, at some point in the long rivalry between Uruk and Kish during the Early Dynastic period. The scribes who preserved this text in their schools were not copying a fairy tale. They were copying a lesson in statecraft.

And the lesson remains, across four thousand years, a remarkably coherent one. The problem the text poses—how should a ruler respond when a more powerful neighbour demands submission?—does not belong exclusively to the third millennium BCE. The solution it proposes—consult widely, choose boldly, defend stubbornly, and treat the defeated enemy with a magnanimity that creates obligation rather than resentment—is a political philosophy, not merely a plot. The 115 lines of "Gilgamesh and Aga" contain no gods, no monsters, and no magic. They contain something rarer in the ancient literary record: a theory of governance.

[1] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, composite text.

[3] Black et al. 2004, pp. 279-284; George 2003.

[4] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 1-5; George 2003, pp. 141-142.

[5] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 1-10; Black et al. 2004, pp. 279-280.

[6] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 1-115; George 2003, pp. 141-142.

[7] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, manuscript list

[8] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 1-12; Black et al. 2004, pp. 280-281.

[9] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 13-23.

[10] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 24-30; George 2003, pp. 143-144.

[11] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 31-40.

[12] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 41-50; Black et al. 2004, pp. 281-282.

[13] George 2003, pp. 141-142

[14] Inference: Both George and Kramer identify the structure as reflecting actual Early Dynastic political institutions. Risk: Whether these literary assemblies reflect real constitutional structures or are literary conventions remains debated; the text is a literary composition, not a constitutional document.

[15] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 50-60; George 2003, pp. 144-145.

[16] Black et al. 2004, pp. 279-280; George 2003, pp. 141-142.

[17] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 60-75.

[18] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 70-85; Black et al. 2004, pp. 282-283.

[19] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 75-85; George 2003, pp. 145-146.

[20] An alternate tradition gives: "George 2003, pp. 143-148, minor variant readings in the assembly speeches based on collation of additional fragments". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL composite is the standard scholarly text; George's

variants are minor and do not alter the narrative structure..

[21] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 85-100.

[22] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 100-108; Black et al. 2004, pp. 283-284.

[23] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 108-113; George 2003, pp. 147-148.

[24] Inference: The text explicitly mentions a prior relationship or debt between Gilgamesh and Aga. Risk: The exact nature of the prior obligation is unclear owing to textual compression; interpretations vary.

[25] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 113-115.

[26] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 1-30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 279-280.

[27] George 2003, pp. 141-142.

Chapter 21. Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven

The composition known to scholars as "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.8.1.2 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) and a later version from Tell Haddad (ancient Me-Turan).^[1] It is, to put the matter plainly, a ruin. The tablets are badly damaged, especially in the sections describing the confrontation with the bull itself — the very event that gives the composition its name.^[2]

Three versions survive: one of unknown provenance, the Me-Turan version, and a Nippur Ur III fragment. All are badly broken. Together they preserve enough to reconstruct the narrative's outline, but not enough to read it continuously. The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, drawing on what survives from each witness.^[3]

[At this point the tablet breaks. The composition is heavily damaged overall. Three versions survive (unknown provenance, Me-Turan, Nibru Ur III fragment), all substantially fragmentary. However, the version of unknown provenance preserves recognizable narrative of the Bull's devastation (Segment B, lines 55–63) and the Me-Turan version preserves the combat conclusion including the killing blow and aftermath (Segment D, lines 33–53). The Akkadian Gilgamesh Tablet VI is a separate tradition and must not be used to fill gaps. Reconstruction from Sumerian sources is partial, with important contributions from the Me-Turan manuscripts published by Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi (1993).]

The story, insofar as the broken tablets allow us to tell it, goes as follows.

The text narrates the episode in which Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — sends the Bull of Heaven against Uruk (Sumerian: Unug), the great walled city of southern Mesopotamia. Gilgamesh (Sumerian: Bilgames), king of Uruk and two-thirds divine hero, slays the beast together with his companion Enkidu.^[4] The Bull of Heaven — in Sumerian *gud an-na*, known in scholarship as Gugalanna — is a cosmic beast, a weapon of divine wrath sent down from the sky to punish a city.

Why Inanna attacks is harder to say. The surviving lines suggest a perceived affront or rejection by Gilgamesh as the trigger — the goddess offended, the king unyielding — but the precise cause is lost.^[5] The text makes clear that Inanna acts; it does not preserve, in readable form, exactly why.

(The motivation for Inanna's sending of the bull appears to involve Gilgamesh's rejection of her advances or some form of insult, consistent with the broader tradition.^[6])

What the Bull does to Uruk, by contrast, survives with striking clarity. The version of unknown provenance preserves the destruction in Segment B, lines 55 through 63: the Bull devours the pasture, drinks the river in great slurps, breaks the palm trees, and submerges Kulaba.^[7] The devastation is ecological before it is military. The beast does not attack the walls or the soldiers first — it consumes the landscape. Pasture, water, trees: the infrastructure of life in a Mesopotamian city, swallowed or shattered by a creature operating on a cosmic scale.

The combat itself — the central action of the composition — is where the tablets fail us most severely. The version of unknown provenance breaks off in the combat section. The Me-Turan version, discovered at Tell Haddad, preserves the combat's conclusion in Segment D, lines 33 through 53, and from these lines we learn the essentials: Gilgamesh and Enkidu confront and slay the Bull of Heaven together.^[8] The Me-Turan text is specific about the killing blow — Gilgamesh smites the Bull's skull with his axe weighing seven talents. After the kill, Enkidu strikes Inanna with a haunch of the slain beast, and she flees. The heroes then consign the Bull's hide and intestines to the streets.

The seven-talent axe is a characteristic Sumerian heroic detail: the weapon is impossibly heavy, the hero impossibly strong, and the text does not pause to explain how a mortal lifts what should be beyond mortal lifting. The haunch thrown at Inanna is a different kind of detail — a deliberate insult, a trophy of the kill flung at the deity who sent the beast. She flees. The goddess who dispatched a cosmic weapon retreats before mortal heroes who have broken it.

Slaying the Bull of Heaven is a direct challenge to divine authority.^[9] A major deity — Inanna, patron of Uruk itself — sent the beast, and mortal heroes destroyed it. The episode dramatises, with considerable force, the limits of divine power. A goddess acts; heroes respond; the goddess loses. The pattern is straightforward, and the theological implications are not subtle. There are things that even a god cannot accomplish when a sufficiently determined human stands in the way.

The literary text survives in poor condition, but another category of evidence tells us that this episode was central to the Gilgamesh tradition. Hero-versus-bull combat is one of the most common Mesopotamian seal motifs, appearing from the Early Dynastic period onward.^[10] Cylinder seals depicting a hero grappling with a bull turn up across centuries and across the full geographic range of Mesopotamian culture. Whether these generic bull-combat scenes depict the specific Gilgamesh narrative is, however, debated — most show a conventional struggle without identifying labels, and only a small number of explicitly labeled or contextually clear cases can be linked with confidence to this particular story.

Still, the prevalence of the bull-slaying scene confirms what the broken tablets can only hint at: this episode was one of the most widely known and most frequently represented elements of the Gilgamesh cycle.^[11] The images survived where the words did not. Thousands of seal impressions preserve the scene that the cuneiform tablets have largely lost.

A note on the relationship between the Sumerian and Akkadian traditions is necessary. The Akkadian Gilgamesh epic — specifically Standard Babylonian Tablet VI — contains a fully developed version of the Bull of Heaven episode, complete with Inanna's courtship, Gilgamesh's rejection speech, and a detailed battle narrative.^[12] It would be tempting to use that version to fill the gaps in the Sumerian text. George, however, identifies the Akkadian account as a separate literary tradition that developed from, but is not identical to, the Sumerian composition. The two share a common narrative kernel — Inanna's offence, the bull's attack, the heroes' slaying — but the Akkadian version represents an independent literary development, not a translation.

(The Sumerian and Akkadian Bull of Heaven episodes share a common narrative kernel — Inanna's offence, the bull's attack, the heroes' slaying — but the Akkadian version represents an independent literary development, not a translation.^[13])

The degree of direct literary dependence between the two versions cannot be established, precisely because the Sumerian text is too damaged to permit a detailed comparison. What we have is a Sumerian skeleton and an Akkadian elaboration, and the honest course is to present the skeleton as it is rather than dress it in borrowed flesh.

What remains, then, is a composition defined as much by its absences as by its surviving lines. We have the devastation — pastures consumed, rivers drained, palm trees broken, Kulaba submerged. We have the climax — the seven-talent axe, the shattered skull, the haunch thrown at a fleeing goddess. And between them we have silence, where the tablets have crumbled and the narrative is lost. The bull-slaying motif that runs through thousands of cylinder seals — heroes grappling with divine beasts in an image so persistent that it became one of the defining visual signatures of Mesopotamian culture — originated in a story we can no longer fully read.

The cosmic bull-slaying as ritual and mythic act echoes far beyond Mesopotamia. The Roman cult of Mithras placed the tauroctony — the ritual slaughter of a bull — at the centre of its mysteries. The Greek tradition sent Heracles against the Cretan Bull and Theseus against the Minotaur. The pattern of a divine weapon, sent by an offended deity and defeated by mortal heroes, is widespread. But the Sumerian version, fragmentary as it is, may be the oldest literary instance we possess of a narrative pattern that would prove remarkably durable: the hero who stands against a beast of heaven and wins.

[1] ETCSL 1.8.1.2, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.8.1.2, composite text.

[3] ETCSL composite text.

[4] ETCSL 1.8.1.2, composite text (heavily damaged).

[5] ETCSL 1.8.1.2, surviving lines; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 10–12.

[6] Inference: The Sumerian fragments preserve enough context to suggest a conflict between Inanna and Gilgamesh as the trigger. Risk: The precise cause is lost in the Sumerian version; this inference is supported by the broader tradition but cannot be confirmed from the surviving Sumerian text alone.

[7] ETCSL 1.8.1.2, Segment B, lines 55–63.

[8] ETCSL 1.8.1.2, Me-Turan version, Segment D, lines 33–53.

[9] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 10–12.

[10] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 10–12.

[11] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 10–12.

[12] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 10–12.

[13] Inference: George 2003 explicitly distinguishes the two traditions. Risk: The degree of direct literary dependence between the Sumerian and Akkadian versions cannot be established given the fragmentary state of the Sumerian text.

Chapter 22. Gilgamesh and Huwawa: The Cedar Forest

The story of Gilgamesh's expedition to the Cedar Forest survives in two independent Sumerian compositions: Version A (ETCSL 1.8.1.5, approximately 202 lines) and Version B (ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1, approximately 168 extant lines with additional gaps). Both are Old Babylonian Sumerian texts, independent of the Akkadian Cedar Forest episode in the Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh epic.^[1] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 269–278; George 2003.^[2]

Two compositions, then, not one. They tell the same story—a journey, a confrontation, a killing, divine anger—but they tell it differently.^[3] Version A is the longer and better preserved, one of the best-attested Gilgamesh poems in the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum, with more surviving copies than nearly any other Gilgamesh composition.^[4] Version B is shorter, a distinct composition with its own manuscript tradition, well attested in its own right but preserved in fewer copies than Version A.^[5] Where Version A foregrounds cleverness—the trick that disarms a monster—Version B foregrounds psychology: the fear that precedes the fight, the dread that fills the forest before a single blow is struck.

George distinguishes these two Sumerian versions at length from each other and from the Akkadian Cedar Forest episode (Tablets IV–V of the Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh epic), showing that all three are independent literary treatments of a shared tradition.^[6] The Akkadian text is a different thing, composed for a different audience in a different language at a different time. What follows here are the Sumerian versions, each on its own terms.

22.1. Version A: The Trick with the Auras

The poem opens with a statement of purpose so blunt it barely qualifies as narrative. Gilgamesh (Sumerian: Bilgames), king of Uruk (Sumerian: Unug), announces his determination to journey to the Cedar Forest and establish a lasting name, citing mortality as his motivation: since death is inevitable, fame is the only enduring legacy.^[7] The logic is pitiless and perfectly clear. Everyone dies. The dead are forgotten. The only meaningful act available to a mortal, therefore, is something so extraordinary that the name survives after the body does not.

This is the central thematic concern of both versions, and it is worth stating plainly: what drives the entire narrative is not adventure, not conquest, not the desire for cedar timber or the thrill of combat. It is the desire for lasting fame as a response to the inevitability of death.^[8] Gilgamesh has looked at mortality, understood it, and decided to outrun it by reputation. The composition raises the central question of Sumerian heroic literature: whether the desire for lasting fame can compensate for the certainty of death.^[9] The answer, as we shall see, is not simple.

Having declared his intention, Gilgamesh does something practical. He seeks and receives the approval of the sun god Utu, who has jurisdiction over the Cedar Mountain as a foreign land.^[10] The detail matters. Gilgamesh does not simply march out of Uruk's gates and head for the mountains. He secures divine sanction first. The Cedar Mountain lies outside the jurisdiction of Uruk's own

gods — it is foreign territory, and foreign territory in Sumerian thought belongs to Utu, the sun, who crosses all lands in his daily journey. Gilgamesh is requesting, in effect, a divine travel permit for a dangerous expedition beyond the boundaries of civilisation.

He then recruits a company of warriors from Uruk to accompany him on the journey.^[11] Enkidu, companion and guide of Gilgamesh, serves as his partner through the mountain passes leading to the Cedar Forest.^[12] This is not a solo venture. It is a military operation, organised and provisioned, with a company of men at arms and a trusted guide who knows the terrain.

The expedition crosses mountainous terrain, and then something unexpected happens. The text describes Gilgamesh falling into a mysterious deep sleep after reaching the cedars, from which Enkidu struggles frantically to rouse him.^[13] It is not a casual nap. It is a heavy, unnatural slumber — the kind of thing that, in Sumerian narrative, signals proximity to the supernatural. Enkidu's attempts to wake Gilgamesh are frantic, insistent, as though the sleep itself is a danger. The Cedar Forest is not merely a remote place. It is a place where the normal rules governing consciousness and the body begin to fray.

And then they are there — in the presence of the forest's guardian. Huwawa (not Humbaba, which is the later Akkadian form of the name), who wields seven supernatural terrors, is the fearsome guardian of the Cedar Forest, appointed by Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru).^[14] These terrors are manifestations of *me-lam* — the terrifying divine radiance that emanates from gods, monsters, and sacred objects — the same supernatural power that inheres in kings and sacred objects throughout Sumerian literature.^[15] Seven auras, seven layers of divine dread. To approach Huwawa is to approach a being who radiates terror as the sun radiates heat — not as a weapon chosen and aimed, but as an inherent property of what he is.

What happens next is the heart of Version A, and it is not what one expects from a heroic epic.

Gilgamesh defeats Huwawa not by direct combat but by a trick. He offers a series of gifts — his sisters as brides, along with food, sandals, and precious stones — and with each offer Huwawa surrenders one of his seven auras, progressively stripping himself of his supernatural protection.^[16] The trick works because each gift appears generous, and Huwawa, accepting, gives back one layer of the divine radiance that makes him invulnerable. One aura for a bride. Another for food. Another for sandals. With each exchange, the guardian becomes less guardianly, less terrifying, less divine. The *me-lam* that made him what he was drains away transaction by transaction, and by the end of the sequence the fearsome protector of the Cedar Forest is simply a large creature with no defences left.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Lines 140–160 of Version A contain significant manuscript variation, with different manuscripts preserving different gift-offering sequences. The general trick-and-surrender pattern is secure, but specific content varies between manuscripts. Overlapping manuscripts for Version A allow reconstruction of most gaps; the aura-surrender trick is secure but individual offerings vary by manuscript.]

The use of *me-lam* here adds a distinctive twist to the broader Sumerian understanding of supernatural power: the seven auras, which embody the same divine radiance that inheres in gods and kings, can be bargained away like trade goods.^[17] It is as though a king could be talked out of his

majesty one piece at a time. The trick works precisely because *me-lam* is treated not as an inalienable property but as a transferable one — something that can be surrendered, exchanged, given away. This is a profoundly subversive idea in a culture that otherwise treats divine radiance as the signature of legitimate cosmic authority.

Once Huwawa has surrendered all seven auras and stands defenceless, the mood of the narrative shifts abruptly. Huwawa pleads for his life, appealing to Gilgamesh's mercy and invoking the sun god Utu.^[18] The guardian of the Cedar Forest, stripped of his terrors, is no longer terrifying. He is pathetic. He begs. He invokes the gods. He asks the hero who tricked him to show the mercy that the hero's trick has rendered possible. Without his auras, Huwawa is vulnerable in a way he was never meant to be, and his plea is the plea of a being reduced from the supernatural to the merely mortal.

Enkidu urges Gilgamesh to kill Huwawa immediately, warning against any show of mercy.^[19] His counsel is blunt and practical: the guardian is dangerous, the opportunity will not come again, and mercy is a luxury that heroes in the Cedar Forest cannot afford. There is no sentiment in it, no reflection on the ethics of the situation. There is only the cold assessment that a defenceless enemy is still an enemy, and an enemy in this forest, once released, will become a threat again.

Enkidu, enraged, decapitates Huwawa.^[20] Not Gilgamesh. Enkidu. The hero who tricked Huwawa out of his defences is not the one who strikes the killing blow. The companion does it — in a rage, decisively, without further debate.

The heroes place Huwawa's severed head in a leather sack and carry it before Enlil.^[21] One imagines they expected praise. They had accomplished what they set out to do. The Cedar Forest was conquered, the guardian slain, and the name of Gilgamesh — which was the entire point of the exercise — would endure. They brought the proof.

Enlil is not impressed.

Enlil, angered by the killing of the guardian he had appointed, redistributes Huwawa's seven auras among the natural world — to the field, the river, the reed-bed, the lion, the palace, the forest, and the goddess Nungal.^[22] The supreme god of the Sumerian pantheon takes the radiance that Gilgamesh tricked away and scatters it across the landscape, as though to ensure that the terror Huwawa once embodied will persist, distributed now among the natural forces of the world rather than concentrated in a single guardian.

(The redistribution of Huwawa's auras to the natural world after his death suggests an aetiological function: the text explains why certain natural phenomena (the terror of lions, the awesome quality of the forest) possess a numinous, fearsome quality.^[23])

The ethical ambiguity of this ending is a deliberate feature of the composition, not an accident of transmission. Huwawa was doing the duty Enlil assigned. The trick that disarmed him was dishonourable. And Enlil's anger at the heroes confirms that their victory comes at a moral cost.^[24] Gilgamesh sought fame. He achieved it. But the god who appointed Huwawa is furious, the guardian who trusted in the gifts is dead, and the divine radiance that once protected a forest now wanders loose in the world, inhabiting lions and rivers and reed-beds. The victory is real, and so is its price.

22.2. Version B: The Weight of Fear

Version B opens with a similar motivation — Gilgamesh’s desire to enter the Cedar Mountain and establish a name — but places greater weight on the psychological dimension: fear, hesitation, and the emotional burden of the quest.^[25] Where Version A begins with a hero announcing his plan with the confidence of someone who has already decided, Version B begins with a hero who wants to go and is afraid. The desire for fame is still there, but from the start it is shadowed by awareness of what the Cedar Forest contains and what entering it will cost.

The journey to the Cedar Forest is described with closer attention to the heroes’ emotional response as they approach Huwawa’s domain — the forest is a place of dread, and the text dwells on the fear inspired by the guardian’s terrifying presence.^[26] Version B’s journey section has significant textual gaps, and this characterisation rests on surviving portions supplemented by scholarly inference. But what survives is distinctive. The forest in Version B is not merely a destination to be reached; it is a psychological landscape, a place that acts on the mind before the body arrives. The dread comes first. The cedars come after. The heroes do not stride toward their adversary so much as force themselves forward through an atmosphere of accumulating terror.

[At this point the tablet breaks. The central section of Version B (approximately lines 80–110), emphasising fear and hesitation before the forest, is partially broken. Fewer manuscripts for Version B leave some lines unrestored. The general tenor of the passage is clear, but specific lines remain uncertain.]

When the encounter comes, Version B gives us something Version A touches on only lightly. Here the meeting with Huwawa includes a scene in which Huwawa weeps and appeals for mercy, a pathetic detail given greater weight than in Version A.^[27] Huwawa does not merely plead. He weeps. The guardian of the Cedar Forest, the being who wielded seven auras of divine radiance, whose very presence was designed to make the forest unapproachable — this being cries, and asks to be spared. Version B gives his helplessness a weight and texture that Version A, more interested in the mechanics of the trick, largely bypasses. Here the pathos is the point. The monster is not monstrous in his defeat. He is pitiful.

Enkidu again urges the killing.^[28] The companion’s counsel is the same in both versions: kill now, hesitate never. But in Version B, set against the greater emphasis on Huwawa’s weeping and the heroes’ own fear, Enkidu’s insistence takes on a harder edge. He is not merely being practical. He is overriding a moment of potential compassion with the ruthlessness that the quest demands.

(Version B presumably concluded with a similar decapitation, given the parallel narrative structure, but this section is not preserved in the surviving text — Version B breaks off before the decapitation scene.^[29])

(Version B presumably concluded with a similar scene of Enlil’s anger, as in Version A, but the ending of Version B is broken and this section is not preserved.^[30])

We do not know how Version B ended. The tablets break off before the killing scene, and what happened after — whether Enlil raged, whether the auras were redistributed, whether the moral calculus was the same or different — is lost. The parallel structure with Version A suggests a similar

conclusion, but suggests is not the same as preserves. The ending may have differed. We cannot know.

22.3. Two Versions, One Question

The two versions share the same narrative kernel—journey, confrontation, trick, decapitation, Enlil’s anger—but differ in emphasis: Version A foregrounds the cleverness of the trick with the auras and the ethical ambiguity of the killing; Version B foregrounds the psychological experience of fear and the pathos of Huwawa’s helplessness.^[31] Neither version is the “real” one. Neither is a draft of the other, or a corruption, or an abridgement. They are two independent compositions, each complete in its own intention, each treating the same traditional material with its own literary priorities. The Sumerian scribal tradition apparently saw no contradiction in maintaining both. Two versions of the same story, kept side by side in the same curriculum, copied by the same students, preserved with equal care. The modern instinct to choose one and discard the other would have puzzled the scribes of the *edubba*—the scribal school where these texts were copied and taught.

The narrative’s didactic function in that *edubba* context may have turned on whether cleverness and ambition justify transgressing divine boundaries—a question the text raises but does not resolve.^[32] The students who copied these tablets were copying a problem, not a solution. Gilgamesh wanted fame. He got it. He also killed a guardian who was doing his job, tricked him with false generosity, and angered the supreme god of the pantheon. Was it worth it? The composition does not say. It presents the evidence and leaves the verdict to the reader—which is, perhaps, the most sophisticated pedagogical move available to a four-thousand-year-old text.

What remains, across both versions, is the oldest sustained literary meditation on a question that would haunt the heroic traditions of many cultures: whether the desire for a name that outlasts death can justify what must be done to earn it. The Greek tradition would pose the same question through Achilles, who chose a short life and eternal fame over a long life and obscurity. The Anglo-Saxon tradition would send Beowulf into a monster’s lair for glory. The pattern is widespread. But the Sumerian versions, composed during the Old Babylonian period and copied in schools across Mesopotamia, may be the earliest literary instances in which the question is posed with this degree of moral complexity. In them the hero wins, the guardian weeps, the god is angry, and the text refuses to tell us who was right.

[1] ETCSL 1.8.1.5 and 1.8.1.5.1; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 149–174.

[2] Black et al. 2004, pp. 269–278; George 2003.

[3] ETCSL 1.8.1.5 (Version A) and ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1 (Version B), composite text.

[4] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, manuscript list; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 149–150.

[5] ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1, manuscript list; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 149–174.

[6] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 149–174.

[7] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 269–270.

[8] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 269–270.

[9] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 269–270.

[10] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 20–40; Black et al. 2004, pp. 270–271.

[11] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 40–60.

[12] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 30–50; Black et al. 2004, pp. 270–271.

- [13] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 60–90; Black et al. 2004, pp. 271–273.
- [14] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 90–120; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 155–160.
- [15] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 120–160; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 155–160.
- [16] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 120–160; Black et al. 2004, pp. 273–275.
- [17] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 120–160; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 155–160.
- [18] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 150–170; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 160–165.
- [19] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 165–180; Black et al. 2004, pp. 275–276.
- [20] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 180–190; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 165–167.
- [21] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 185–195.
- [22] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 190–202; Black et al. 2004, pp. 276–278.
- [23] Inference: The list of recipients — field, river, lion, forest — corresponds to naturally fearsome aspects of the Mesopotamian landscape. Risk: The aetiological reading is plausible but not explicitly stated in the text; the redistribution may also function simply as divine punishment of the heroes.
- [24] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 190–202; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 165–167.
- [25] ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1, lines 1–30; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 167–170.
- [26] ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1, lines 30–80; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 170–172.
- [27] ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1, lines 110–130; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 172–173.
- [28] ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1, lines 130–150; Black et al. 2004, pp. 276–278.
- [29] Inference: Parallel narrative structure with Version A. Risk: The ending may have differed.
- [30] Inference: Parallel narrative structure with Version A. Risk: The ending may have differed.
- [31] George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 149–174.
- [32] Black et al. 2004, pp. 269–270.

Chapter 23. Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World

The composition is catalogued as ETCSL 1.8.1.4 and survives on numerous Old Babylonian tablets from multiple sites.^[1] It is one of the most widely attested Sumerian Gilgamesh poems — roughly 303 lines in the ETCSL composite, with Gadotti's 2014 critical edition drawing on seventy-four manuscripts to produce a text of some 330 lines.^[2] Seventy-four manuscripts. The scribes of Nippur and their counterparts at other sites did not copy this text out of obligation alone. They copied it because the questions it asks — what happens after death, and does it matter how you lived — demanded repetition.

The text scholars read is a composite assembled from these many overlapping witnesses; no single manuscript preserves the whole.^[3] This is a composite-editorial text: the ETCSL composite draws on numerous Old Babylonian tablets to produce the standard scholarly text, and the continuous narrative that results is a modern editorial achievement, not something any ancient scribe held in his hands.^[4] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 285–296.^[5]

The composition is structurally tripartite: a cosmogonic prologue describing the separation of heaven and earth; a huluppu-tree narrative involving Inanna and Gilgamesh; and a nether-world descent-and-report sequence involving Enkidu's ghost.^[6] A single logic connects the three sections — one that runs from the origin of the cosmos to the origin of death to the question of what death means.

A note on the relationship to the Akkadian tradition is needed at the outset. Akkadian Tablet XII of the Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh epic is a partial translation of this Sumerian composition — specifically, of the descent-and-report section — appended to the epic as a supplement. It is not a variant of the Sumerian text but a direct, if selective, rendering into Akkadian.^[7] The cosmogonic prologue and the huluppu-tree narrative that open the Sumerian composition do not appear in Akkadian Tablet XII, which begins only at Enkidu's descent.^[8] Many readers therefore encounter the nether-world report through the Akkadian Gilgamesh without knowing it belongs to a longer, independent Sumerian composition with its own architecture. The Sumerian text is the original. What follows is its story.

The composition opens not with Gilgamesh but with the cosmos. In the beginning — in those days, in those far-off days, in those nights, in those far-off nights — heaven was separated from earth, and earth from heaven.^[9] The primordial separation: An carried off heaven, Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command — carried off earth, and the *kur* — the nether world, realm of the dead beneath the earth — was given to Ereshkigal — queen of the underworld — as a prize.^[10]

Three gods, three domains, three acts of division, and the universe as the Sumerians understood it is complete. Heaven above. Earth in the middle. The nether world below. The critical point is not merely architectural but temporal: the nether world is not a later addition to the cosmos, not a corruption or a punishment. It is coeval with creation, assigned to its queen from the beginning, as fundamental to the structure of reality as the sky above or the ground underfoot.

The cosmogonic prologue belongs to the composition, not to a later scribal layer, because it establishes the cosmological framework — the existence and nature of the *kur* — on which the entire subsequent narrative depends.^[11] Without these opening lines, the loss of the ritual objects to the nether world would lack its cosmic resonance. With them, every event that follows unfolds against the knowledge that the realm below is as old as the realm above, and as permanent.

Then comes a passage whose full meaning is lost. Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu — sets sail for the *kur*, and the sea attacks his boat. The keel trembles as if butted by turtles, and waves at the bow rise to devour the king like wolves.^[12] A primordial conflict, a journey by the god of wisdom toward the nether world, an ocean that fights back — a reference to a tradition whose full context is lost to us. What survives is the image: the sea rising against a god, the boat shuddering under assault, the nether world ahead.

After the cosmogonic prologue, the narrative shifts from the universal to the particular — from the origin of the cosmos to a single tree on the bank of a river.

Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — finds a huluppu tree on the bank of the Euphrates after these primordial events.^[13] The huluppu — a tree of uncertain species, sacred to Inanna — stands where the primal waters have deposited it, and Inanna sees in it something worth cultivating. She transplants the tree to her holy garden in Uruk — the great walled city of southern Mesopotamia — intending to fashion from it a throne and a bed once it has grown to maturity.^[14] A throne: the instrument of authority. A bed: the instrument of union. These two objects define Inanna's double sovereignty over political power and sexual force, and both will come from this tree, if the tree will grow.

The tree will not grow. Three creatures have infested it. A serpent that cannot be charmed nests at its roots. An Anzud bird — the divine lion-headed eagle — sets its young in the crown. And a phantom maid — *ki-sikil-lil-la*, sometimes identified with Lilith, though the connection is contested — builds her dwelling in the trunk.^[15] Root, crown, and trunk: the three zones of the tree are occupied, each by a creature that refuses to yield — a vertical cosmology in miniature, echoing the tripartite division of the cosmos that opened the composition.

Inanna weeps and appeals for help. Gilgamesh (Sumerian: *Bilgames*) — king of Uruk, two-thirds divine hero — responds. He kills the serpent at the roots, sending the Anzud bird flying with its young to the mountains and the phantom maid fleeing to the wilderness.^[16] The hero does not negotiate with the tree's inhabitants. He removes the keystone creature, and the structure of infestation collapses.

(The huluppu-tree episode encodes Inanna's dependence on male heroic action (Gilgamesh) to realise her aspirations (the throne and bed), while simultaneously providing the origin of the objects whose loss drives the second half of the narrative.^[17] ^[18])

Gilgamesh fells the huluppu tree and gives the trunk to Inanna for her throne and bed. From the roots and crown, he fashions two objects for himself: the *ellag* and the *ekidma* — often rendered in scholarship as *pukku* and *mekku*.^[19] Exactly what these objects are is one of the most debated questions in Sumerian philology. Proposals include a ball and mallet used in a competitive game, a drum and drumstick, or ritual objects of unknown function. The identification remains unresolved. What the text makes clear is that the objects matter — they come from the sacred tree, they are

Gilgamesh's personal possessions, and they drive everything that follows.

(The exact identification of the pukku and mekku is uncertain. Proposals include a ball and mallet used in a game, a drum and drumstick, or ritual objects of unknown function.^[20])

What Gilgamesh does with the pukku and mekku is not entirely clear, but its effects are. He uses them in a way that oppresses the young men and women of Uruk — the text records their complaints about his behaviour.^[21] Whether the oppression involves forced labour, compulsory participation in a game, or some form of ritualized dominance, the citizens cry out. Their complaint registers. In Sumerian narrative, the universe listens when people suffer — not always with sympathy, but it listens.

In response to the citizens' cries, the pukku and mekku fall into the nether world, beyond Gilgamesh's reach.^[22] The people cry, and the objects fall. The narrative logic is clear: Gilgamesh abused the objects, and they are gone — fallen into the *kur*, the same nether world created at the beginning of the composition, the same realm assigned to Ereshkigal when the cosmos was young.

Gilgamesh sits at the gate of the nether world and laments.^[23] He cannot retrieve them himself. The gate is a boundary, and the boundary holds. A hero who killed a serpent, felled a sacred tree, and fashioned ritual objects from its wood cannot reach past the threshold of the dead and take back what has fallen there. The nether world is a one-way passage, and Gilgamesh, for all his strength, stands on the wrong side of it.

Enkidu — companion and servant of Gilgamesh — volunteers to descend to the nether world and retrieve the pukku and mekku.^[24] The offer comes without hesitation. Gilgamesh cannot go; Enkidu will go in his place.

Gilgamesh accepts, but not without instruction. What follows is one of the most remarkable passages in the composition: a detailed catalogue of taboos Enkidu must observe to avoid being trapped among the dead. He must not wear clean clothes. He must not anoint himself with fine oil. He must not hurl throw-sticks. He must not hold a cornel-wood stick. He must not wear sandals. He must not make noise. He must not kiss his wife. He must not hit his wife. He must not kiss his child. He must not hit his child.^[25] Each prohibition names a behaviour that marks the living. Clean clothes, fragrant oil, sandals, the sounds of daily life, the touch of family — these are the signatures of a person who belongs above, who eats, who loves, who moves through the world as someone with a body and a place. To do any of these things in the nether world is to declare yourself alive, and to declare yourself alive among the dead is to be seized by the dead and made one of them.

The taboo catalogue functions as a guide to the boundary between life and death: each prohibition marks a behaviour that identifies the living person, and each violation marks the transition from living visitor to trapped dead.^[26] The nether world operates on recognition. It identifies the living by what the living do, and if you do what the living do, you are identified and seized.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Portions of Enkidu's taboo-breaking instructions and descent sequence (approximately lines 150–175) are partially damaged. Numerous OB tablets overlap and allow reconstruction of most gaps; the taboo catalogue is substantially secure.]

Enkidu descends. And he breaks every one of the taboos.

He does everything Gilgamesh warned him against — systematically, completely.^[27] He wears clean clothes. He anoints himself. He carries a stick. He wears sandals. He makes noise. He touches wife and child. The text enumerates each violation with the same precision Gilgamesh used to enumerate each prohibition. The instructions were clear. Enkidu heard them. And Enkidu did every single thing he was told not to do.

The text does not explain why. It does not blame Enkidu's violations on forgetfulness, on defiance, on the disorienting nature of the nether world, or on fate. It simply records the facts: he was told not to, and he did. The result is immediate and absolute. The nether world seizes Enkidu. He cannot return to the living. He is trapped among the dead.^[28]

Gilgamesh does not accept the loss. He goes to the gods.

He approaches Enlil in Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru), the religious capital of Sumer, and pleads for help in recovering Enkidu. Enlil does not help.^[29] The text does not elaborate on the refusal. It does not need to. Enlil's refusal is a structural constant in Sumerian narrative — the king of the gods maintains cosmic order, and cosmic order includes the finality of the nether world. The dead stay dead. That is the rule. Enlil does not break rules.

Gilgamesh then approaches Enki in Eridu, the oldest city in Sumerian tradition, seat of Enki's temple, the E-abzu. Enki agrees to help.^[30] Where Enlil saw a rule, Enki sees a problem. This, too, is a structural constant. Enki does not challenge the law of the nether world. He does not argue that Enkidu deserves an exception. He finds a mechanism — a technical solution to a theological problem. He instructs the sun god Utu to open a hole in the nether world through which Enkidu's ghost can rise.

The distinction is worth marking. Enlil enforces cosmic law. Enki finds loopholes in it. The nether world says the dead cannot leave, and that law holds. But Enki's solution does not violate the law — it reinterprets it. Enkidu will not leave the nether world. Enkidu's ghost will rise through a hole, speak, and return. The body stays below. The shade comes up. The law is satisfied, and the information is delivered.

Utu opens a hole in the earth, and the ghost — the gidim — of Enkidu rises from the nether world.^[31] A hole opens. A ghost rises through it. The mechanism is precise and contained — an aperture in the boundary between worlds, opened by the sun god's authority, admitting one shade and no more.

Gilgamesh and the ghost of Enkidu embrace — a moment of reunion between the living and the dead.^[32] The text records it without commentary. It does not describe tears, or joy, or the quality of touch between flesh and phantom. It says they embrace.

Then Gilgamesh asks the question the entire composition has been building toward. He asks Enkidu about conditions in the nether world. What is it like? What happens to the dead?

What follows is the most significant section of the composition and the most detailed Sumerian

eschatological text that survives: an extended catalogue of the dead, a systematic report on the fates of the deceased, organised by manner of death, number of children, and social status.^[33]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Parts of Enkidu's ghost's report on afterlife conditions (approximately lines 240–270) are fragmentary in some witnesses. Manuscript overlap covers most but not all of the catalogue of the dead; some conditions described for specific categories of the dead remain uncertain.]

Enkidu delivers the report category by category, and a single principle governs the picture that emerges: the quality of the afterlife depends on the biography of the life that preceded it. Not on moral conduct. Not on piety. Not on virtue or sin. On biography — on the specific, countable facts of how you lived and how you died.

He who had one son weeps bitterly at the base of his wall. He who had two sons sits on a pair of bricks and eats bread. He who had three sons drinks water from a waterskin. The progression continues upward. He who had seven sons sits on a throne as a companion of the gods and listens to judgments.^[34] The arithmetic is explicit. Each additional son improves the condition of the dead by one gradation. No ceiling matters except the highest — seven sons, a throne — and no floor except the lowest — no sons at all, and the wall against which you weep.

The stillborn child, who never drew breath, plays at a table of gold and silver laden with honey and ghee.^[35] The logic is systematic: the nether world assigns fates by the conditions of death, and the stillborn, having died without the weight of worldly biography, receives a default state of ease. No failures to account for. No deficit of sons. Only absence, and the absence is rewarded with honey.

And the unburied dead — those whose bodies were left in the street, who received no funeral, no lamentation, no offering — eat the scraps and crumbs tossed out in the street.^[36] Abandoned above, they are abandoned below. They eat what is thrown away, because they themselves were thrown away.

The catalogue is the most detailed Sumerian eschatological text: a systematic taxonomy of the afterlife organised by social and biographical categories.^[37] It does not moralize. It does not threaten. It does not promise reward for good behaviour or punishment for bad. The system it describes runs on a different logic entirely: the logic of biographical fact, of measurable conditions, of the specific circumstances under which a person entered the nether world. The question the dead are asked is not "Were you good?" but "How many sons did you have? Were you buried? How did you die?"

The overall picture is one of conditional welfare grounded in earthly circumstances: the quality of the afterlife depends primarily on the number of one's children, on burial status, and on manner of death.^[38]

(The absence of moral judgement in the nether-world catalogue — fates depend on biography, not ethics — represents a fundamentally different eschatological logic from traditions that organise the afterlife by moral desert.^[39])

This eschatological vision is the composition's most significant cultural contribution: the idea that the quality of one's death and afterlife depends on specific biographical facts — number of children, manner of death, proper burial — rather than on moral conduct during life.^[40]

The Sumerian nether world, as Enkidu describes it, is not a court. It is a registry. It does not evaluate. It classifies. The dead are sorted by the facts of their deaths — how many children they had, whether they were buried, whether they died in battle or by fire or by neglect — and these facts settle their condition below with the impersonal efficiency of an administrative system.

The cosmogonic prologue now reveals its structural purpose. The nether world is coeval with the cosmos: it came into being at the moment of the primal separation of heaven and earth and was assigned to Ereshkigal from the beginning.^[41] The registry has always been open. The criteria — sons, burial, manner of death — have always applied. The system was not designed after the fact to punish or reward. It was built into the cosmos from the start, as permanent as the *kur* itself.

The composition ends with the catalogue. There is no resolution, no return to the huluppu tree, no reconciliation between Gilgamesh and the nether world. The ghost of Enkidu speaks, and the text closes on the taxonomy of the dead. The last word belongs not to the hero but to the system — the nether world and its classifications, ancient and immutable, operating long before Gilgamesh was born and certain to operate long after he is gone.

Three narratives, then, woven into one composition. The separation of the cosmos. A sacred tree and the objects fashioned from it. A descent, a loss, a ghost, and a catalogue of the dead. Each part requires the others. Without the cosmogonic prologue, the nether world would be merely a setting. Without the huluppu tree, there would be no pukku and mekku, and without the pukku and mekku, there would be no loss, and without the loss, no descent, and without the descent, no ghost at the aperture between worlds, delivering the only eyewitness report the Sumerian tradition possesses of what it is like to be dead.

The seventy-four manuscripts testify to how seriously the scribes took this report. They copied it, and copied it again, and kept copying it, because the question it answers is the one that does not go away: what happens when you die, and does it matter how you lived? The Sumerian answer, delivered by a ghost to a grieving king through a hole in the ground opened by the sun, is this: it matters, but not in the way you think. It matters how many sons you had. It matters whether you were buried. It matters how you died. It does not matter whether you were good.

That answer may be the oldest surviving eschatological statement in human literature. It is certainly among the most honest.

[1] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–303, manuscript list.

[3] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, composite text.

[4] ETCSL 1.8.1.4.

[5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 285–296.

[6] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–303; Black et al. 2004, pp. 285–286.

[7] ETCSL 1.8.1.4.

[8] ETCSL 1.8.1.4.

[9] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–13.

[10] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, pp. 286–287.

[11] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–20; Black et al. 2004, pp. 285–286.

[12] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 10–20.

[13] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 20–40.

- [14] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 30–50; Black et al. 2004, pp. 287–288.
- [15] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 40–60.
- [16] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 60–80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 288–289.
- [17] Inference: The text shows Inanna unable to use the tree until Gilgamesh intervenes. Risk: This is one modern scholarly reading; the text does not make this gendered interpretation explicit.
- [18] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 20–100.
- [19] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 80–100.
- [20] Inference: Scholarly reviews of the evidence find no definitive identification. Risk: The identification remains one of the most debated questions in Sumerian philology; any specific rendering is provisional.
- [21] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 100–120; Black et al. 2004, pp. 289–290.
- [22] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 120–140.
- [23] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 140–150.
- [24] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 150–160.
- [25] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 155–185; Black et al. 2004, pp. 290–292.
- [26] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 155–210.
- [27] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 185–210.
- [28] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 210–220; Black et al. 2004, pp. 292–293.
- [29] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 220–230.
- [30] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 230–245.
- [31] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 245–250.
- [32] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 250–255.
- [33] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 255–303; Black et al. 2004, pp. 293–296.
- [34] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 260–290.
- [35] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 260–290.
- [36] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 260–290.
- [37] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 255–303.
- [38] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 280–303.
- [39] Inference: The catalogue sorts the dead by manner of death, social status, and number of children, with no mention of virtuous or sinful conduct. Risk: The text may be incomplete or selective; absence of evidence for moral judgement is not evidence of its absence in the broader tradition.
- [40] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 255–303.
- [41] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–13.

Chapter 24. The Death of Gilgamesh

The composition is catalogued as ETCSL 1.8.1.3 and survives on fragmentary tablets from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) and Tell Haddad (ancient Me-Turan).^[1] The Nippur and Tell Haddad versions differ significantly in ritual content.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite, supplemented by ETCSL composite text.^[3]

The text survives in two co-equal witnesses: a Nippur version known from fragmentary Old Babylonian tablets, and a Tell Haddad version published and analysed by George.^[4] Neither is subordinate to the other; each preserves material the other has lost. The Tell Haddad tablets expanded scholarly knowledge of this composition considerably, adding ritual and funerary content not attested in the Nippur fragments.^[5]

[At this point the tablet breaks. The Nippur manuscripts are extensively damaged, with multiple large gaps throughout. Funeral preparations and underworld reception sequences are heavily broken. The Tell Haddad version provides significant new material not available from Nippur witnesses, but the two versions do not fully overlap, leaving substantial gaps in both.]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Ritual content in the Tell Haddad version (columns ii–iv) is partially damaged. The divine judgement scene is incomplete. None; the Tell Haddad version is the only witness for its distinctive ritual content.]

Both versions are broken. The Nippur manuscripts have multiple large gaps; the Tell Haddad version preserves material the Nippur tablets have lost, but it too is damaged, particularly in the ritual columns and the divine judgement scene. What follows is the story as it can be recovered from two incomplete witnesses.

The composition ETCSL 1.8.1.3 narrates the death of Gilgamesh (Sumerian: Bilgames)—king of Uruk who confronts his mortality and is received as a judge among the dead—and his reception in the nether world.^[6]

Every other Sumerian Gilgamesh narrative tells what the hero does with his life. This one tells what happens when the life ends. The answer the Sumerian poets gave is both bleaker and more generous than one might expect. Death is absolute. Even for Gilgamesh. But death is not featureless, and the dead are not all equal.

ETCSL 1.8.1.3, Nippur version, which has been known longer and forms the basis of the ETCSL composite.^[7]

Having achieved great deeds during his life, Gilgamesh confronts the inevitability of his own death—the gods have decreed that even the greatest hero must die.^[8] There is no sudden reversal, no enemy to fight, no stratagem that might succeed. Gilgamesh has slain Huwawa in the Cedar Forest, has crossed mountains and rivers, has done everything a mortal can do to distinguish himself—and none of it changes the fundamental arithmetic. Mortals die. He is mortal. Therefore he will die.

The text appears to include a dream or divine communication in which Gilgamesh is told that immortality is not granted to mortals, however great their accomplishments—the gods have reserved eternal life for themselves.^[9] The mechanism is characteristically Sumerian: a direct statement of cosmic law, delivered without apology. The gods live forever. Men do not. The boundary is not a wall to be scaled but a fact to be absorbed.

(The divine decree against Gilgamesh's immortality echoes the theme expressed in other Sumerian Gilgamesh compositions—particularly Gilgamesh and Huwawa—that fame, not eternal life, is the only compensation for mortality.^[10])

That is the lesson the tradition has been teaching across every Gilgamesh composition: fame, not eternal life, is the only compensation for mortality. The Death of Gilgamesh is the composition in which that bargain comes due. The name will be spoken. The hero will not be there to hear it.

The text describes elaborate funeral preparations for Gilgamesh, including offerings to the gods of the nether world.^[11] Here the two versions diverge most sharply. The Nippur fragments preserve the fact of the funeral but little of its substance. The Tell Haddad version preserves much more: a detailed protocol of offerings, a formal procedure for the reception of a dead king.

The Tell Haddad version preserves substantially more detail about the funerary ritual. Offerings are presented to major underworld deities—Ereshkigal, queen of the underworld and elder sister of Inanna; Ningishzida, god of the underworld and a judge among the dead; and other divine figures—in what appears to be a formal protocol for the reception of a dead king.^[12] The ritual follows a sequence—deity by deity, gift by gift—that suggests a well-established liturgical tradition. Ereshkigal receives her offerings first. Ningishzida receives his. Other divine figures, whose names the damaged tablets only partially preserve, receive theirs in turn. A dead king does not simply arrive in the underworld. He is processed.

Gilgamesh presents gifts to the underworld deities—a ritual sequence that parallels the gift-giving protocols attested in other Sumerian literary and liturgical texts concerning the nether world.^[13] The parallel with Inanna's Descent is worth noting. When Inanna descended, she passed through seven gates and was stripped of everything. When Gilgamesh descends, he brings gifts. The living goddess entered the realm of the dead and lost everything; the dead king enters and gives everything. Both acts submit to the underworld's authority, but the forms differ. Inanna went alive and unwilling. Gilgamesh goes dead and, if not willing, at least prepared.

After death, Gilgamesh is received in the nether world not as an ordinary shade but as a figure of authority: he is granted the status of a judge among the dead.^[14] This is both less and more than immortality. Less, because Gilgamesh is still dead—he does not return to the world of the living, does not sit among the gods in heaven. More, because within the domain of the dead he is not merely one shade among millions. He has a function. He has authority. He judges.

Elevation to judge of the dead places Gilgamesh alongside Ningishzida and other underworld deities, turning him from a mortal hero into a figure with a permanent divine function in the afterlife.^[15] In life, he was two-thirds divine and one-third mortal—a fraction that made him the greatest of heroes but did not save him from the arithmetic of death. In the underworld, the

fraction shifts. He is not a god, but he exercises a divine function, judging the dead alongside figures who are gods. Death took everything from him except his merit, and his merit has earned him a role that will last as long as the dead keep coming — which is to say, forever.

(The elevation of Gilgamesh to underworld judge functions as a form of apotheosis — a partial divinisation that grants the dead hero a role surpassing that of ordinary mortals while still confining him to the nether world.^[16])

The composition's eschatological function is to assert that even for the greatest hero, death is absolute — but that extraordinary merit can earn an elevated status within death's domain, as a judge and authority among the dead rather than a mere shade.^[17] The text does not deny death, does not soften it, does not promise resurrection. What it promises is distinction — that the difference between a great life and an ordinary one persists beyond the grave. Gilgamesh is dead, but he is not merely dead. He is dead and judging.

The royal-legitimation function is significant: by showing Gilgamesh received as a divine judge in the nether world, the text legitimises the cult of dead kings and the ongoing ritual obligations of the living toward deceased rulers.^[18] This is not simply a story about one hero's fate. It is a charter for an institution. If Gilgamesh exercises divine authority in the underworld, then all dead kings share in that reflected authority, and the living owe them something — offerings, rituals, the ongoing maintenance of their cult. The theology serves the institution, and the institution serves the theology, and the text encodes both.

The damage to this text is, in one sense, appropriate. The Death of Gilgamesh is a composition about the limits of human achievement, and the tablets that preserve it have themselves suffered the same forces the text describes.

But what survives is enough. The gods decreed that Gilgamesh must die. He died. His people prepared his funeral with the care a dead king required — offerings to Ereshkigal, gifts to Ningishzida, a protocol that acknowledged the hierarchies of the underworld as precisely as any court protocol acknowledged the hierarchies of the living. And when the rituals were complete, he was not filed away among the shades. He was given authority, a chair of judgement, the function that would define his existence for eternity.

It is not immortality. The Sumerian poets were too clear-eyed for that. But it is the next best thing, and the fact that these poets — writing four thousand years ago, in a language that would itself die — understood the difference between eternal life and eternal significance may be the most durable thing about this broken, fragmentary, indispensable text.

[1] ETCSL 1.8.1.3, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.8.1.3, composite text.

[3] ETCSL composite text.

[4] ETCSL 1.8.1.3; George 1999, pp. 195–208.

[5] George 1999, pp. 195–196.

[6] ETCSL 1.8.1.3, composite text (fragmentary).

[7] An alternate tradition gives: "George 1999, pp. 200–208, Tell Haddad version, which includes significantly more ritual and funerary content, expanding the underworld reception scene". The prevalent version is chosen here because The Nippur and Tell

Haddad versions are equally authoritative witnesses to the tradition; neither is subordinate to the other..

[8] ETCSL 1.8.1.3, surviving lines; George 1999, pp. 196–200.

[9] ETCSL 1.8.1.3, surviving fragments

[10] Inference: The thematic continuity across the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems is widely noted by scholars. Risk: Given the fragmentary state of the text, the precise formulation of the decree and its relationship to other compositions cannot be fully established.

[11] ETCSL 1.8.1.3, surviving fragments; George 1999, pp. 200–204.

[12] George 1999, pp. 200–206.

[13] George 1999, pp. 202–206.

[14] ETCSL 1.8.1.3, surviving fragments; George 1999, pp. 206–208.

[15] George 1999, pp. 206–208

[16] Inference: George 2003 identifies this elevation as consistent with the Sumerian cult of dead kings, in which deceased rulers received ongoing offerings and were treated as semi-divine intercessors. Risk: The fragmentary state of the text means the precise nature and extent of Gilgamesh's underworld authority cannot be fully determined.

[17] George 1999, pp. 206–208.

[18] George 1999, pp. 200–208.

Chapter 25. Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta

The composition is catalogued as ETCSL 1.8.2.3 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets, approximately 630 lines.^[1] It is mostly preserved, though some passages describing the Aratta response are unclear; it stands as a peak achievement of Sumerian narrative poetry.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1—95; Black et al. 2004, pp. 236—251.^[3]

At approximately 636 lines, this is one of the longest and most complex Sumerian narrative poems, a peak of the genre's rhetorical sophistication.^[4] It is also one of the strangest. No battle breaks out. No one journeys to the underworld, slays a monster, or wields a divine weapon. Instead, the poem stages a contest conducted entirely by messenger—a diplomatic duel fought through increasingly elaborate verbal exchanges between two kings who never meet face to face. And at its climax, the poem records something unprecedented: the invention of writing itself, presented not as a gift from the gods but as a practical solution to a very human problem. The message had grown too long for any man to remember.

The composition is built around a series of escalating messenger exchanges between the two kings, with the messenger himself serving as the narrative vehicle—the poem never depicts the two kings meeting face to face.^[5] This messenger structure is the defining literary feature: each exchange follows a pattern of dispatch, journey, delivery, response, and return, escalating rhetorically at each round.^[6] The architecture is not a convenience. It is the point. The entire composition investigates what happens when two powers can communicate only through intermediaries—when every statement must survive the journey across seven mountain ranges in the memory of a single man walking alone.

The composition survives across multiple Old Babylonian manuscripts from Nippur and other scribal centres, attesting to wide circulation as a curriculum text in the *edubba* tradition.^[7] It is the longest composition in the Aratta cycle, which also includes Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana, Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave, and Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird; its position in the cycle's narrative sequence is debated by scholars.^[8] Vanstiphout's 2003 critical edition devotes nearly one hundred pages to the text with philological commentary and remains the primary scholarly treatment.^[9]

Enmerkar is presented as lord of Uruk (Sumerian: Unug) and son of the sun god Utu, a legendary king of the first dynasty of Uruk who seeks to make Aratta submit to his authority.^[10] The genealogy is not decorative. Enmerkar's connection to Utu—the sun god—reinforces his legitimacy; he is not merely a powerful king but a figure of divine descent.^[11] He rules from Uruk, the great walled city of southern Mesopotamia, and his ambition reaches far beyond his own walls.

The object of that ambition is Aratta—a distant, wealthy city beyond seven mountain ranges, famed as a source of precious stones, lapis lazuli, carnelian, and metals.^[12] The poem emphasises Aratta's remoteness repeatedly; the difficulty of the journey is part of the dramatic structure.^[13] Seven mountain ranges is not a number the Sumerians deployed casually. It measures the distance between the known and the almost-mythical, between the alluvial plain where cities grew from

river mud and the highland world where the earth yielded lapis lazuli and silver instead of barley and dates.

Aratta functions in the text as the exotic, wealthy other — the distant source of luxury materials that Uruk desires and claims the right to command.^[14] Despite its subordination in the narrative, Aratta is portrayed as a sophisticated civilisation with its own claims to divine favour; the lord of Aratta is no barbarian but a worthy adversary.^[15] This matters. The poem would not work if Aratta were merely a resource depot to be commandeered. The contest has meaning only because both parties believe themselves favoured by the same goddess.

That goddess is Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star. She is the patron of Uruk and the pivotal figure whose favour both Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta seek. The contest between the two kings is fundamentally a contest for her divine endorsement.^[16] Inanna does not belong to either city by default. She must be won. And the means of winning her are not swords and siege engines but words and wit.

The composition functions as royal legitimization literature: it establishes Uruk's supremacy over Aratta through a divinely backed diplomatic contest, presenting Enmerkar as the rightful hegemon.^[17] Through Enmerkar's demands for tribute and labour from Aratta, backed by Inanna's divine favour, the poem encodes Uruk's ideological claim to regional hegemony.^[18] But the encoding is subtle. No army marches. No wall is breached. Supremacy is established through a sequence of verbal exchanges so elaborate that they ultimately exceed the capacity of human speech itself.

Enmerkar prays to Inanna, asking her to compel Aratta to deliver precious stones and metals for the construction of her temple, the E-ana in Uruk.^[19] The prayer is calculated with a precision any diplomat would recognise. Enmerkar does not ask the goddess to destroy Aratta or to grant him military victory. He asks her to compel tribute — specifically, the tribute of building materials for her own temple. Lapis lazuli for the walls. Carnelian for the decorations. Gold and silver for the fittings. The framing converts a political demand into a pious act. To refuse Enmerkar is not merely to defy a foreign king; it is to deny Inanna the adornment of her own sanctuary. The genius of this opening move is that it makes the political and the theological indistinguishable. Enmerkar's ambition and Inanna's honour point in the same direction.

Inanna endorses Enmerkar's claim and instructs him to send a messenger across the mountains to demand Aratta's submission.^[20] Her endorsement establishes the ideological framework of the entire poem: Uruk's claim to supremacy rests on divine backing, not military force.^[21] She does not promise troops. She does not promise a storm to flatten Aratta's walls. She promises something more powerful and more ambiguous: her preference. She tells Enmerkar to send a messenger. That is all. The rest is up to words.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Transition passage between Inanna's endorsement and the first messenger dispatch. composite reconstruction from multiple OB manuscripts restores most of the passage.]

Before the first messenger departs, the poem contains a passage of extraordinary significance — one that has generated more scholarly debate than perhaps any other in Sumerian

literature. This is the passage known as the Incantation of Nudimmud.

The poem contains a passage known as the Incantation of Nudimmud (lines 136—155) that addresses the theme of linguistic unity; its interpretation is debated among scholars.^[22]

ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 136—155, passage placed early in the narrative as a mythological aside.^[23]

Vanstiphout/Alster and ETCSL translation: the passage is a prayer for Enki to restore linguistic unity — "may they all address Enlil together in a single language" (optative mood).^[24]

The passage describes the god Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu — changing the speech of humanity. Kramer (1961) interpreted this as Enki disrupting a primordial linguistic unity. Later scholars (Vanstiphout, Alster) and the ETCSL translation read it instead as a prayer for Enki to restore unity — "may they all address Enlil together in a single language."^[25]

The ETCSL translation renders the passage: "the whole universe, the well-guarded people — may they all address Enlil together in a single language," using optative mood that suggests a wish for unity rather than a narrative of disruption.^[26]

The distinction matters enormously. If Kramer's reading is correct, then this passage narrates the same kind of event as the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1—9 — a primordial moment when a god shattered the linguistic unity of mankind, scattering one language into many.^[27] Kramer was among the first to compare it to the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11:1—9, in which a primordial linguistic unity is disrupted by divine intervention.^[28] If the ETCSL reading is correct, then the passage is not a narrative of past disruption but a prayer for future restoration — a wish that humanity might again speak with one voice to the gods. The Sumerian verb forms are ambiguous enough to sustain both readings, and the scholarly debate remains unresolved. What is clear in either case is that the passage situates the poem within a cosmological framework: the difficulty of communication between Uruk and Aratta is not merely a practical inconvenience but a consequence of the divine ordering of the world.

(The confusion of tongues functions within the narrative as context for the communication difficulties between Uruk and Aratta — it is the mythological backdrop to the need for messengers and ultimately for writing.^[29])

What is not debated is the passage's function within the poem. Whether Enki scattered language or whether the poet is praying for Enki to reassemble it, the passage establishes the fundamental problem that drives the entire narrative: human beings do not understand one another easily. Communication across distance is difficult. Messages are fragile. And it is this fragility — the inadequacy of human speech to bridge the gap between Uruk and Aratta — that will generate every complication that follows.

Enmerkar dispatches a messenger across the seven mountain ranges to Aratta, carrying an oral demand that the lord of Aratta submit and send tribute of precious stones and metals to Uruk.^[30] One man. Seven mountain ranges. An entire diplomatic position compressed into the storage capacity of a single human memory. The messenger is not named. He never is. He is a technology, not a character — the most sophisticated communications technology available to a society that has

not yet invented the alternative.

The messenger travels the long road over the mountains and delivers Enmerkar's demand verbatim to the lord of Aratta, preserving the speech exactly as formulated.^[31] He never editorialises or alters the messages he carries; the poem presents him as a neutral conduit, reinforcing its interest in the reliability and limits of communication.^[32] The fidelity is absolute — or at least the poem presents it as absolute. The messenger reproduces Enmerkar's words as if they were inscribed in his throat. No paraphrase, no summary, no editorial gloss. This is the standard to which oral transmission aspires, and the standard against which it will eventually fail.

The lord of Aratta refuses submission, insisting that Aratta too is beloved of Inanna and that the goddess resides with him as well.^[33] The refusal is not defiance for its own sake. The lord of Aratta contests the premise, not merely the demand. His argument is theological: Inanna is not Uruk's exclusive patron. She dwells in Aratta as well. Her favour is not a settled question but an open one, and until it is settled, no demand based on her endorsement carries authority.

The lord of Aratta issues a counter-challenge, proposing a trial to determine which king Inanna truly favours.^[34] Here the composition pivots from simple demand-and-refusal into something more interesting. The lord of Aratta does not merely say no. He proposes a mechanism for resolution — a test, a trial, a contest that will reveal the goddess's true preference. The diplomatic exchange becomes a competition, and the messenger becomes its sole conduit.

The messenger crosses the seven mountain ranges between Uruk and Aratta repeatedly, and the text describes each journey in formulaic terms that recur at every exchange.^[35] Seven ranges, crossed and recrossed. The formulaic repetition is not padding. It is the poem insisting on the physical reality of distance — the sheer cost, in human endurance, of every round in this verbal contest. Each message requires a journey that must have taken weeks. Each response requires the same journey in reverse. The reader is never allowed to forget that these elaborate rhetorical exchanges are separated by mountain ranges and months of walking.

The messenger returns to Uruk with Aratta's response, and Enmerkar formulates a new, escalated demand.^[36] Enmerkar does not repeat himself. He does not simply send the same demand louder. He changes the terms.

Enmerkar sends the messenger back with a challenge involving grain: he fills nets with grain and sends them to Aratta, demanding that the lord of Aratta respond in kind with precious materials.^[37] The gesture is calculated and multilayered. Grain is what Uruk has in abundance — the gift of the alluvial plain, the product of irrigation and patient agriculture. By sending it to Aratta, Enmerkar is not offering trade. He is displaying surplus. He is saying: we have so much of this that we can afford to send it across seven mountain ranges as a diplomatic statement. The choice of commodity is not accidental. Aratta's wealth is mineral: lapis lazuli buried in mountain rock, carnelian washed from highland streams. Uruk's wealth is vegetable: barley grown in fields watered by canals that Uruk's engineers built and Uruk's labourers maintained. The grain challenge pits one kind of abundance against another and asks, implicitly, which one the goddess values more. It is an argument conducted in bushels rather than words, and it shifts the contest from theology to economics.

(The grain challenge functions as a display of Uruk's agricultural abundance, asserting economic

superiority over Aratta's mineral wealth.^[38])

The lord of Aratta is troubled by the challenge but refuses to capitulate, sending the messenger back with further counter-arguments.^[39] Troubled, but not broken. The grain has arrived, the point has been absorbed, and the lord of Aratta responds. He does not concede that Uruk's agricultural bounty trumps Aratta's mineral treasure. He sends the messenger back with counter-arguments that the surviving text does not fully preserve but that clearly kept the contest going on new ground. The messenger turns again toward the mountains. The pattern is now established in full: demand, journey, counter-demand, return journey, escalation. Each round raises the stakes. Each round adds new layers of rhetorical complexity. And each round tests the capacity of one man's memory to carry an increasingly intricate verbal payload across increasingly familiar mountains.

Enmerkar escalates further with a series of impossible challenges: he sends a demand involving a scepter made of no known material (lines 339—411), and later a challenge requiring a champion of no identifiable colour (lines 456—499) — conditions that cannot literally be met.^[40] These are not practical ultimatums. They are riddles.

The riddle challenges belong to a genre of wisdom contest in which rhetorical skill and intellectual superiority replace direct military conflict.^[41] The exchanges between Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta belong to a broader ancient Near Eastern wisdom-contest tradition in which intellectual prowess substitutes for military conflict.^[42] A scepter made of no known material. A champion of no identifiable colour. These demands exist to be impossible — puzzles designed not to be solved but to reveal, through the quality of the response, who possesses the superior mind. The contest has shifted from economics (grain versus precious stones) to pure intellect. The question is no longer which city commands more resources. The question is which king can think more cunningly.

The impossible conditions imposed by each king — demands that cannot literally be met — serve as tests of ingenuity and divine backing rather than practical ultimatums.^[43] A deeper logic is at work. In the Sumerian worldview, answering an impossible question is evidence of divine favour. The gods do not assist the unworthy. If a king can respond to a riddle that should have no answer, it is because the gods have whispered the answer to him. The riddle contest is, in effect, a mechanism for soliciting divine judgement without asking for it directly. Let both kings face the impossible. Whichever one succeeds has the gods behind him.

The lord of Aratta responds to each challenge with counter-conditions of his own, sustaining the escalating pattern of diplomatic exchange.^[44] Each round of exchanges intensifies the demands and the rhetorical complexity, with the messenger serving as the sole conduit of these increasingly elaborate verbal contests.^[45] The lord of Aratta is no one's fool. He matches riddle with riddle, impossibility with impossibility. For every condition Enmerkar imposes, the lord of Aratta invents a counter-condition of equal ingenuity. The two kings are well matched. The messenger — the same messenger, presumably, though the text does not comment on his fatigue — walks back and forth across the seven mountain ranges, carrying verbal constructions of mounting complexity in a memory that is being asked to do more than memory was designed to do.

The exchanges continue through additional rounds, with Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta each striving to outdo the other in the ingenuity and impossibility of their demands.^[46] The pattern by

now is hypnotic. Dispatch. Mountains. Delivery. Response. Mountains again. Return. Escalation. Dispatch. Mountains. The poem is ruthless in its repetitions. Each cycle follows the same structure, but the content grows more elaborate with every revolution. The formulaic journey descriptions remain fixed while the speeches they frame expand and contort.

Inanna's favour begins to tip visibly toward Enmerkar as the exchanges proceed; divine signs and portents mark Uruk as the goddess's preference.^[47] The shift is not sudden. It accumulates through small signs and implicit advantages that tilt the contest in Enmerkar's direction. The goddess does not appear and declare a winner. She allows the result to emerge from the process itself — as if the contest, properly conducted, generates its own verdict.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Several of the lord of Aratta's responses in lines 500—530 are partially damaged or unclear. overlapping manuscripts clarify some lines, but the lord of Aratta's counter-arguments remain fragmentary in places.]

etcsl 1.8.2.3, lines 500—530, ETCSL composite follows majority manuscript readings.^[48]

The damaged sections are unfortunate but not catastrophic. What the surviving text makes clear is that the lord of Aratta is weakening. His counter-arguments, where they can be read, lack the confidence of his earlier responses. The momentum of the contest has shifted. Inanna's preference, never explicitly declared, has become legible in the texture of the exchanges themselves — in the growing assurance of Enmerkar's challenges and the growing strain of the lord of Aratta's replies. The goddess has not spoken. She has not needed to. The contest is revealing her preference through its own dynamics, and the dynamics favour Uruk. But the climax has not yet arrived. That comes next, and it comes from a failure — not a failure of nerve or of wit, but a failure of the most basic technology on which the entire contest depends.

The messenger must memorise and reproduce the kings' speeches verbatim; the fidelity of oral transmission is a central concern of the poem, setting up the climactic failure that necessitates writing.^[49] The poem has been building toward this moment since its first line. Every exchange has been longer and more complex than the last. Every round has demanded more of the messenger's memory. The formulaic journey descriptions have remained constant, but the speeches they bookend have swelled from statements into arguments, from arguments into riddles, from riddles into elaborate rhetorical constructions that strain the limits of human recollection.

The poem reaches a climactic moment when Enmerkar's message becomes too complex for the messenger to carry in his memory; the messenger cannot repeat it accurately.^[50] And there it is. The breaking point. After all these exchanges — after crossing and recrossing the seven mountain ranges, after delivering and reproducing speeches of mounting complexity with perfect fidelity — the messenger reaches his limit. The message Enmerkar has formulated is too long, too elaborate, too dense with conditions and counter-conditions and rhetorical substructures for any human memory to contain. The messenger cannot repeat it accurately. The most sophisticated communications technology available to a pre-literate civilisation has reached the boundary of its capacity.

The text presents writing as a practical invention born of necessity: the escalating complexity of the diplomatic exchanges between Uruk and Aratta outstrips human memory, forcing a technological solution.^[51] There is nothing mystical about this. No god descends to teach Enmerkar the art of the

stylus. No divine voice dictates the principles of cuneiform. The need is practical, the response is practical, and the result changes everything.

In response to this limitation, Enmerkar takes a lump of clay and "puts words on it as on a tablet" — he invents the technology of writing to overcome the failure of oral communication.^[52] A lump of clay. Words pressed into it. That is the moment. The Sumerian poet describes it with a matter-of-factness that belies its significance. Enmerkar does not build a laboratory or convene a committee of sages. He takes clay — the same clay that lines the canals, that forms the bricks of the E-ana, that is the fundamental building material of everything in Mesopotamia — and he puts words on it. The sentence is almost absurdly simple. But what it describes is the most consequential technological innovation in human history: the externalising of memory. Language, which has always existed only in the air and in the mind, is given a body. It can now survive the death of the speaker, the forgetting of the listener, and the seven mountain ranges between Uruk and Aratta.

This passage is one of the most celebrated in Sumerian literature: it offers an aetiology for the invention of cuneiform writing, attributing it to Enmerkar of Uruk in the context of diplomatic communication.^[53] The text's didactic function is evidenced by its wide *edubba* circulation: the confusion-of-tongues passage and the writing-invention passage encode cultural memory about the origins of literate civilisation.^[54] Every student in every scribal school who copied this tablet was copying a story about why the tablet existed in the first place. The medium was the message, four thousand years before anyone thought to phrase it that way.

The lord of Aratta receives the clay tablet but cannot read it, highlighting the novelty of the technology and Uruk's innovation.^[55] The scene is devastating in its implications. The messenger arrives in Aratta carrying something unprecedented — not a speech memorised and reproduced, but an object. A lump of clay with marks on it. The lord of Aratta takes it and stares at it and cannot decipher what it says. The innovation that solved Enmerkar's problem has created a new one: the technology is unilateral. Uruk can write; Aratta cannot read. The asymmetry is itself a form of supremacy. In a contest conducted entirely through communication, the king who controls the medium of communication holds the ultimate advantage.

This is the culmination of the poem's sustained investigation into the limits and possibilities of communication. The confusion-of-tongues passage at the beginning established the problem: human beings do not understand one another naturally. The messenger exchanges demonstrated the costs of the available solution: enormous expenditure of time and effort to transmit messages orally across vast distances. The failure of the messenger's memory revealed the ceiling of that solution. And the invention of writing broke through the ceiling — but only for one side. The lord of Aratta, holding a clay tablet he cannot read, is confronting not just a message he cannot decipher but a future in which he has already fallen behind. The technology gap is the final and most devastating asymmetry in a poem built entirely on the contest between two ostensibly equal powers. Military parity might be restored. Economic parity might be negotiated. But a communications advantage of this magnitude — the ability to externalise thought itself, to transmit complex messages without the risk of forgetting, across any distance and to any number of recipients — cannot be answered with a clever riddle.

After the writing episode, the goddess Inanna intervenes decisively in favour of Enmerkar and

Uruk.^[56] The intervention comes after the contest has already been decided in substance. Inanna's preference was implicit throughout the exchanges—in the accumulating signs and portents, in Enmerkar's growing rhetorical dominance, in the very fact that it was Enmerkar, not the lord of Aratta, who invented the technology that broke the deadlock. Her decisive intervention merely confirms what the narrative has already established.

Ishkur, the storm god, sends rain upon Aratta, and the city produces wild grain, which is taken as a sign that the gods favour trade and communication rather than continued resistance.^[57] The rain is peculiar and worth careful attention. It falls on Aratta—the losing side—and it produces grain. Aratta, the highland city of stones and metals, suddenly has what the lowland had always monopolised. On the surface, this looks like a divine blessing. But the effect is paradoxical: Aratta now has grain, which means Aratta no longer needs to resist Uruk's demands in order to survive. The grain removes the economic incentive for continued defiance. It softens the terms of surrender. It makes accommodation not merely possible but natural—if both cities now possess what they lacked, then trade becomes mutually beneficial rather than one-sided extraction.

(The rain and grain episode may signal a shift toward peaceful exchange rather than one-sided submission—the resolution gestures toward mutual trade rather than outright conquest.^[58])

The lord of Aratta appears to accept a form of accommodation with Uruk, though the precise terms of the resolution are debated among scholars.^[59] The ending is not a clean victory. The lord of Aratta is not marched in chains through the streets of Uruk. He is not killed or deposed or humiliated. Something more ambiguous occurs—something closer to a negotiated settlement than to an unconditional surrender. The contest of words has produced a verdict, and both parties appear to accept it, but the terms are left vague enough that scholars continue to debate whether the outcome represents genuine reciprocity or one-sided capitulation dressed in the language of trade. Perhaps both readings are correct at once. The poem was composed in Uruk, or at any rate for an audience that identified with Uruk, and its sympathies are never in doubt. But the fact that the resolution gestures toward accommodation rather than destruction suggests a political sophistication beyond mere propaganda. A trading partner is more useful than a ruin. The Sumerian poets understood this, and so, apparently, did Enmerkar.

The poem is attested in multiple Old Babylonian manuscripts, predominantly from Nippur, with the ETCSL composite representing the standard scholarly reconstruction.^[60] Generations of scribal students copied it, and in the act of copying they were performing exactly the technology the poem celebrates. Every stylus pressed into wet clay repeated Enmerkar's original gesture. Every tablet that survived was proof that his invention worked.

What remains, across four millennia, is a composition of remarkable formal elegance. The messenger structure—dispatch, journey, delivery, response, return, escalation—provides a framework as precise as any sonnet form, and the poet deploys it with absolute control.^[61] Within that framework, the content expands with each cycle until the framework itself can no longer contain it. The messenger who could carry the first message cannot carry the last. The oral technology that sustained the first exchange collapses under the weight of the final one. And from that collapse, writing is born.

The messenger crosses the seven mountain ranges between Uruk and Aratta repeatedly, and the

text describes each journey in formulaic terms that recur at every exchange.^[62] He must memorise and reproduce the kings' speeches verbatim; the fidelity of oral transmission is a central concern of the poem.^[63] There is a poignancy to his role that the poem does not underline but cannot suppress. He is the most important person in the narrative and the least powerful. Without him, neither king can communicate with the other. With him, they can communicate only within the limits of his memory. He is not a character but a channel, and the poem's entire dramatic arc depends on the channel's bandwidth. When that bandwidth is finally exceeded—when the messenger can no longer faithfully reproduce what Enmerkar has composed—the failure is not his. It is the failure of a system that asked too much of human biology. The messenger's legs could cross the mountains indefinitely. His memory broke first. And in that breaking, the poem finds its deepest meaning: the limits of the body are the mother of invention.

The confusion of tongues, the escalating riddles, the invention of writing—these are the passages that have made the composition famous. But the true achievement of the poem is structural. It demonstrates, through its own form, the problem it describes. The exchanges grow. The messenger's burden grows. The reader feels the accumulation. And when the breaking point comes—when the message is finally too heavy for one man's memory to carry—it arrives not as a surprise but as an inevitability that the entire poem has been preparing.

This is a text about communication written at the moment when communication was being reinvented. The scribes who copied it in their schools were the direct beneficiaries of the technology it describes. The tablets on which they wrote it were the descendants of the lump of clay Enmerkar pressed his words into. And the story itself—preserved, copied, transmitted across centuries in the medium it celebrates—is the most persuasive argument the Sumerians ever made for the proposition that words, once given a body, can outlast the mountains they were carried across.

[1] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, composite text.

[3] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1–95; Black et al. 2004, pp. 236–251.

[4] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1–10.

[5] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1–10 (introduction).

[6] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 5–8.

[7] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, manuscript list.

[8] Black et al. 2004, pp. 236–237.

[9] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1–95.

[10] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 33–37; Black et al. 2004, pp. 236–237.

[11] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 33–37; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 15–17.

[12] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 10–20; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 15–17.

[13] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, *passim*; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 15–17.

[14] Black et al. 2004, pp. 236–237.

[15] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 200–260; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 32–40.

[16] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 1–30; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1–10.

[17] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 236–237.

[18] Black et al. 2004, pp. 236–237.

[19] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 28–55; Black et al. 2004, p. 237.

[20] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 56–100; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 20–25.

[21] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1–10 (introduction).

[22] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 136–155; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 22–26.

[23] An alternate tradition gives: "Some scholars interpret the confusion-of-tongues passage as occurring later in the narrative

context, around lines 500—540". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL composite placement; exact position debated but ETCSL is the standard reference.

[24] An alternate tradition gives: ": the passage describes Enki disrupting a primordial linguistic unity, changing one language into many (parallel to the Tower of Babel)". The prevalent version is chosen here because The interpretation of the Incantation of Nudimmud is genuinely debated; the ETCSL optative mood supports the unification reading, but Kramer's confusion reading is historically influential.

[25] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 141—155; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 22—26.

[26] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 136—140.

[27] .

[28] .

[29] Inference: The passage is situated in a composition centrally concerned with the difficulty of long-distance communication. Risk: The causal connection between the confusion motif and the writing-invention passage is inferred by scholars but not stated explicitly in the text.

[30] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 100—170; Black et al. 2004, pp. 238—239.

[31] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 170—200; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 28—32.

[32] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 5—8.

[33] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 200—240; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 32—36.

[34] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 240—260; Black et al. 2004, p. 240.

[35] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, passim; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 5—8.

[36] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 260—290; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 36—40.

[37] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 290—330; Black et al. 2004, pp. 240—241.

[38] Inference: The text pairs agricultural produce against precious stones as competing claims to divine favour. Risk: The symbolic reading is widely accepted but the text does not make the economic argument explicit.

[39] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 330—370; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 42—48.

[40] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 339—499; Black et al. 2004, pp. 242—246.

[41] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 5—8 (introduction).

[42] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 5—8.

[43] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 370—500; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 48—66.

[44] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 410—500; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 52—66.

[45] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1—10 (introduction on messenger structure).

[46] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 450—500; Black et al. 2004, pp. 244—246.

[47] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 480—510; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 60—66.

[48] An alternate tradition gives: "Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 66—72, occasionally favours different manuscript readings in the Aratta response sections". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL composite is the standard scholarly text across multiple OB manuscripts.

[49] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 500—548; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 72—78.

[50] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 500—540; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 72—78.

[51] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 72—78; Black et al. 2004, pp. 247—248.

[52] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 500—504; Black et al. 2004, pp. 247—248.

[53] Black et al. 2004, pp. 236—237 (introduction to the composition).

[54] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 500—548; Black et al. 2004, pp. 236—237.

[55] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 548—560; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 78—80.

[56] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 560—590; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 80—85.

[57] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 536—556; Black et al. 2004, pp. 249—250.

[58] Inference: The text describes both cities benefiting from the exchange of goods. Risk: Whether the ending represents genuine reciprocity or mere Uruk propaganda is debated.

[59] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 615—636; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 85—90.

[60] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, manuscript list.

[61] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1—10 (introduction).

[62] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, passim; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 5—8.

[63] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 500—548; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 72—78.

Chapter 26. Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana: The Sorcery Contest

The composition is catalogued as ETCSL 1.8.2.4 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets.^[1] It is generally well-preserved.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—169; Black et al. 2004, pp. 252—261.^[3]

The text survives well across Old Babylonian manuscripts — between thirty-two and thirty-seven witnesses — and forms part of the *edubba* curriculum as one of the four Aratta cycle compositions, with its position in the narrative sequence debated by scholars.^[4] Vanstiphout's critical edition provides seventy pages of text and commentary, documenting minor variant readings in the sorcery-contest sequence.^[5] This composition is the last of the four Aratta cycle texts; it ends with En-suhgir-ana's submission to Enmerkar, closing the contest between Uruk and Aratta in Uruk's favour.^[6]

After the lengthy diplomatic exchanges and impossible riddles of the preceding poem, the Aratta cycle takes a sharp turn. No more messengers trudge across seven mountain ranges with speeches compressed into their memories. No more verbal contests turn the medium of communication itself into the issue. Here, magic decides the conflict between Uruk and Aratta — not words, and not kings but proxies. The contest structure — sorcery challenge, dispatch of champion, counter-champion, defeat, submission — follows a clear pattern that the audience would have recognised as a test of divine favour.^[7]

En-suhgir-ana is lord of Aratta, the distant wealthy city that has rivalled Uruk throughout the cycle; he challenges Enmerkar, king of Uruk, to a new contest.^[8] The contest in this composition shifts from the diplomatic and rhetorical exchanges of the preceding Enmerkar poem to a direct sorcery challenge: magical power, not rhetoric, will decide the conflict.^[9] The shift says something about where the rivalry stands. Diplomacy has been tried and has failed to settle the question. Riddles have been posed and answered. Writing itself has been invented in the course of the argument, and still the lord of Aratta has not conceded. Now En-suhgir-ana raises the stakes by moving the competition onto entirely different ground. He will not match words against words. He will match power against power — sorcery against sorcery — and let the outcome speak for the gods.

Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star — remains the divine patron of Uruk whose favour ensures Enmerkar's ultimate victory, continuing the theological framework established in Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta.^[10] Her role here is less visible than in the preceding poem. She does not appear on stage to direct events or whisper instructions to her champion. Her presence is structural rather than dramatic — felt in the outcome, not in the action. But the outcome is unmistakable: Uruk prevails because the goddess wills it.

En-suhgir-ana boasts that he will defeat Enmerkar through magical means; his minister Ansiga-ria identifies a sorcerer, Urgirinuna, from the destroyed city of Hamazu, as a champion for the magical contest.^[11] The choice of champion matters. En-suhgir-ana does not propose to work the sorcery himself. He delegates the task to a specialist — a hired weapon, imported from outside Aratta's own

territory. Ansigar-ia locates Urgirinuna and recommends him, and the recommendation carries confidence. En-suhgir-ana has decided that magic will settle what rhetoric could not, and he has secured a practitioner of formidable reputation.

Urgirinuna, a male sorcerer originally from the destroyed city of Hamazu, is dispatched to defeat Uruk through sorcery; he is presented as a formidable practitioner of magic.^[12] His origin matters. Hamazu is destroyed — Urgirinuna is a man without a city, a specialist whose skills go to whoever can afford them. He belongs to no polity. He owes allegiance to no god's temple. In the logic of the narrative, he is a free agent of considerable power and no particular loyalty, and the combination makes him dangerous. He has nothing to lose and nothing to protect. His sorcery is not rooted in divine patronage but in personal mastery of techniques that operate outside the normal channels of temple and palace. En-suhgir-ana has, in effect, hired a mercenary of the supernatural.

Urgirinuna travels to Eresh — the city of the goddess Nisaba — rather than directly to Uruk, and begins to exercise his magical powers against the livestock.^[13] He chooses his target methodically. He does not march to the gates of Uruk and challenge its king to a duel. He does not assault the walls or attempt to breach the E-ana. He goes to the hinterland, to the pastoral territory that feeds the city, and he attacks the source of its wealth at the most fundamental level. The cows' milk goes to their horns. The goats' milk goes to their backs. The phrasing is precise and surreal — the magic does not kill the animals but rearranges their biology, redirecting what should flow into udders into useless extremities. It is not destruction but perversion, subverting the natural order by supernatural means.

The sorcerer's magic threatens the pastoral foundations of the region's prosperity, disrupting the milk production of cows and goats.^[14] The strategy is more sophisticated than it appears. In a society where wealth is measured in livestock and grain, where the temple economy depends on dairy offerings and pastoral surplus, redirecting milk attacks the entire economic infrastructure. The cows and goats are alive but useless — standing paradoxes, producing what they always produced but delivering it to the wrong place. It is sorcery as economic warfare, and it works.

Wise Woman Sagburu of Eresh encounters Urgirinuna and recognises him as a foreign sorcerer threatening the region.^[15] Her title — "Wise Woman" — carries formal authority, not merely a description of her character.^[16] The poem affirms that Uruk's strength lies in possessing a deeper, divinely protected resilience; Sagburu is a titled figure of recognised authority who defeats the foreign sorcerer through superior magical power.^[17]

The composition's central literary theme is local, divinely backed sorcery triumphing over foreign sorcery: Sagburu, titled "Wise Woman," defeats Urgirinuna through superior counter-magic rather than domestic cunning.^[18] Note what the poem does not do. It does not send Enmerkar himself to face the sorcerer, or summon a warrior, or invoke Inanna directly. The champion who rises to meet En-suhgir-ana's hired sorcerer is a woman from a provincial city — not the capital, not the royal court, but Eresh. The asymmetry is deliberate. En-suhgir-ana has scoured distant lands for the most formidable sorcerer available. Uruk's answer is already present, already local, already waiting.

Sagburu defeats the sorcerer through superior counter-magic in a series of five animal-conjuring contests: she conjures predatory animals from the river — eagle against carp, wolf against ewe, cow against lion, ibex against leopard, gazelle against tiger — each of which overcomes the sorcerer's conjured creature.^[19]

The duels deserve attention. They are not random. Five rounds, five pairs, five victories for Sagburu. The sequence runs on a logic that is not immediately obvious but becomes clear on examination. Each round reverses expectations. The carp should be safe in the water; the eagle takes it. The ewe should be helpless before predators; the wolf seizes it. But then the pairings shift. A cow against a lion — the domestic animal against the king of beasts, and somehow the cow prevails. An ibex against a leopard. A gazelle against a tiger. In each case, the creature that ought to be prey proves to be predator. Sagburu's magic does not simply overpower Urgirinuna's; it inverts the natural hierarchy, turning the apparently weaker creature into the dominant one. The pattern is the argument. Superior sorcery does not announce itself with overwhelming force. It wins by making strength irrelevant.

Urgirinuna conjures what should be powerful. Sagburu conjures what should be vulnerable. And the vulnerable prevails, five times in succession, with a regularity that leaves no room for accident or luck. The sorcerer from Hamazu, the rootless professional with his formidable reputation, discovers that he has been outmatched. He has been defeated not by a more powerful version of his own methods but by a different kind of power entirely — one that draws on local knowledge, divine backing, and the capacity to subvert the very categories on which his sorcery depends.

After defeating Urgirinuna's magical creatures one by one, Sagburu throws the sorcerer himself from the bank of the Euphrates and seizes his life-force, killing him.^[20] The killing is blunt. After five rounds of elaborate magical combat, the final act is physical. Sagburu throws Urgirinuna from the riverbank and seizes his life-force. The shift from magical subtlety to bodily violence jars, and presumably it is meant to. The sorcerer has been defeated on his own terms, through five demonstrations that his magic is inferior. The physical killing that follows is not the victory itself but the conclusion drawn from it — the practical consequence of a contest already decided. He lost the argument. Now he loses his life.

When news of Urgirinuna's defeat reaches Aratta, En-suhgir-ana realises that his magical strategy has failed and that Inanna's protection of Uruk is decisive.^[21] He recognises it at once. There is no second attempt, no alternative plan. If the best practitioner his minister could find — a sorcerer from a destroyed city, a man with everything to prove — has been killed by a Wise Woman from Eresh, then the contest is over. Not because Urgirinuna was weak, but because what he faced was not simply another sorcerer. What he faced was the structural advantage of a city whose goddess has chosen to protect it.

En-suhgir-ana acknowledges Enmerkar's supremacy, declaring "From the moment of conception I was not your equal, you are the older brother. I cannot match you ever."^[22] The concession is total. Not "I lost this round" but "I was never your equal." The language of brotherhood matters: in Sumerian political rhetoric, the older brother is the legitimate authority, the one who commands by right of precedence. En-suhgir-ana is not merely acknowledging defeat in a single contest. He is conceding the entire framework — the theological premise the lord of Aratta had challenged since the beginning of the cycle. Uruk is the senior city. Enmerkar is the rightful hegemon. The question

that has driven four compositions across hundreds of lines of poetry is finally answered.

The poem ends with an affirmation of Inanna's patronage of Uruk and Enmerkar's divinely endorsed supremacy over Aratta.^[23] The cycle has been building toward this conclusion through every messenger dispatch, every riddle, every diplomatic exchange, and now through this final, decisive test. Sorcery was the last resort—the attempt to bypass rhetoric, intellect, and even technology in favour of raw supernatural power. And sorcery, too, has failed. Not because Aratta's magic was inept, but because Uruk's protection runs deeper than any individual practitioner's skill.

The composition's place within the Aratta cycle gives it a significance that reaches beyond its individual narrative. The cycle has traced a complete arc: from Enmerkar's initial prayer to Inanna demanding Aratta's submission, through the messenger exchanges and riddle contests, through the invention of writing, and now to this final proof that Uruk's supremacy is divinely ordained and practically unassailable. That proof is delivered not through words but through conjured animals on a riverbank in Eresh.

The structure of the magical contest—champion against champion, creature against creature, five rounds with a decisive outcome—belongs to a recognisable narrative pattern. Later traditions would produce their own versions: Moses confronting the magicians of Pharaoh, whose conjured serpents were swallowed by his own; Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, where the god who answers by fire proves himself the true god. The pattern is the same. Two powers, each claiming divine backing, submit their claims to a contest of supernatural force. The contest does not test the practitioners' skill alone. It tests which god stands behind which practitioner, and the result settles not merely the immediate question but the entire theological framework within which the question was asked.

What distinguishes this Sumerian version is its choice of champion. Sagburu is not a king, not a priest, not a prophet summoned from the wilderness with fire in his eyes. She is a Wise Woman of a provincial city, a figure of local authority whose power is rooted in the very soil that the foreign sorcerer has come to corrupt. The poem's argument is not that Uruk possesses a mightier sorcerer than Aratta. Its argument is that Uruk does not need one. The divine protection that Inanna extends over her city runs through the fabric of the land itself. A titled woman in Eresh encounters a foreign sorcerer at work and defeats him—not because the court dispatched her, but because Uruk's territory is defended at a level that En-suhgir-ana never understood.

The sorcerer came from a destroyed city. He had no patron, no roots, no divine protector. He had technique—impressive, formidable technique—and nothing else. Sagburu had technique as well, but she also had something Urganinuna lacked: a place. She belonged to Eresh, and Eresh belonged to the network of cities over which Inanna held her hand. The contest was decided before the first creature was conjured from the river—decided by geography, by theology, by the accumulated weight of divine favour that no imported specialist could overcome. The diplomatic exchanges, the riddles, the sorcery—these were never genuine competitions between equals. They were, from the Sumerian poet's perspective, a series of demonstrations for the education of anyone who doubted the obvious. And the goddess who favours Uruk does not withdraw her protection because a sorcerer from Hamazu has learned how to redirect milk into a cow's horns.

The tablets endured. Between thirty-two and thirty-seven manuscript witnesses preserve the

composition in the scribal curriculum, copied by students who understood that the story was an argument about the nature of legitimate power. Uruk won that argument on every available field of competition — from rhetoric to riddles to writing to sorcery — and it won for the same reason every time. Not because its champions were individually superior, though they were. But because the goddess stood behind them, and against that, no challenger could prevail.

- [1] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, bibliography.
- [2] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, composite text.
- [3] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—169; Black et al. 2004, pp. 252—261.
- [4] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, manuscript list; CDLI P469675.
- [5] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—169.
- [6] Black et al. 2004, pp. 252—253.
- [7] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—105 (introduction).
- [8] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, opening lines; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—105.
- [9] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 114—150; Black et al. 2004, pp. 252—253.
- [10] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, concluding lines; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—105.
- [11] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 114—150; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 110—118.
- [12] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 135—180; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 118—130.
- [13] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 170—205; Black et al. 2004, pp. 255—256.
- [14] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 170—205; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 130—138.
- [15] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 222—228; Black et al. 2004, pp. 257—258.
- [16] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—105.
- [17] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, concluding lines; Black et al. 2004, pp. 252—253.
- [18] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—105.
- [19] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 228—248; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 138—148.
- [20] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, line 273; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 148—155.
- [21] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 274—281; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 155—160.
- [22] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 274—281; Black et al. 2004, pp. 260—261.
- [23] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, concluding lines; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 160—165.

Chapter 27. Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave

The composition known as "Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.8.2.1 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) — the religious capital of Sumer, seat of Enlil's temple the E-kur — and from Ur.^[1] The text is reconstructed from fragments; some segments remain unclear, and the narrative breaks off at both ends.^[2] It is the first half of a linked pair, the second being "Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird" (ETCSL 1.8.2.2), and together the two compositions form a single arc — abandonment, survival, and the journey home. Manuscripts at both Nippur and Ur scribal schools show that the linked Lugalbanda pair circulated as part of the *edubba* curriculum — the scribal school where these texts were copied and taught.^[3]

The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—131; Black et al. 2004, pp. 262—268.^[4] Vanstiphout's critical edition treats the philology thoroughly, documenting where the Nippur and Ur textual traditions diverge.^[5]

The army of Uruk (Sumerian: Unug) — the great walled city of southern Mesopotamia, seat of Inanna's temple the E-ana — was on the march.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening lines (1—30) describing the cosmic opening and Enmerkar's military mobilization are partially damaged in Nippur manuscripts. Ur fragments preserve some of the opening but with divergent wording; partial reconstruction possible.]

Lugalbanda — soldier and later king of Uruk, father of Gilgamesh in tradition — served in the army of Enmerkar, king of Uruk. Enmerkar was leading his forces across mountainous terrain toward the distant city of Aratta — the fabulously wealthy city beyond the mountains, rival of Uruk.^[6] The campaign belongs to the larger Aratta cycle alongside the two Enmerkar compositions, which describe the rivalry between the two cities as a contest of wit and diplomacy.^[7] Here the rivalry has hardened from diplomatic contest into military expedition. The army moves, and Lugalbanda moves with it — a soldier among soldiers, not yet a king, not yet the figure tradition would later remember as the father of Gilgamesh. He is simply one man in an army crossing mountains.

During the march through the mountains, Lugalbanda fell gravely ill and could no longer keep pace with the army.^[8] The text does not specify the nature of the illness. It does not need to. What matters is the consequence: a soldier who cannot march cannot remain with an army that must keep moving. The campaign against Aratta would not wait for one man's recovery, however valued he might be.

His comrades, unable to carry him and unwilling to delay the campaign, left Lugalbanda in a mountain cave with provisions of food, drink, and bedding, expecting that he would die.^[9] The decision deserves a moment's thought. These were not strangers abandoning a stranger. They were soldiers — his companions on a long and dangerous march — and they left him because they had no practical choice. An army crossing mountain terrain cannot drag a dying man without endangering the living. They did what they could: they chose a sheltered place, they left food and water and

something to lie on, and they marched on. The provisions were a kindness, but the expectation was death. They were preparing a grave, not a sickroom.

The text describes Lugalbanda's isolation and suffering in the cave with vivid detail: he lay alone in the wilderness, cut off from his companions and from the civilisation of Uruk.^[10] The specificity is deliberate. The Sumerian literary imagination was urban. Its gods lived in temples. Its rituals took place in courtyards and processional ways. Its scribes worked in the shade of brick walls. To place a man alone in the mountains, beyond the reach of any city, any temple, any institution, was not merely to displace him geographically. It was to displace him from existence as the scribes understood it. Lugalbanda lay in a cave in the wilderness, and between him and everything that made life intelligible there was nothing but rock and distance.

What happened next is the compositional and theological centre of the narrative, and it is worth following closely.

Despite his illness and isolation, Lugalbanda prayed. He addressed the celestial deities — Utu the sun god, Inanna, and Nanna-Suen (the moon god, son of Enlil and Ninlil, patron of Ur) — and asked for their aid.^[11] The choice of these three gods is not arbitrary. Utu, Inanna, and Nanna form the celestial triad — the gods visible in the sky, present even above the mountains, available to a man who has no temple, no priest, no altar. A soldier dying in a cave cannot reach the institutional apparatus of Sumerian religion. He cannot enter the E-kur. He cannot present offerings at the E-ana. He has nothing but himself, his voice, and the sky above him. So Lugalbanda prayed to the gods he could see.

(Lugalbanda's piety is correct and meticulous even in a wilderness setting — the text emphasizes that proper devotion is rewarded even outside temple or city.^[12])

ETCSL 1.8.2.1, composite text based on Nippur manuscripts.^[13]

Utu, the sun god, responded first to Lugalbanda's prayers and sent down divine encouragement; Inanna accepted his tears next; and Nanna-Suen accepted his tears and granted him life.^[14] The sequence matters. Utu first — the sun, the god who sees everything, the god of justice who illuminates what is hidden. Then Inanna — goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star, the deity whose patronage of Uruk ties Lugalbanda to his home even at this distance. Then Nanna — the moon, whose light persists through the night, the god who grants life. The healing is not instantaneous. It moves through the celestial hierarchy, each deity contributing in turn, and the cumulative effect is restoration. Lugalbanda did not receive a miracle from a single divine hand. He received a collaborative intervention from three gods acting in concert, each responding to the sincerity of his appeal.

This is the theological point the composition makes most clearly. The divine healing sequence shows that correct ritual behaviour — sincere prayer — is rewarded even when performed outside temple or city, in the raw wilderness.^[15] The institutional apparatus of Sumerian religion — the temples, the priests, the festivals, the carefully maintained cult calendars — none of it was within Lugalbanda's reach. What he had was piety, and piety was enough. The gods heard him because he addressed them properly and because his need was genuine. The composition does not argue that temples are unnecessary. It argues that divine favour is not confined to temples. The distinction matters, and the scribes who copied this text in the *edubba* would have understood it.

The divine healing restored Lugalbanda to full health; he emerged from the mountain cave, ate life-saving plants and drank water, and sped away "like a horse of the mountains."^[16] The simile is vivid and unexpected. Not "like a warrior," not "like a king," but like a horse—a creature of speed, endurance, and wild strength. Lugalbanda's recovery is not merely medical. It is transformative. The man who lay dying in a cave emerges running across the mountains with the vigour of an animal born to that terrain. The wilderness that nearly killed him now serves as his domain.

After his recovery, Lugalbanda found himself alone in the mountains, separated from the army that had marched on toward Aratta.^[17] He baked bread and foraged in the wilderness. The detail is worth pausing over. Baking bread requires ingredients, a heat source, knowledge, and patience. It is a civilised act performed in an uncivilised setting. Lugalbanda carries civilisation with him—not in the form of city walls or temple precincts but in the practical skills of daily survival. The man who prayed correctly to the celestial triad also knows how to bake bread in the mountains. Piety and competence stand together as complementary virtues, not alternatives.

Lugalbanda caught a wild bull and goats in the wilderness, showing how resourcefully he could survive.^[18] The shift is important. He has moved from passive suffering—a man dying in a cave—to active mastery. He hunts, he captures, he provides for himself. The composition tracks this arc with evident satisfaction. The hero who was left for dead is now more capable in the mountains than the army that abandoned him. He does not merely survive. He thrives.

Then Lugalbanda received a dream vision from the god Zangara, who instructed him to sacrifice the animals he had caught. He performed the sacrifices and held a banquet invoking four great gods: An; Enlil, king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur; Enki, god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu; and Ninhursaja, mother goddess, lady of the mountain.^[19] The four great gods of the Sumerian pantheon, addressed by name, in a wilderness sacrifice offered by a solitary man on a mountainside. If the earlier prayers to the celestial triad showed that piety works outside the temple, this sacrifice to the four supreme deities pushes the principle further. Lugalbanda is not merely praying now. He is performing a full ritual—killing, offering, invoking—and doing it in the wild, with animals he caught himself, on instructions received in a dream. The dream-instruction is itself telling: the gods do not merely receive worship, they direct it. Zangara tells Lugalbanda what to sacrifice and how, ensuring that the wilderness ritual conforms to divine expectations.

The composition continues beyond this point, but the surviving text grows increasingly fragmentary. Material involving demonic beings and divine incantations occupies lines 394–499, followed by a fragmentary Segment B with an unknown number of lines missing; the narrative sets up the continuation in "Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird."^[20] What we can say with confidence is that the text did not end here. The story of Lugalbanda in the mountain cave is, by design, an incomplete arc. The hero has survived, recovered, shown his piety and resourcefulness—but he has not yet rejoined the army. He has not yet reached Aratta. He has not yet become the figure who, according to the Sumerian King List, will eventually rule Uruk. All of that belongs to the second composition, and the break between the two texts is a narrative hinge, not a narrative conclusion.

The central theme of the composition is individual endurance in isolation: Lugalbanda survives entirely through personal piety and divine favour, not through military prowess or social standing.^[21] This is a distinctive emphasis within the Sumerian literary tradition. Most compositions in the broader corpus deal with divine beings acting within divine society—gods among gods, powers against powers, cosmic structures being built or challenged or defended. The Lugalbanda poems are different. They place a human being at the centre, and they ask what happens when that human being is stripped of everything—companions, city, institutional support, even health—and left with nothing but himself and the gods.

The answer the composition gives is clear: the individual who maintains correct devotion will be sustained, even in extremity. The wilderness is not beyond the reach of the gods. The mountains are not outside their jurisdiction. A man who prays sincerely to Utu, Inanna, and Nanna will be heard, whether he stands in the E-ana or lies dying in a cave. The institutional structures of religion—the temples, the priesthoods, the calendars of offerings—are not the only channels through which divine power flows. They are the primary channels, the ones the scribes maintained and celebrated in hundreds of other compositions. But they are not the only ones.

The parallels with other traditions are suggestive, though direct influence should not be assumed. The pattern of a hero abandoned in the wilderness and sustained by divine providence recalls Moses in the desert and Hagar's ordeal in Genesis 21, where a human being left to die in an inhospitable landscape is preserved by direct divine intervention. The motif of the foundling or abandoned hero left to die and miraculously preserved echoes Romulus and Remus in Roman tradition. These resemblances may reflect independent developments of a deep narrative pattern—the human alone in nature, sustained by powers greater than human—or they may point to something more specific about how Near Eastern literary traditions shaped later Mediterranean storytelling. Either way, the Sumerian version has its own internal logic and its own theological purpose, and it should not be read as a precursor to anything. It is a complete statement in its own right.

What the scribes of Nippur and Ur preserved in this composition is a portrait of piety rewarded in extremity—individual devotion outside institutional religion answered by personal divine intervention. Lugalbanda in the mountain cave is not a king. He is not yet a hero in the traditional sense. He is a sick man, alone, who prays correctly and is healed. The rest—the Anzud bird, the return to the army, the kingship of Uruk—belongs to other tablets and other chapters. Here, in the cave, the only thing that matters is whether the gods are listening. They are.

[1] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, composite text.

[3] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, manuscript list.

[4] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97–131; Black et al. 2004, pp. 262–268.

[5] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97–131.

[6] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, opening lines; Black et al. 2004, pp. 262–263.

[7] ETCSL 1.8.2.1; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97–105.

[8] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 71–86; Black et al. 2004, pp. 263–264.

[9] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 87–140.

[10] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 140–150.

[11] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 148–227; Black et al. 2004, pp. 264–265.

[12] Inference: The three deities each accept his prayers and grant healing. Risk: The text presents the prayers and divine responses without explicit commentary on ritual correctness.

[13] An alternate tradition gives: "Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 105–115, notes divergences between Nippur and Ur fragments in the

healing sequence". The prevalent version is chosen here because ETCSL composite provides the most complete available reconstruction.

[14] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 171—227; Black et al. 2004, pp. 265—266.

[15] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 148—275.

[16] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 264—275; Black et al. 2004, pp. 266—267.

[17] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 264—299.

[18] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 300—325; Black et al. 2004, pp. 267—268.

[19] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 326—393.

[20] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 394—499 and Segment B.

[21] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97—105 (introduction).

Chapter 28. Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird

The composition known as "Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.8.2.2 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets.^[1] It is one of the most heavily attested Sumerian narratives, preserved in numerous Old Babylonian manuscripts from Nippur and other scribal centers.^[2] Substantially intact, it served as a standard text in the Isin-Larsa curriculum, copied and recopied by generations of students learning the craft of letters.^[3]

This composition is the second half of a linked pair. The first half, "Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave" (ETCSL 1.8.2.1), tells how a soldier in Enmerkar's army fell ill on the march toward Aratta, was left for dead in a mountain cave, and survived through piety and divine favor. Together, the two texts form a narrative diptych within the Aratta cycle, binding Lugalbanda's personal story to the larger contest between Uruk and Aratta.^[4]

The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 132—166; Black et al. 2004, pp. 12—22; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320—344.^[5] Jacobsen's literary translation (pp. 320—344) brings out the poetic dimension of the encounter, while Vanstiphout's critical edition (pp. 215—275) documents minor variant readings in the Anzud-encounter and gift-granting scenes.^[6]

Lugalbanda was alone in the mountains, cut off from Enmerkar's army. The army had continued its march toward Aratta, the distant wealthy city beyond the ranges that was the object of Enmerkar's campaign.^[7]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Opening lines (1—15) partially damaged; initial context for Lugalbanda's separation from the army fragmentary. Multiple OB manuscripts overlap to restore most of the opening.]

The composition picks up directly from the end of the preceding text. The soldier who had been left for dead in a mountain cave was now on his feet — alive, recovered, but utterly alone in terrain no single man was meant to cross without an army around him.^[8] The army had moved on. No road led back to Uruk, no messenger could be sent ahead, no companion could share the watch. Lugalbanda wandered the mountains, surviving through the resourcefulness and piety he had shown in the preceding composition. He had proved that he could endure. The question now was what he would do with his survival.

What Lugalbanda found in those mountains changed everything that followed.

He discovered a nest — not the nest of any ordinary bird, but the nest of the Anzud, the divine lion-headed eagle, an enormous creature of terrifying power whose wingspan darkened the mountains.^[9] The nest sat high in the crags, built on a scale that matched its occupant, and the parent birds were away. They had gone hunting, leaving behind a single chick.^[10]

A man alone in the mountains, starving or close to it, who discovers an unguarded nest faces a straightforward decision. He can take what he finds and eat it. A chick is food. A divine chick is still, in the most immediate material sense, food. Every survival instinct would have pointed in one

direction.

Lugalbanda went the other way.

Rather than harm or ignore the chick, Lugalbanda treated it with elaborate care. He painted its eyes with kohl—the cosmetic preparation that in Mesopotamian practice signified honor and beauty—and dabbed white cedar scent onto its head, honoring it as a divine being.^[11] The gestures were specific and deliberate. They were not the actions of a man who happened upon a baby bird and felt pity. They were ritual acts: the same adornment a worshipper would apply to a divine statue, or a host would offer to a guest of the highest rank. Lugalbanda recognized the chick for what it was—the offspring of a god—and he responded accordingly.

He went further. He prepared choice foods for the chick: cakes of honey-kneaded dough, salt meat, and sheep's fat, treating the young bird with the ritual deference due to a god's offspring.^[12] Where he obtained these provisions in the middle of a mountain wilderness—whether he carried them from his cave stores, foraged for them, or found them by some other means—the text does not trouble itself to explain. What matters is the quality of the offering, not its logistics. The Sumerian scribes who shaped this narrative cared about what Lugalbanda chose to do, not about the supply chain that made it possible.

The care Lugalbanda lavished on the Anzud chick worked as reciprocity in advance. By honoring the chick, he created an obligation the parent bird would be compelled to fulfill.^[13] This is not calculation in the modern cynical sense. It is the logic of the Sumerian world, in which the relationship between gods and mortals ran on reciprocity: gifts given correctly create debts that must be honored, and the weight of those debts grows with the status of the parties involved. To feed and adorn the offspring of the Anzud was to step inside that system of mutual obligation—not as a beggar asking for charity, but as a host who had performed a service that demanded a response.

Then the parent returned.

The Anzud bird came back to its nest and found its chick well-fed, adorned, and cared for.^[14] The joy was immediate and unmistakable. The chick was not merely alive—it had been treated with a reverence the parent could recognize as genuine. Someone had been here. Someone had done this. And whoever had done it had understood what they were dealing with.

The text pauses to describe the parent Anzud with its terrifying divine radiance—the *me-lam*, the supernatural splendor that emanated from gods, sacred objects, and beings of cosmic power.^[15] The description is not incidental. It reminds the audience of the sheer scale of the power Lugalbanda had chosen to approach through kindness rather than fear. This was not a grateful mother hen. This was a divine predator of the first order, a being whose radiance alone could flatten armies, and Lugalbanda had walked into its nest uninvited and decorated its child.

The Anzud bird, grateful for the care shown to its chick, offered Lugalbanda a reward and asked him to name his desire.^[16] The offer was open-ended: a divine being of enormous power, bound by reciprocity to grant what was asked. Wealth lay within reach. Weapons lay within reach. Dominion,

protection, invulnerability — any of the conventional rewards that divine favor might confer were, presumably, within the Anzud's power to bestow. A less thoughtful man would have asked for the obvious.

Lugalbanda asked for speed.

Not wealth. Not weapons. Not kingship or invulnerability or any of the gifts heroic poetry conventionally awards to its protagonists. He asked for supernatural speed — the ability to travel with tireless, matchless swiftness across any terrain.^[17]

The choice is remarkable, and the text treats it as such. Lugalbanda's request shows the composition prizing practical humility over conventional heroic ambition.^[18] He did not ask to be the strongest warrior or the richest king. He asked to be fast — and the reason, though the text does not state it outright at this point, becomes clear in what follows. He was a soldier separated from his army, alone in mountains that lay between Uruk and Aratta. What he needed was not the power to conquer but the power to connect — to carry messages, to bridge distances, to link the army in the field with the city it served. Speed was the practical answer to a practical problem. That Lugalbanda saw this, when a god was offering him anything he wanted, tells us something about the kind of hero the Sumerian scribes wanted him to be.

The Anzud bird granted the gift. Lugalbanda would run without tiring, his feet carrying him faster than any other being — a supernatural endowment that turned him from a stranded soldier into an extraordinary messenger.^[19]

But the gift came with a condition. The Anzud bird imposed a single prohibition: Lugalbanda must not reveal the source of his speed to anyone. The gift must remain secret.^[20]

(The secrecy condition creates narrative tension for future episodes and establishes a divine taboo — the gift's power depends on discretion, a common motif in stories of supernatural endowment.^[21])

The secrecy condition is a familiar motif. Stories of supernatural gifts across many traditions — Orpheus forbidden to look back, the fairy-tale bride who must not be named — share the same structural logic: the gift's power is bound to a prohibition, and the prohibition makes the gift precarious. It can be used but not explained. It can be shown but not discussed. The moment the source is revealed, the contract that sustains it breaks. The Sumerian scribes who built this condition into the narrative understood what it would do to every subsequent scene: whenever Lugalbanda displays his speed, the audience knows something the other characters do not, and that gap between what is known and what is hidden generates the particular tension that keeps the story alive.

Empowered with his new gift, Lugalbanda did the obvious thing. He crossed the mountain terrain that separated him from Enmerkar's army and rejoined his companions, who were astonished by his survival and arrival.^[22] The astonishment is understandable. They had left him for dead. Mountain travel was measured in weeks, in exhaustion, in the slow grinding calculus of distance against human endurance. Lugalbanda arrived as though the mountains were a courtyard to be

crossed in a morning. His companions could see the result but not the cause, and the prohibition kept the cause invisible.

What Lugalbanda found when he reached the army was not a force on the march but a force that had stopped. The army of Uruk was stalled before Aratta, unable to finish its campaign.^[23] Enmerkar needed help—not more soldiers, not siege equipment, but information. He needed a messenger to travel back to Uruk and consult Inanna about how to proceed. Inanna was the goddess of love and war, patron of Uruk, whose temple the E-ana stood at the heart of the city. The problem was distance. Between the army and Uruk lay the same mountain terrain Lugalbanda had just crossed, and no ordinary messenger could make the journey in time for the counsel to matter.

Lugalbanda volunteered.

His supernatural speed made him the only soldier who could make the journey in time.^[24] The arc from abandoned soldier to indispensable messenger was now complete. The man the army had left behind in a cave was now the only man who could save the campaign. Everything that had happened—the illness, the abandonment, the solitary survival, the discovery of the nest, the care of the chick, the gift of the Anzud—had prepared him for this moment. And none of it would have happened if Lugalbanda had not been left behind. The abandonment that looked like a catastrophe turned out to be the condition for everything that followed.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Minor gaps in lines 350—380 where Lugalbanda delivers Enmerkar's message to Inanna. Composite reconstruction from heavily attested manuscripts covers the gaps.]

Lugalbanda ran to Uruk and delivered the message.

Inanna received Lugalbanda and gave him counsel for Enmerkar: she instructed the army on how to overcome Aratta's defenses.^[25] The text records the counsel without lingering on the audience scene. What matters is not the protocol of the divine meeting but the content of the message and the speed at which it could be delivered. Inanna spoke. Lugalbanda listened. And then he ran back.

Lugalbanda raced back to the army with Inanna's message, finishing the round trip that would have been impossible without the Anzud's gift.^[26] A distance that would have consumed weeks of ordinary travel collapsed into a span the narrative barely pauses to describe. The gift of speed did not merely make the journey faster; it made it possible. Without Lugalbanda, there was no messenger. Without the Anzud's gift, there was no Lugalbanda who could serve. Without the chick, there was no gift. The chain of causation runs all the way back to a solitary man in the mountains who chose to paint a baby bird's eyes with kohl rather than eat it.

The composition closes with Lugalbanda's indispensable role confirmed: the abandoned soldier had become Enmerkar's most valuable asset through piety and reciprocity rather than martial prowess.^[27]

The narrative arc of this composition—from abandoned soldier to indispensable messenger—turns entirely on the reciprocity theme. Lugalbanda's unsolicited care for the Anzud chick earned a supernatural reward that determined the outcome of Enmerkar's campaign.^[28] The text teaches that piety and reciprocity toward the divine are rewarded with supernatural gifts, and

Lugalbanda's humility contrasts sharply with the martial valor heroic poetry typically celebrates.^[29]

The pattern is clear. The Sumerian scribes who shaped this story were not interested in the conventional hero who defeats his enemies through strength and courage. They were interested in a different excellence: the capacity to recognize what a situation requires and to act with the appropriate deference. Lugalbanda does not fight the Anzud. He does not trick it. He does not steal from its nest. He serves its offspring and waits. The heroism, such as it is, consists of understanding the rules of a world in which gods and mortals are bound by mutual obligation—and acting accordingly.

Lugalbanda's choice to request speed rather than wealth or power shows this principle at its most explicit.^[30] A conventional hero would have asked for what a conventional hero needs: the strength to crush enemies, the armor to withstand blows, the treasure to buy allegiance. Lugalbanda asked for the ability to run. And in asking for the ability to run, he made himself not a conqueror but a messenger—a man whose value lies not in what he can destroy but in what he can carry between the places where decisions are made and the places where those decisions must be enacted.

This composition, paired with "Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave," forms a narrative diptych within the Aratta cycle.^[31] The first panel shows abandonment and survival. The second shows reward and purpose. Together they answer a question the Sumerian scribes must have considered worth posing to their students: what happens to a man who is left behind? The answer the texts give is not that he fights his way back. It is that he finds the nest of a god, treats its child with reverence, receives a gift he did not presume to expect, and returns to do the one thing nobody else in the army can do. The abandoned man becomes the essential man—not through force, but through attention.

[1] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, manuscript list.

[3] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, composite text.

[4] Black et al. 2004, pp. 12–13.

[5] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 132–166; Black et al. 2004, pp. 12–22; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–344.

[6] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–344

[7] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, opening lines

[8] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 12–13.

[9] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 30–70; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 322–325.

[10] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 70–90

[11] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 50–60; Black et al. 2004, pp. 14–15.

[12] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 50–60; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 326–329.

[13] .

[14] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 140–180; Black et al. 2004, pp. 15–16.

[15] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 140–160; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 329–332.

[16] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 180–210

[17] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 210–240; Black et al. 2004, pp. 16–17.

[18] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 210–240; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 333–336.

[19] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 240–270; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 333–336.

[20] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 270–290

[21] Inference: The Anzud explicitly commands silence, and Lugalbanda observes the prohibition. Risk: The narrative function of the secrecy motif is inferred; the text does not explain why secrecy is required.

[22] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 290–330; Black et al. 2004, pp. 18–19.

- [23] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 330—360
- [24] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 360—400; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 338—341.
- [25] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 400—430; Black et al. 2004, pp. 20—21.
- [26] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 430—460
- [27] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, concluding lines
- [28] .
- [29] .
- [30] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 210—240; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 333—336.
- [31] Black et al. 2004, pp. 12—13.

Chapter 29. The Flood Story: The Eridu Genesis

The composition known to scholars as the "Eridu Genesis" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.7.4 and survives on a single tablet, CBS 10673, recovered from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) — the religious capital of Sumer, seat of Enlil's temple the E-kur. It is the sole known manuscript of the Sumerian flood narrative.^[1] There is no second copy, and no overlapping fragment from Ur, Lagash, or any other site supplements what this one tablet preserves. Every scholarly edition of the Sumerian flood story depends entirely on this piece of baked clay, and what the clay has lost, scholarship cannot recover.

The tablet is in extremely poor condition. Large portions of every column are broken or illegible, and the surviving text represents only fragments of a much longer composition.^[2] The creation of man and the details of boat-building are largely missing.^[3] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Jacobsen 1987, pp. 145–150.^[4]

Despite its extreme fragmentation, the text has drawn outsized scholarly attention as the earliest known flood narrative, predating the Akkadian Atrahasis and the Gilgamesh XI flood account.^[5] The attention is understandable. This is not merely a flood story; it is the flood story — the oldest surviving version of a narrative pattern that would later appear in Akkadian literature and, through channels still debated, in the Hebrew Bible. But the attention must be tempered by honesty about what actually survives. The Eridu Genesis, as it is conventionally called, is one of the most fragmentary major Sumerian compositions, and the surviving text amounts to disconnected passages from a work originally much longer.^[6]

The Akkadian flood traditions — the Atrahasis epic and the flood account in Tablet XI of Gilgamesh — are related but distinct compositions, and they must not be conflated with or used to reconstruct the Sumerian Eridu Genesis.^[7] What follows is what the Sumerian tablet preserves, and nothing more.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Columns i–ii (opening) are largely lost; the creation of humans, the establishment of cities, and the institution of kingship survive only in fragments. No other Sumerian manuscripts preserve these sections; CBS 10673 is the sole witness.]

The composition once began with something. Columns i and ii are largely destroyed, and what they contained can only be guessed at from the barest surviving fragments. Those fragments — broken lines, isolated signs — appear to describe the founding of cities and the institution of kingship before the flood, suggesting an antediluvian civilization narrative.^[8] The word "Eridu" — the oldest city in Sumerian tradition, seat of Enki's temple the E-abzu — appears among the fragments. References to the descent of kingship from heaven can be discerned.

(The antediluvian section likely described the creation of humanity and the founding of the first cities, based on surviving fragments that mention cities and kingship.^[9])

But these are traces, not a narrative. The reader must imagine a prologue that is not here — some account of how the world was set in order, how cities were built and populated, how kings were appointed to govern. The Sumerian scribes wrote it. The tablet did not keep it.

What survives more legibly, though still in broken passages, is the divine decision that sets the story in motion.

[At this point the tablet breaks. The divine decision to destroy humanity and the circumstances leading to it survive only in broken passages in column iii; details of the gods' deliberation are largely lost. No other Sumerian manuscripts preserve these sections.]

The gods in assembly decide to send a flood to destroy humanity, but the reason for this decision is not fully preserved in the surviving text.^[10] Why? The tablet does not say — or rather, whatever it said is now broken. Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur — appears to play a role in the decision to send the flood, consistent with his position as chief god of the pantheon and the deity whose commands the other gods must obey.^[11] Whether the motivation was human noise, human transgression, or simple divine prerogative, the surviving text does not tell us. The gods decide, and the mechanism of their decision is lost.

What is not lost — and this is the passage that has made the composition famous — is the warning.

Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu — warns Ziusudra of the coming flood by speaking through a reed wall, circumventing a divine oath not to reveal the gods' decision directly to a mortal.^[12] The device is elegant in its legalism. Enki does not address Ziusudra; he addresses the wall. He speaks to a structure of bundled reeds, and if a pious king happens to be standing on the other side of that structure, listening, that is the wall's affair and not Enki's. The reed-wall device — Enki addressing the wall rather than speaking directly to Ziusudra — is a distinctive narrative element that preserves the god's technical obedience to the divine decree while subverting its intent.^[13] It is precisely the kind of trick one would expect from the god of cunning: not a violation of the oath but an exploitation of its wording. The letter of the law is observed. The spirit of the law is annihilated.

Ziusudra — a pious king who receives Enki's warning — is described as righteous, and his righteousness is the basis for his selection as the survivor.^[14] The text does not elaborate on what form his piety takes or how long he has practised it. He is righteous, and therefore he is warned. The equation is presented as self-evident.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Details of the boat construction, the loading of the vessel, and the flood itself are largely lost; only fragments survive. No other Sumerian manuscripts preserve these sections; Akkadian parallels (Atrahasis, Gilgamesh XI) are distinct traditions and must not be used to fill gaps.]

Ziusudra builds a boat in response to Enki's warning, but the details of its construction are largely lost in the surviving text.^[15] We know he built it because he survived in it, and we know he survived in it because the text says so in a later column. But the construction itself — the dimensions, the materials, the loading of animals or grain or family — is gone. These are the details the Akkadian versions preserve in elaborate specificity, but the Akkadian versions are distinct traditions, and the temptation to borrow from them to fill the Sumerian gaps must be resisted. What the Sumerian tablet does not say, we do not know.

The flood strikes. The surviving fragments indicate a catastrophic deluge that destroys the world, though the Sumerian text preserves very little of the actual flood description.^[16] The waters come. The world ends. And the tablet, with what feels almost like thematic appropriateness, is broken precisely where the destruction is described.

When the text becomes legible again, the flood is over.

Ziusudra opens a window in the boat, the sun god Utu shines in, and Ziusudra prostrates himself before Utu.^[17] The image is striking in its simplicity. After the catastrophe — after the divine assembly's verdict has been executed and the world has been drowned — light enters through an opening in a boat, and a man falls on his face before it. The gesture is not explained. It does not need to be. Sunlight, after the end of the world, is sufficient cause for prostration.

Ziusudra then offers sacrifices to the gods, performing the ritual acts of a pious survivor giving thanks for deliverance.^[18] He has survived. He is grateful. He does what a righteous man does when the gods have spared him: he feeds them. The logic is transactional and ancient. The gods destroyed humanity, but the gods also need humanity — or at least need someone to perform the sacrifices. Ziusudra is that someone.

The gods — specifically An, the sky god, and Enlil — grant Ziusudra eternal life and settle him in Dilmun — the paradisaal land associated with purity, trade, and immortality.^[19] The reward is absolute. Ziusudra does not merely survive the flood; he is translated out of the human condition entirely. He receives the breath of heaven and the breath of earth — the life of the gods — and is placed in a land where mortality does not operate. The pious king who listened at the reed wall becomes something other than human.

[At this point the tablet breaks. The concluding lines describing Ziusudra's apotheosis and settlement in Dilmun are damaged; the full terms of his immortality and the ending of the composition are not fully preserved. No other Sumerian manuscripts preserve these sections.]

What we have, then, is a skeleton. The outline of the story is clear: a world before the flood, a divine decision to destroy it, a warning delivered through a trick, a boat, a deluge, a survival, a reward. The pattern is the one that would recur in Akkadian literature, in the Hebrew Bible, and — more distantly — in Greek tradition with Deucalion and Pyrrha. But the Sumerian version, the oldest, is also the least complete. The flesh of the narrative is gone, and the connective tissue — motivation, detail, dialogue — has been eaten by time and breakage.

The composition sits at the beginning of a long tradition, but it sits there in fragments. To read it honestly is to read around the gaps, to acknowledge that the earliest flood story is also the one we understand least. Tablet CBS 10673 has given us enough to know what the Sumerians told. It has not given us enough to know how they told it.

[1] ETCSL 1.7.4, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.7.4; Kramer 1961, pp. 97–98.

[3] ETCSL 1.7.4, composite text.

[4] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 145–150.

[5] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 145–150; Kramer 1961, pp. 97–101.

- [6] ETCSL 1.7.4; Black et al. 2004, pp. 284–285.
- [7] George 2003 (comparative only); Jacobsen 1987, pp. 145–150.
- [8] ETCSL 1.7.4, columns i–ii (fragmentary); Kramer 1961, pp. 97–99.
- [9] Inference: Fragmentary lines reference cities (including Eridu) and the descent of kingship from heaven. Risk: The actual content of the lost columns is unknown; this inference rests on very small textual fragments.
- [10] ETCSL 1.7.4, column iii (fragmentary); Jacobsen 1987, pp. 146–147.
- [11] ETCSL 1.7.4, column iii (fragmentary); Kramer 1961, pp. 99–100.
- [12] ETCSL 1.7.4, column iii–iv; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 147–148.
- [13] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 147–148; Kramer 1961, pp. 99–100.
- [14] ETCSL 1.7.4, column iii; Jacobsen 1987, p. 147.
- [15] ETCSL 1.7.4, column iv (fragmentary); Jacobsen 1987, p. 148.
- [16] ETCSL 1.7.4, column v (fragmentary); Kramer 1961, p. 100.
- [17] ETCSL 1.7.4, column v–vi; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 148–149.
- [18] ETCSL 1.7.4, column vi (fragmentary); Jacobsen 1987, p. 149.
- [19] ETCSL 1.7.4, column vi; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 149–150.

Chapter 30. Ningishzida's Journey to the Nether World

The composition known as "Ningishzida's Journey to the Nether World" is catalogued as ETCSL 1.7.3 and survives on six or more manuscripts from multiple sites, including UET 6 23 from Ur.^[1] About ninety lines of largely continuous narrative survive, with minor local lacunae.^[2] The retelling that follows draws on the ETCSL composite text.^[3]

This is among the most fragmentary compositions in the Sumerian literary corpus; the surviving text preserves only discontinuous passages of what was once a longer work.^[4] Old Babylonian manuscripts are the sole witnesses — no other scribal tradition preserves the poem, and no dedicated critical edition exists.^[5] What follows, therefore, is a retelling of fragments. We are looking at the surviving pieces of a composition that was once considerably more complete, and the gaps are not filled by guesswork.

Ningishzida — an underworld god known in the Sumerian tradition as "lord of the good tree," a deity of the nether world and of vegetation — stands at the centre of what is, in essence, an abduction narrative.^[6] He does not descend willingly. The *galla* demons — underworld demons who enforce the laws of the dead — seize him and drag him to the nether world.^[7] The distinction matters. Inanna chose to descend; Ningishzida was dragged.

[At this point the tablet breaks. The context for Ningishzida's seizure by the galla demons is largely lost; the circumstances of his descent — why he is seized, what precipitates the demons' action — are unclear. OB Nippur manuscripts are the only witnesses and they are highly fragmentary; no reconstruction of the opening context is possible.]

We do not know why they came for him. The opening columns that would have explained his seizure — what offence was committed, what debt was owed, what cosmic transaction demanded his body — are largely lost. This is one of the costs of fragmentary preservation: we have the action but not the motive. The *galla* arrive. They seize a god. The reason is gone.

What survives of the seizure itself is unambiguous. The *galla* demons take hold of Ningishzida and escort him toward the land of the dead; the text presents the scene as a forcible abduction by underworld agents.^[8] The pattern will be familiar to readers of earlier chapters. The seizure follows the same structural template seen in other Sumerian underworld texts, particularly Inanna's Descent, where *galla* demons enforce the claims of the nether world.^[9]

(The galla demons' role here is consistent with their function throughout Sumerian underworld literature as agents who carry out the nether world's demands for a substitute or victim.^[10])

Across the Sumerian corpus, the *galla* play a consistent role: they are the enforcement apparatus of the underworld, the officers who execute its demands. They do not negotiate. They do not explain. They seize and they transport. Whether the mechanism here is the same substitute-logic that operated in Inanna's Descent — the underworld demanding a body in exchange for a body — cannot be determined from the surviving text. The parallel is structural, not textually explicit.

The emotional centre of what survives is not the seizure itself but what follows it: the laments. Surviving fragments preserve portions of laments spoken by Ningishzida's sister and mother, who mourn his journey to the nether world.^[11]

[At this point the tablet breaks. The sister's and mother's laments through the stations of descent are substantially broken; only fragments of individual lament stanzas survive. No overlapping manuscripts fill the gaps.]

Broken though they are, the lament fragments reveal a composition structured around grief. The surviving stanzas repeat formulaic expressions of mourning — a structure consistent with performed liturgical lamentation.^[12] This is not narrative grief, the kind a storyteller invents for a character. This is ritual grief, the kind a tradition prescribes for a ceremony. The lamentation structure points to a connection with ritual wailing traditions for dying or departed gods, paralleling the Dumuzid lament tradition.^[13] The sister wails. The mother wails. The formulae repeat. And one can hear, behind the broken tablet, the sound of an actual performance — voices raised in a temple or at a cult site, following the prescribed patterns of mourning for a god taken below.

In its theological implications, the composition advances a proposition that runs through the whole body of Sumerian underworld literature: the nether world is inescapable even for deities.^[14] Inanna descended and was killed. Dumuzid was seized and dragged below. Now Ningishzida — himself a god, himself divine — is taken by the same class of demons to the same destination. The pattern admits no exceptions. Divinity confers no immunity. The underworld takes what it claims, and what it claims includes gods.

The forced descent of a god to the underworld, mourned by those left behind, is a structure that extends well beyond Mesopotamia. Greek tradition preserves its own versions: Hades abducts Persephone, Demeter grieves, Orpheus descends to retrieve what the underworld has claimed.^[15] The structural parallel — a divine or semi-divine figure taken below while the living mourn — is close enough to suggest that the pattern addresses something fundamental in how human beings conceive of death and loss. The departed is taken against their will, those who remain can do nothing but lament, and the lament itself becomes the only response available to the living.

What remains of Ningishzida's journey is, in truth, not much — fragments of a seizure, fragments of a lament, and the silence of broken clay where the rest once was. But the fragments are enough to establish what the composition was: a text about the forcible removal of a god from the world of the living, and the ritualised grief of those who could not prevent it. The sister mourned. The mother mourned. The formulae prescribed exactly how they should mourn. And the god went down into the earth, because in Sumer, that is where the taken go.

[1] ETCSL 1.7.3, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 1.7.3, composite text.

[3] ETCSL composite text.

[4] ETCSL 1.7.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 280–282.

[5] ETCSL 1.7.3, manuscript list; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 56–63.

[6] ETCSL 1.7.3; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 56–57.

- [7] ETCSL 1.7.3, surviving opening fragments; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 57–59.
- [8] ETCSL 1.7.3, surviving narrative fragments; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 58–59.
- [9] ETCSL 1.7.3; Kramer 1961, pp. 90–92.
- [10] Inference: The galla appear in the same capacity in Inanna's Descent and other texts. Risk: The specific reason for Ningishzida's seizure is not preserved, so the parallel to the substitute-mechanism in Inanna's Descent is structural, not textually explicit in this composition.
- [11] ETCSL 1.7.3, central section (fragmentary); Jacobsen 1987, pp. 59–62.
- [12] ETCSL 1.7.3, lament fragments; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 59–62.
- [13] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 56–58.
- [14] ETCSL 1.7.3; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 56–58.
- [15] Kramer 1961, pp. 90–92.

Chapter 31. The Death of Ur-Namma

The composition known to scholars as "The Death of Ur-Namma" is catalogued as ETCSL 2.4.1.1 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur; it is included per scope policy for its substantial underworld narrative.^[1] Several tablets contribute to the reconstructed text, which runs to 242 lines in the composite.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite, supplemented by Flückiger-Hawker's 1999 critical edition.^[3]

Ur-Namma was the historical founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur (Ur III). He ruled from roughly 2112 to 2095 BCE, built the great ziggurat at Ur, and promulgated one of the earliest known law codes.^[4] He was, in short, a man who built things that lasted — walls, temples, legal precedent — and the composition that bears his name is about the discovery that the builder does not last as long as what he builds.

The composition narrates Ur-Namma's death and his subsequent journey to the underworld, where he is received among the dead; it belongs to royal underworld literature, a uniquely Sumerian genre.^[5] It is not a hymn, not a praise poem, not a lamentation in the ordinary sense. It is something rarer: a detailed administrative report on what happens to a king after he dies. The Sumerians, the most bureaucratically minded civilisation of the ancient world, would have appreciated the precision.

[At this point the tablet breaks. The opening section (lines 1–30) describing Ur-Namma's death in battle is partially damaged; the exact circumstances of the king's fall are fragmentary. Flückiger-Hawker's reconstruction from Nippur tablets restores most of the sequence.]

The text describes Ur-Namma dying of illness. He lies sick, abandoned on the battlefield "like a crushed vessel" — a vivid image of royal desolation.^[6] The simile is exact and merciless. A crushed vessel is something made for a purpose — to hold, to carry, to contain — and broken past repair. That is what the text says has become of the king of Ur.

(The text's emphasis on Ur-Namma being abandoned on the battlefield suggests a military defeat in which the king's own forces were unable to recover his body — an unusual and deeply humiliating circumstance for a Sumerian king.^[7])

The city of Ur mourns its king, and the lamentation is described in terms of civic and cosmic grief: the people weep, and the city itself is portrayed as bereft.^[8] This is not private sorrow. The grief is structural. A Sumerian city without its king is a body without its organising principle — the temples lack their patron, the walls lack their guardian, the law courts lack their source of authority. Ur does not simply lose a man. It loses the centre around which the city's meaning was arranged.

Ur-Namma's body is prepared for the underworld journey with elaborate funerary rites: his chariot is provisioned, his weapons readied, offerings set aside for the underworld deities.^[9] The preparation is thorough and practical. The dead king will need transport, protection, and — most importantly — currency. The underworld is not a place where status is assumed. It must be purchased.

The text lists the specific grave goods and offerings that accompany the king: animals for sacrifice, precious objects, ritual provisions — a detailed inventory of royal funerary practice.^[10] The inventory has the quality of a shipping manifest. Each item is specified, counted, accounted for. One reads it and understands that the Sumerians approached the afterlife the way they approached everything else: with meticulous record-keeping and the assumption that nothing important should go unrecorded. A king entering the underworld without proper supplies would be like a merchant setting out on a trade expedition without capital. The results would be predictable and unfortunate.

Ur-Namma descends to the underworld, traveling the road from which there is no return; the journey is described as the passage every mortal must make, even a king.^[11] The phrase "the road from which there is no return" is one of the most persistent formulas in Sumerian underworld literature. It appears in Inanna's Descent, in Gilgamesh and the Netherworld, in text after text, and it means exactly what it says. The road goes in one direction. The grammar of death has no return clause.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Details of the journey to the underworld and arrival at the gates have minor gaps in lines 100–140. Overlapping Nippur manuscripts allow reconstruction of most of the passage.]

The king crosses the river of the underworld, the boundary that separates the world of the living from the realm of the dead.^[12] The river is the definitive threshold. On one side stands the living world with its cities, its temples, its sunlight. On the other lies the *kur* — the underworld, the realm from which not even the most powerful king can send a message back. Ur-Namma crosses it, and the crossing cannot be undone.

On arriving in the underworld, Ur-Namma presents elaborate gifts to Ereshkigal — queen of the underworld — in a gesture of tribute and supplication.^[13] Here the composition becomes most distinctively Sumerian. In the world above, Ur-Namma was sovereign: he gave orders, received tribute, held court. In the underworld, the relationship inverts. He is the supplicant. Ereshkigal is the authority. The king of Ur presents his gifts the way any subject approaches a throne — with deference and an implicit understanding that the gift is not generosity but obligation.

The text itemizes the gifts Ur-Namma brings to each of the seven chief porters of the netherworld, presenting offerings individually to each deity who sits in judgment over the dead.^[14] The gift-giving follows a structured protocol: each underworld deity receives offerings appropriate to their station, and Ur-Namma is received according to his royal status.^[15] The protocol is rigid and formulaic — not unlike, one suspects, the actual court protocol of the Ur III state, where every transaction was documented and every offering tallied. The underworld, as the Sumerians conceived it, was not chaos. It was administration. It had a hierarchy, and the hierarchy demanded its due.

Among the underworld judges to whom Ur-Namma presents gifts are Gilgamesh (Sumerian: Bilgames) — the legendary king of Uruk, who serves as judge and governor of the dead — and Ningishzida, an underworld deity and judge among the dead.^[16] Gilgamesh's presence matters. Here is the great hero of Sumerian literature, the man who sought immortality and failed to find it, now serving as a functionary of the underworld — a judge of the dead, an administrator in the bureaucracy of death. If there is an irony in this, the text does not comment on it. Gilgamesh, who

could not escape death, now processes those who arrive after him. Ningishzida sits beside him, and together they receive the dead king's tribute as their due.

After presenting his gifts, Ur-Namma receives a place in the underworld commensurate with his royal dignity; he is not reduced to the common shade but retains special status among the dead.^[17] He is given a throne and a dwelling, and the dead welcome him; the text presents his posthumous existence as one of honour rather than degradation.^[18] This is not the grey, undifferentiated existence described in other Mesopotamian underworld texts, where the dead eat dust and sit in darkness regardless of their former station. Ur-Namma retains rank. He has a throne. The dead acknowledge him. The underworld, in this version, recognises the same social distinctions that the world above enforced — provided, of course, that the deceased arrives with sufficient gifts.

(The text functions as royal propaganda for the Ur III dynasty, demonstrating that even in death, the king of Ur retains dignity and commands respect from the underworld powers.^[19])

The composition includes a lament from Ur-Namma himself, who bewails his separation from the living world, from his city, and from his uncompleted projects.^[20] This is the emotional centre of the text, and it is remarkable for what it reveals about the king's priorities. He does not mourn the loss of pleasure, of companionship, of the simple fact of being alive. He mourns his work.

Ur-Namma mourns that he could not complete his building programs or fulfill all his royal duties — the walls he planned, the temples he meant to finish — a poignant expression of the unfinished business of a life cut short.^[21] The walls he designed are unfinished. The temples he began stand incomplete. The projects he set in motion will continue without his guidance or be abandoned altogether. For a king whose historical legacy rests on exactly such building projects — the ziggurat at Ur still stands, four thousand years later, as testimony to what he accomplished — the grief is specific and genuine. He is not mourning death in the abstract. He mourns the gap between what he planned and what he had time to finish. It is, perhaps, the most human moment in the entire composition: the recognition that death does not arrive at a convenient stopping point.

The text expresses the Sumerian understanding that death is absolute and irreversible: even a great king cannot return from the underworld, and the grief of separation is permanent.^[22] No consolation is offered. No deity intervenes to soften the verdict. No exception is made for royal blood or exceptional service. The composition states its position with the clarity of a legal ruling: death is final, separation is total, and no amount of prior accomplishment alters the terms.

The Death of Ur-Namma provides the most detailed Sumerian account of a king's entry into the underworld, covering the gift-giving protocol, the judgment by underworld deities, and the assignment of posthumous status.^[23] No other surviving Sumerian text maps the transition from living king to honoured dead with this degree of procedural specificity.

The composition elevates Ur-Namma's afterlife status as royal legitimation: even in the underworld, the king of Ur retains his dignity and is honoured by the rulers of the dead.^[24] The text combines elements of royal praise literature, underworld geography, and lamentation into a hybrid genre unique within Sumerian literary tradition.^[25] It is praise literature because it glorifies the

king; it is eschatology because it maps the underworld; it is lamentation because the king himself voices his grief. The combination is unusual and, as far as the surviving record tells us, was not repeated for any other Sumerian ruler at this level of detail.

The text survives on multiple Nippur tablets; Flückiger-Hawker's 1999 critical edition is the most thorough philological treatment and the basis for the ETCSL composite.^[26] The ETCSL composite follows Flückiger-Hawker closely but presents a slightly more conservative text in damaged passages.^[27]

The parallels extend across cultures and millennia. Royal afterlife literature — the dead king judged and honoured among the dead — is a concern shared with the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the royal mortuary texts that accompanied pharaohs into their tombs.^[28] The protocols differ, but the underlying anxiety is the same: will the king's authority survive the transition to the next world, or will death reduce him to the common lot? Egypt and Sumer arrived at similar answers through different administrative machinery.

The image of the royal shade retaining identity in the underworld finds an echo in Homer's *Odyssey*, Book 11, where Agamemnon appears among the dead still recognisably himself — still a king, still aggrieved, still bearing the weight of his earthly station.^[29] Ur-Namma's lament over his unfinished building projects echoes, in its own register, the mortality crisis at the heart of the *Gilgamesh* tradition: the recognition that kingship cannot outrun death, and that even the greatest works of human hands are completed — or abandoned — by other hands.

The scribes who copied this text on their tablets in the schools of Nippur preserved something more than a royal eulogy. They preserved a record of how one civilisation negotiated the most fundamental of all transitions — the passage from authority to powerlessness, from presence to absence, from the throne room to the river crossing. Ur-Namma brought his chariot, his weapons, and his gifts. He presented them according to protocol. He received his throne among the dead. And then he wept for the walls he would never finish.

[1] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, composite text.

[3] Flückiger-Hawker 1999 (critical edition).

[4] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, introductory context; Kramer 1961, pp. 128–129.

[5] ETCSL 2.4.1.1; Flückiger-Hawker 1999, commentary.

[6] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 1–30 (partially reconstructed); Flückiger-Hawker 1999; Kramer 1961, pp. 128–130.

[7] Inference: The imagery of abandonment and the "crushed vessel" simile imply disgrace beyond ordinary death. Risk: The fragmentary state means we cannot be certain of the exact military context.

[8] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 30–60; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.

[9] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 60–90; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.

[10] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 70–100; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 380–382.

[11] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 90–120; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.

[12] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 120–140; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 382–383.

[13] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 140–170; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.

[14] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 170–210

[15] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 170–210; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.

[16] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 180–200; Flückiger-Hawker 1999; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 383–384.

[17] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 210–240; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.

[18] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 240–260; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 384–385.

- [19] Inference: The elaborate gift-giving and the honored reception are clearly designed to elevate Ur-Namma's posthumous status. Risk: The propagandistic function is widely accepted by scholars but the text does not make this meta-purpose explicit.
- [20] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 260–290; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.
- [21] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 280–310
- [22] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, concluding sections; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.
- [23] ETCSL 2.4.1.1; Flückiger-Hawker 1999, commentary.
- [24] Flückiger-Hawker 1999, commentary.
- [25] Black et al. 2004, pp. 56–60.
- [26] Flückiger-Hawker 1999; ETCSL 2.4.1.1.
- [27] ETCSL 2.4.1.1; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.
- [28] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 380–385.
- [29] Kramer 1961, pp. 128–131.

Chapter 32. The Debate between Hoe and Plough

"The Debate between Hoe and Plough," catalogued as ETCSL 5.3.1, survives on Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru) — the religious capital of Sumer, seat of Enlil's temple the E-kur — and from Ur. It was a standard curriculum text.^[1] Nearly complete.^[2] The retelling below follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–218.^[3]

The composition survives in numerous Old Babylonian copies from Nippur and other scribal-school sites, confirming its place in the standard *edubba* curriculum.^[4] Civil's agricultural studies and Black's anthology both treat it as a canonical example of the Sumerian debate genre, well attested and nearly complete.^[5]

The text belongs to the Sumerian debate genre (Sumerian *a-da-min*), in which two personified entities argue their merits before a divine judge who renders a verdict.^[6] The format will be familiar to anyone who has read a trial transcript, a parliamentary debate, or an undergraduate essay competition — except that here the participants are farm implements and the judge is the king of the gods. The Sumerians, who invented large-scale bureaucratic record-keeping and some of the earliest surviving law codes, also invented the literary argument between inanimate objects. That fact alone tells us something about how they thought: any question, however mundane, could be framed as a formal dispute with a divine verdict.

The two disputants are the Hoe (Sumerian *al*), the essential tool for digging irrigation channels and breaking ground, and the Plough (Sumerian *apin*), the seeder-plough used for large-scale cereal agriculture.^[7] These are not arbitrary choices. The hoe and the seeder-plough were the two most consequential implements in the Sumerian agricultural economy. One broke the earth and shaped the canals without which nothing grew. The other drove the furrows and seeded the grain that filled the granaries and fed the temple estates. Choosing between them was, in the logic of the composition, choosing between two theories of what civilisation fundamentally required.

32.1. The cosmogonic prologue

The composition opens with a cosmogonic prologue in which Enlil — king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur — separates heaven from earth and establishes the conditions for agriculture and civilisation.^[8]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Minor damage to the cosmogonic prologue opening (lines 1–10). Multiple Nippur school copies overlap and restore the prologue nearly completely.]

The prologue establishes a hierarchy of created things, framing agricultural tools as part of the divinely ordained order of civilisation.^[9] This is not casual scene-setting. By situating the debate within the divine order, the prologue frames the relative merits of human tools as a question ultimately decided by divine authority.^[10] The audience is being told, before a single argument is made, that the answer to the question "which tool matters more?" is not a matter of human preference. It is a matter of how the universe was built.

Enlil then creates the Hoe and assigns its functions, situating it within the divine order as the primary tool for working the earth.^[11] The fact deserves emphasis. Before the debate begins, before a word of argument is spoken, the prologue has already given the Hoe a cosmogonic pedigree. Enlil made it. Enlil assigned its functions. The Plough, by contrast, receives no comparable origin story in the opening lines. For a composition that will spend its middle section staging a fair-seeming contest between two equals, this is a thumb on the scale — placed there at the very beginning, in the language of creation itself.

32.2. The debate

The Plough opens the dispute by asserting its superiority over the Hoe, claiming that its role in seeding and ploughing the fields makes it the more important implement.^[12] It speaks first, and it speaks with the confidence of an institution. It does not merely claim to be useful. It claims to be essential — the implement without which the great grain fields would produce nothing and the entire apparatus of temple offerings, royal granaries, and urban food supply would collapse.

The Plough boasts of its prestige associations: it is linked with large-scale cereal farming, the work of oxen, and the wealth of the great estates.^[13] The argument is economic and social at once. The seeder-plough is not merely a tool; it is the centrepiece of an entire system. Oxen pull it. Ploughmen guide it. Overseers manage the ploughmen. The grain it plants flows into the temple storerooms and from there into the accounting systems that the scribes themselves administered. To claim superiority for the Plough is to claim superiority for the entire institutional hierarchy of Sumerian cereal agriculture — from the ox-team in the field to the accountant in the archive.

The Plough argues that without it the great grain fields would lie barren and the temples would lack offerings, tying its function to the sustenance of the gods themselves.^[14] This is the strongest card in its hand, and it plays the card without hesitation. The gods must eat. The temples must receive their offerings. The grain that feeds the cult comes from the furrows that the Plough cuts. Without the Plough, no offerings. Without offerings, the gods go hungry. Without the gods, no cosmic order. The syllogism is neat, and it carries a certain force — provided one accepts the premise that grain farming is the only activity that matters.

The Hoe responds by listing its indispensable functions: it digs irrigation channels, lays the foundations of houses and temples, plants orchards, and clears land for construction.^[15] Where the Plough argued from prestige, the Hoe argues from range. Its case is not that it does one thing supremely well, but that it does a dozen things the Plough cannot do at all. The Plough can cut furrows. The Hoe can cut furrows too — but it can also dig the canals that bring water to those furrows, lay the foundations on which the granaries stand, and clear the ground on which the ox-teams assemble. The Hoe's argument is, in essence, infrastructural: before the Plough can do anything, the Hoe has already done the work that makes ploughing possible.

The Hoe argues further that it serves in every season and every context — city-building, canal-digging, agriculture — whereas the Plough is confined to the sowing season.^[16] The argument is practical, and it is devastating. The seeder-plough is a seasonal instrument. It comes out when the fields are ready for sowing, does its work, and then sits idle for the rest of the year. The Hoe never

stops. When the sowing is done, the Hoe digs drainage ditches. When the harvest is in, the Hoe builds walls. When the temple needs a new foundation, the Hoe is there. When the canal silts up, the Hoe clears it. The Plough is a specialist. The Hoe is a generalist. And in a civilisation that depended on the constant maintenance of an artificial irrigation landscape, the generalist had a stronger case than the specialist could comfortably admit.

The Hoe counters that it is the tool of labourers, builders, and city-makers — that civilisation itself begins with digging, not ploughing.^[17] The claim is sweeping, and it is not entirely wrong. Before there can be a field, there must be a canal. Before there can be a canal, someone must dig it. Before there can be a city, someone must lay foundations. The Hoe was there at the beginning of every construction project, every hydraulic engineering effort, every act of settlement. The Plough arrived later, when the groundwork was done. The Hoe's argument amounts to a theory of civilisational priority: the implement that breaks the first ground is more fundamental than the implement that seeds the broken ground.

The Hoe further claims that Enlil created it first, giving it primordial precedence over the Plough.^[18] This is the cosmological trump card, and the Hoe plays it with full awareness of what the prologue has already established. Enlil made the Hoe first. The prologue said so. The Hoe is now reminding everyone in the room — including, presumably, the judge — of a fact stated before the argument even began. The appeal is not to utility alone but to divine precedent. What was made first was made first for a reason, and that reason, the Hoe implies, is that the universe needed it more.

The debate follows the standard genre pattern of escalating claims and counter-claims, with each implement marshalling economic, cosmological, and practical arguments for its superiority.^[19] The pattern will be familiar from any structured argument: each side raises the stakes, each response tries to outdo the previous claim, and the accumulation of assertions builds toward a climax that only an external authority can resolve. Neither the Hoe nor the Plough can concede, because the genre does not permit concession. The point of the *a-da-min* is not negotiation. It is total victory, awarded by a god.

32.3. The verdict

Enlil renders the final verdict in favour of the Hoe, declaring it the winner of the contest.^[20]

(Enlil's verdict for the Hoe reflects the tool's wider utility and its cosmogonic priority (Enlil created it first in the prologue).^[21])

The verdict follows the standard structural pattern of the debate genre: the disputants argue, and the divine judge resolves the conflict by choosing one over the other, restoring cosmic harmony.^[22] Enlil does not explain his reasoning in the discursive terms a modern reader might expect. He does not issue a written opinion with numbered paragraphs. He simply declares a winner. But the structure of the composition has done the reasoning for him. The prologue established the Hoe's cosmogonic priority. The debate demonstrated the Hoe's broader utility. The verdict ratifies what the text has argued from the first line: the implement that breaks the ground, digs the channels, and lays the foundations is more fundamental than the implement that seeds the furrows — however prestigious those furrows may be.

32.4. The composition in context

The composition functioned didactically in the *edubba* curriculum: it taught scribal students the vocabulary and social roles of two key agricultural tools through the structure of competitive argument.^[23] This pedagogical dimension should not be overlooked. The students who copied these tablets were not farmers. They were scribes — young men training for administrative careers that would require them to manage agricultural records, oversee canal-maintenance schedules, and account for grain yields. For these students, a composition that systematically enumerated the functions, associations, and economic significance of the hoe and the seeder-plough was a vocabulary lesson embedded in a narrative. They learned the terminology by copying the arguments, and they learned the arguments by copying the terminology.

Numerous copies recovered from Nippur and other Old Babylonian school sites confirm the composition's standard place in the scribal curriculum.^[24] The ETCSL composite is nearly complete, assembled from tablets with strong agreement, and minor translational differences between ETCSL and Black et al. 2004 do not affect the narrative substance.^[25]

The question the composition asks — which tool matters more? — is, at bottom, a question about what civilisation is. If civilisation is grain, the Plough wins. If civilisation is infrastructure, the Hoe wins. The Sumerian answer, delivered by the king of the gods himself, is that infrastructure comes first. The canals before the crops. The foundations before the buildings. The digging before the sowing. It is a pragmatic verdict, and it reflects a pragmatic civilisation — one that understood, from millennia of experience in the southern Mesopotamian alluvium, that without functioning canals the finest seeder-plough in the world was an expensive piece of wood attached to a confused ox.

The pattern of personified dispute with divine adjudication is not unique to Sumer, though the Sumerians developed it earlier and more systematically than any other civilisation for which we have records. Medieval European literature produced its own versions: adversarial debate poems such as *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c. 1200 CE) use the same structure of competing speakers and a judge who renders a verdict.^[26] The Latin *conflictus* genre, exemplified by the *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis* (The Dispute between Spring and Winter), shares the pattern of personified seasonal or material entities arguing before a divine or royal arbiter.^[27] Whether these later traditions inherited the form from the ancient Near East through channels we cannot trace, or whether the pattern emerged independently wherever literate cultures developed the habit of staging arguments, is a question the evidence does not settle. What is clear is that the Sumerian version is the oldest surviving example of the genre. Its treatment of the subject — agricultural tools as cosmologically significant entities whose relative worth requires divine adjudication — reflects a worldview in which human technology was not merely practical but divinely ordered. The tools were made by a god. Their ranking was decided by the same god. And the scribes who copied the verdict, generation after generation, were learning not only how to spell *al* and *apin* but how to think about the structure of the world they administered.

[1] ETCSL 5.3.1, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 5.3.1, composite text.

[3] Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–218.

[4] ETCSL 5.3.1, composite text, lines 1–190; Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–218.

- [5] Civil 1994, *passim*; Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–218.
- [6] Kramer 1961, pp. 72–73.
- [7] Civil 1994, *passim* (agricultural terminology and tool vocabulary); Black et al. 2004, p. 210.
- [8] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines 1–20; Black et al. 2004, p. 210.
- [9] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines 1–20; Black et al. 2004, p. 210.
- [10] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines 1–20; Black et al. 2004, p. 210.
- [11] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines 10–20; Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–211.
- [12] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines ~20–50; Black et al. 2004, pp. 211–212.
- [13] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines ~50–80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 212–213.
- [14] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines ~50–80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 212–213.
- [15] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines ~80–120; Black et al. 2004, pp. 213–215.
- [16] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines ~120–150; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–216.
- [17] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines ~80–150; Black et al. 2004, pp. 213–216.
- [18] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines ~10–20 (prologue) and ~130–140 (Hoe’s argument); Black et al. 2004, pp. 210, 215.
- [19] Kramer 1961, pp. 72–73; Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–218.
- [20] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines ~170–190; Black et al. 2004, pp. 217–218.
- [21] Inference: The prologue gives Hoe primordial precedence; the verdict is consistent with the debate structure favouring the more versatile entity. Risk: The text does not state the reasoning behind the verdict in explicit analytical terms; this is interpretive.
- [22] Kramer 1961, pp. 72–73; Black et al. 2004, p. 218.
- [23] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines 50–170; Civil 1994, *passim*.
- [24] ETCSL 5.3.1, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 210.
- [25] ETCSL 5.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–218.
- [26] Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–218.
- [27] Black et al. 2004, pp. 210–218.

Chapter 33. The Debate between Ewe and Grain

The composition known as "The Debate between Ewe and Grain" is catalogued as ETCSL 5.3.2 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur.^[1] It is generally well-preserved and notable for its cosmogonic prologue.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 219—225.^[3]

The composition survives in multiple Old Babylonian copies from Nippur scribal schools, which confirms its wide circulation as a standard curriculum text.^[4] The text belongs to the Sumerian debate genre and features two divine personifications—Lahar (Ewe), the divine embodiment of pastoralism and livestock, and Ashnan (Grain), the divine embodiment of cereal agriculture—who argue their relative merits before a divine audience.^[5] The previous chapter staged a dispute between two farming implements. This one moves up a level. The question is no longer which tool matters more but which entire way of life—pastoral or agricultural—stands closer to the foundation of civilisation. That is a larger question, and the composition meets it with a correspondingly larger prologue.

33.1. The cosmogonic prologue

The composition opens with an extended cosmogonic prologue describing a primordial era in which humans lived without the gifts of civilisation.^[6] This is not brief scene-setting. It runs for forty lines—roughly a fifth of the entire composition—and it describes humanity's original condition with a specificity that has made it one of the most frequently cited passages in Sumerological literature.^[7]

In this primordial state, Ewe had not yet been created and Grain had not yet appeared: humans ate grass with their mouths like animals, drank water from ditches, and went about naked.^[8] The image is precise and deliberately degrading. These are not noble savages. They are not prelapsarian innocents dwelling in a garden. They are creatures who crouch at the edges of irrigation channels and eat what grows there, indistinguishable in their habits from the livestock that would later serve them. The Sumerian scribes who composed and transmitted this passage had a clear idea of what separated human beings from animals, and the answer was not language, or reason, or the possession of a soul. The answer was bread and wool. Without those two things, humans were animals. With them, humans were civilised. The line was that sharp, and the prologue draws it without apology.

The gods created Ewe and Grain in the "creation chamber of the gods"—the *dul-kug*, the holy mound—specifically to relieve humanity's primitive condition and to provide food and clothing.^[9] The location matters. The *dul-kug* is not the earth. It is a divine precinct, a place of pure creation, and what emerges from it carries the authority of divine manufacture. Ewe and Grain are not natural phenomena that humans discovered through trial and error. They are divine inventions, delivered to humanity from above.

Enlil—king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur—and

Enki — god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu — together create the two entities, and each assigns them a specific role in sustaining human civilisation.^[10] The collaboration of the two most powerful male deities in the pantheon underscores the seriousness of the enterprise. This is not a minor act of divine generosity. It is a fundamental restructuring of the human condition, carried out by the gods who govern the cosmos and the gods who organise it.

The prologue establishes that Ewe provides wool for clothing and Grain provides bread for nourishment — the two fundamental necessities that distinguish civilised human life from the animal existence that preceded it.^[11] The pairing is not accidental. Mesopotamian economic texts, from the earliest administrative archives onward, organise their accounting around precisely these two categories: livestock and cereal. The ration system that fed the workforce of the great temple estates handed out barley and wool. The two goods that the prologue identifies as the markers of civilisation are the same two goods that the Sumerian bureaucracy tracked most meticulously. Theological claim and economic reality are perfectly aligned, which is either a coincidence or a sign that the Sumerians understood their own economy rather well.

(The cosmogonic prologue establishes the debate's theological stakes — without Ewe and Grain, humanity reverts to its pre-civilised animal state.^[12])

33.2. The debate

Ewe and Grain are initially content in their divine roles. They perform their functions, humanity benefits, and the cosmic order operates as designed. But at a feast where they drink too much wine, they begin to quarrel over which of them is more valuable to the gods and to humanity.^[13] The trigger is worth noting. This is the second composition in this book in which a drunken feast touches off a divine contest — the first being the drinking match between Enki and Ninmah that produced humanity's physical diversity. The Sumerian literary tradition seems to have understood that alcohol loosens not only tongues but hierarchies. Sober, the divine personifications accept their assigned stations. Drunk, they demand to know which of them ranks higher. The wine does not create the rivalry; it reveals it.

Grain speaks first. She counters any claim to pastoral superiority by arguing that bread is the staple of human life, that the great temples depend on grain offerings, and that beer — brewed from grain — is the drink of the gods and the social lubricant of civilisation.^[14] The argument is comprehensive, and it strikes at the heart of what made Sumerian civilisation possible. Grain does not merely feed people. It feeds the gods — through the daily offerings that every temple required. It fuels the social order — through the ration system that paid workers in barley. And it produces beer, which in Mesopotamia was not a luxury but a dietary staple, a ritual necessity, and the medium through which virtually every social transaction ran, from treaty ratification to neighbourhood gossip. To claim the superiority of Grain was to claim the superiority of the entire urban, agricultural, temple-centred way of life that the Sumerians had built.

Ewe responds by boasting of the wool she provides, the material for garments that clothe both humans and kings, and of the fat and milk she supplies for temple offerings and feasts.^[15] Her argument is not trivial. Wool was the second pillar of the Mesopotamian economy — the textile industry was, by some measures, the largest organised labour system in the ancient world, and all of its raw material came from sheep. Kings wore wool. Priests wore wool. The gods, in their statues,

wore wool. And the fat and milk of livestock were indispensable to the temple cult: offerings of butter, cheese, and animal fat appear in every surviving temple inventory.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Some lines in the central exchange are partially damaged (lines 100–115). Overlapping Nippur manuscripts restore most of the passage.]

The debate escalates as each contestant belittles the other: Ewe mocks Grain as mere dirt-bound stalks, and Grain mocks Ewe as a dirty, bleating creature.^[16] The insults are vivid and specific. The contestants have moved past the phase of positive self-promotion and into the phase of active denigration—a rhetorical escalation that follows the standard pattern of the Sumerian debate genre. The Hoe and the Plough, in the previous composition, followed the same arc. So will the disputants in the compositions that follow. The structure is formulaic, but the insults are tailored. Grain does not merely call Ewe inferior; she calls her filthy. Ewe does not merely call Grain less important; she calls her rootbound and passive. The personal attacks do rhetorical work: each contestant tries to redefine the other not as a worthy rival but as something contemptible.

The argument covers the full range of each entity's contributions: wool and leather against bread, beer, and flour; pastoral life against agricultural settlement.^[17] By the time the debate reaches its climax, the contestants have exhausted their inventories. Every product, every ritual use, every economic function has been claimed, defended, and attacked. Along the way, the composition has given the student who copied it a systematic catalogue of the goods and services tied to both pastoralism and agriculture—a pedagogical accomplishment disguised as a quarrel.

33.3. The verdict

Enki renders the verdict in favour of Grain, declaring Ashnan superior to Lahar.^[18] The judge is Enki alone—the god of wisdom and cunning, not the full assembly of the gods. And his verdict is for Grain.

(The verdict for Grain reflects the centrality of cereal agriculture to Sumerian civilisation—grain was the basis of the ration system, the temple economy, and the brewing of beer.^[19])

The result should not surprise anyone who has been paying attention to the structure of the argument—or, for that matter, to the structure of Sumerian civilisation. Grain fed the workers. Grain paid the wages. Grain filled the temple storerooms and the offering tables. Grain became beer, and beer was present at every significant event in Mesopotamian life, from the divine banquet to the contractual agreement. Wool was essential, but wool was second. The ration lists said so. The temple accounts said so. And now the god of wisdom said so.

Ewe accepts the verdict, and the two are reconciled, restoring the harmonious order that the debate had disrupted.^[20] The reconciliation is generic—it follows the standard closure pattern of the debate compositions, in which the loser accepts the verdict and cosmic harmony returns. But the fact that reconciliation happens at all is significant. Ewe is not destroyed, banished, or demoted. She remains a divine personification with an essential role. The verdict establishes a hierarchy, not an elimination. Grain ranks higher, but both are necessary. The composition has spent forty lines explaining what happens when neither exists: humans eat grass and go naked. The point of the verdict is not that pastoralism is worthless but that agriculture is more fundamental. The world

needs both. It needs one more.

33.4. The composition in context

The composition served a didactic function in the *edubba*—the scribal school where these texts were copied and taught: through competitive argument it taught scribal students the relative merits of pastoralism and agriculture as pillars of civilisation.^[21] The students who copied it were learning, as they copied, the vocabulary of two economic systems and the rhetorical techniques for comparing them. The debate genre was, among other things, an examination format. To copy the arguments was to learn the material. To learn the material was to prepare for the administrative work of managing an economy that depended on both sheep and barley.

The cosmogonic prologue describing humanity in a pre-civilised state—eating grass, going naked, drinking from ditches—is one of the most cited passages in Sumerological literature and provides essential evidence for Sumerian conceptions of human origins.^[22] Kramer and Jacobsen both gave it sustained attention, and for good reason. It is one of the clearest Sumerian statements about what civilisation is and what it replaced. The passage does not theorise about progress or development. It simply describes two states—one with bread and wool, one without—and lets the contrast do the work.

Multiple Old Babylonian copies from Nippur scribal schools attest the composition's wide circulation and standard curricular status.^[23] Minor translational differences between ETCSL and Black et al. 2004 in the cosmogonic prologue do not affect the narrative substance.^[24]

The pattern of pastoral-versus-agricultural tension resolved by divine judgement is not unique to Sumer. The most famous parallel appears in Genesis 4, where Cain the farmer kills Abel the shepherd after God accepts Abel's offering and rejects Cain's. The narrative shares the same structural elements—two ways of life, divine preference, a verdict—but reverses the outcome: in the Hebrew tradition, the shepherd is favoured over the farmer. Whether the biblical narrative drew on the Mesopotamian debate tradition directly, or whether both traditions independently addressed a tension that any mixed pastoral-agricultural society would have felt, is a question the evidence does not settle. What is clear is that the Sumerians addressed it first, addressed it in the form of a structured argument rather than a murder, and resolved it with a judicial verdict rather than a fratricide. The civilisation that invented bureaucratic record-keeping resolved even its mythological disputes through due process.

The broader motif—primordial humanity living "like animals" before divine intervention elevates them to civilisation—recurs across world traditions, from the Prometheus myth (humans lack fire and craft until a god provides them) to the Hesiodic progression from the Golden Age and to Vedic accounts of pre-civilised states. In each case, the boundary between the human and the animal is defined not by biology but by technology: the possession of specific gifts—fire, grain, wool, writing—that the gods provided and that humans could not have invented on their own. The Sumerian version of this idea is among the oldest, and it is among the most concrete. The gifts are not abstract. They are bread and clothing. The theology is practical, and the practice is theological, and the scribes who copied this text in their schools understood both dimensions perfectly well.

[1] ETCSL 5.3.2, bibliography.

- [2] ETCSL 5.3.2, composite text.
- [3] Black et al. 2004, pp. 219—225.
- [4] ETCSL 5.3.2, composite text, lines 1—192; Black et al. 2004, pp. 219—225.
- [5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 219—220; Kramer 1961, pp. 72—73.
- [6] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 1—40; Black et al. 2004, pp. 219—220.
- [7] Kramer 1961, pp. 72—73; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 155—160.
- [8] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 1—20; Kramer 1961, pp. 72—73.
- [9] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 20—40; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 155—160.
- [10] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 20—40; Black et al. 2004, p. 220.
- [11] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 30—40; Black et al. 2004, p. 220.
- [12] Inference: The prologue explicitly describes humans living "like animals" before the gods' intervention. Risk: The text does not state the prologue's function in explicit metatextual terms; this is structural interpretation.
- [13] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines ~50—80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 220—221.
- [14] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines ~115—150; Black et al. 2004, pp. 222—224.
- [15] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines ~80—100; Black et al. 2004, pp. 221—222.
- [16] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines ~130—170; Black et al. 2004, pp. 223—224.
- [17] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 80—180; Black et al. 2004, pp. 221—225.
- [18] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines ~180—192; Black et al. 2004, p. 225.
- [19] Inference: The economic and ritual primacy of grain in Mesopotamia is well-documented across the corpus. Risk: The text does not state the reasoning behind the verdict explicitly; this is scholarly interpretation.
- [20] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines ~190—192; Black et al. 2004, p. 225.
- [21] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 80—180; Black et al. 2004, pp. 219—225.
- [22] Kramer 1961, pp. 72—73; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 155—160.
- [23] ETCSL 5.3.2, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 219.
- [24] ETCSL 5.3.2; Black et al. 2004, pp. 219—225.

Chapter 34. The Debate between Winter and Summer

The composition known as "The Debate between Winter and Summer" is catalogued as ETCSL 5.3.3 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets, with frequent copies from Nippur scribal school sites.^[1] It is mostly complete at 318 lines.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 226—233.^[3]

The composition survives in frequent Old Babylonian copies from Nippur scribal school sites, which confirms its standard place in the *edubba* curriculum.^[4] The text belongs to the Sumerian debate genre and features two divine personifications—Enten (Winter) and Emesh (Summer)—who argue their relative contributions to agriculture before Enlil, who renders the final verdict.^[5] The previous two compositions staged disputes between implements and between economic systems. This one stages a dispute between the seasons themselves—between the rain that fills the canals and the heat that ripens the grain. In a sense, it is the most fundamental of the debate compositions, because it asks not which tool or which livelihood matters more, but which half of the year makes the other half possible.

A note on the Sumerian seasonal calendar is necessary here, because the composition's logic depends on it. In southern Mesopotamia, Enten (Winter) corresponds to the wet season of rain and flooding, while Emesh (Summer) corresponds to the dry season of harvest and heat.^[6] This inverts the seasonal symbolism familiar from northern European traditions, where winter means dormancy and summer means growth. On the alluvial floodplain of southern Iraq, winter is the season that brings water—the rain, the river floods, the replenishment of the irrigation canals on which everything depends. Summer is the season of harvest, but also of desiccating heat. The wet season produces; the dry season collects the results. Readers who import northern assumptions about which season is "fertile" will misread the verdict.

34.1. The cosmogonic prologue

The composition opens with a prologue in which Enlil—king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur—creates the two seasons and assigns each specific duties to ensure agricultural productivity throughout the year.^[7] The pattern is by now familiar from the earlier debate compositions: before the argument begins, the text establishes the divine framework within which it will be settled.

Enlil creates Enten (Winter) to manage the rains, the flooding of the rivers, and the fertility of the soil—the processes that replenish the irrigation system and prepare the land for cultivation.^[8] Enten's domain is water in all its forms: the rain that falls, the rivers that rise, the canals that fill, the soil that softens and accepts the seed.

Enlil creates Emesh (Summer) to manage the ripening of crops, the harvest, and the abundance that follows from Winter's preparatory work.^[9] The phrasing is careful. Emesh does not create abundance from nothing. Emesh manages the abundance that follows from Winter's work. The prologue has already, in the assignment of roles, indicated which season provides the foundation

and which builds upon it. An attentive reader will note that the verdict has been prefigured, quietly, in the very act of creation.

The prologue frames the seasonal cycle as a deliberate divine creation, with each season assigned complementary responsibilities by the chief god.^[10] The composition does not present Winter and Summer as enemies. They are collaborators in a system Enlil designed to keep the land productive year-round. The dispute that follows is about precedence—which half of the cycle is more essential—not about whether one season should replace the other.

The cosmological prologue frames the seasonal cycle as a divinely ordained structure, with Enlil as both creator of the seasons and ultimate arbiter of their relative worth.^[11] This double role gives Enlil a unique authority in the proceedings. He is not an impartial outsider. He is the engineer who built both machines. When he renders his verdict, he is not discovering which season is better; he is revealing what he knew from the moment of creation.

34.2. The debate

After fulfilling their seasonal duties, Emesh (Summer) and Enten (Winter) bring their produce to Enlil's temple as offerings, and a dispute arises over which has contributed more.^[12] The argument takes place at the temple—the institution where divine offerings are received and tallied. The question "who contributed more?" is being asked in the one place where contributions are systematically measured.

Emesh boasts of providing the harvest—the ripe grain, the abundant fruit, the prosperity of the fields under the sun—and claims credit for the visible wealth of the land.^[13] Emesh's argument has the force of the obvious. Look at the granaries. Look at the fruit trees heavy with produce. The grain turned golden under Summer's heat. The dates ripened under Summer's sun. The harvest—the tangible, countable, edible result of the entire agricultural cycle—happened on Summer's watch.

Enten counters that without the winter rains and floods, the irrigation canals would be dry, the soil barren, and Emesh would have nothing to ripen; Winter is therefore the foundational season on which all agricultural prosperity depends.^[14] The counter-argument strikes at the logical foundation of Emesh's boast. In whose water did the seed germinate? Who filled the canals? The rains came in Winter. The rivers flooded in Winter. The soil, baked and cracked after the previous summer's heat, softened and opened in Winter. Summer's harvest is real, but it derives from Winter's water.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Several lines in the central exchange are partially broken (lines 140–155). Overlapping Nippur school tablets restore the passage in large part.]

The debate covers the full agricultural cycle: water management, sowing, growth, ripening, and harvest, with each season claiming credit for the stages under its domain.^[15] The composition walks through the entire sequence of operations that turns rain into bread—the flooding of the channels, the preparation of the soil, the sowing of the seed, the growth, the ripening, the cutting, the threshing, the storage. At each stage, the relevant season steps forward to claim credit, and the other objects. The result is a comprehensive survey of Mesopotamian agriculture embedded within a competitive argument.

Enten accuses Emesh of being merely a parasite on the work Winter has done — enjoying the results without providing the essential foundation of water and fertile soil.^[16] The logic is structural rather than personal. Everything Summer does presupposes something Winter has already done. Strip away Winter’s contributions, and Summer has nothing — no water, no growth, no crop. Strip away Summer’s contributions, and Winter’s water is still there, filling the canals, soaking the earth, sustaining the marshes. The asymmetry, Enten argues, is absolute.

Emesh retorts that heat and sunlight are indispensable for ripening and that without Summer the grain would rot in waterlogged fields.^[17] The counter is agronomically sound. Water alone does not produce a harvest. Too much water produces the opposite: rot, mildew, waterlogged roots. The dry heat of summer transforms green stalks into golden grain ready for cutting. Without heat to drive ripening, without the dry weeks that harden the grain for storage, the water Winter is so proud of becomes a liability. Emesh’s argument is that water without heat is a swamp, and a swamp is not agriculture.

34.3. The verdict

Enlil renders the final verdict in favour of Enten (Winter), declaring Winter the winner of the contest.^[18]

(Enlil’s verdict for Winter reflects the ecological reality of southern Mesopotamian irrigation agriculture — rain and flooding are the indispensable basis of the entire system, without which no harvest is possible.^[19])

The verdict will seem counterintuitive to readers from climates where winter means frost and dormancy. But the composition is not written for those climates. It is written for southern Mesopotamia — an alluvial floodplain where agriculture depends entirely on water management. Rain falls only in the winter months. The Tigris and Euphrates flood only in the cooler season. The entire irrigation infrastructure depends on the annual replenishment of its water supply. Emesh’s argument about the necessity of heat was not wrong. But Enlil’s verdict reflects a deeper logic: you can have water without a harvest, and the water will still sustain the marshes and the wild growth of the floodplain. You cannot have a harvest without water. The asymmetry runs in one direction, and Enlil resolved it in the direction it runs.

After the verdict, Emesh (Summer) accepts Enten’s (Winter’s) superiority, and the two seasons are reconciled; they praise each other and restore harmony.^[20] The reconciliation follows the standard pattern of the debate genre: the loser accepts the verdict, the winner does not gloat, and the cosmic order returns. Neither season is abolished. Neither is diminished in its essential function. The verdict establishes hierarchy, not elimination. Winter comes first. Summer follows. Both are necessary. One is more necessary.

34.4. The composition in context

The composition served a didactic function in the *edubba*: through the structure of competitive argument, it taught scribal students the relative contributions of the wet and dry seasons to

agricultural productivity.^[21] Like the earlier debates, this text functioned simultaneously as literature and as curriculum. The student who copied it absorbed, through the act of copying, a systematic account of the agricultural year—which processes belong to which season, which dependencies flow in which direction, and how the whole system fits together. The debate genre was, among other things, a teaching method. The arguments were the lesson.

Frequent copies from Nippur school tablets confirm the composition's active circulation in the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum.^[22] Minor rendering differences between ETCSL and Black et al. 2004 in seasonal epithets do not affect the narrative substance.^[23]

The pattern of personified seasons arguing before a divine judge connects this composition to one of the most persistent structures in world literature. The most direct parallel appears in the Latin *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis* (Debate of Spring and Winter), a medieval European composition that preserves an almost identical literary structure: two personified seasons, a competitive exchange, and a verdict rendered by authority. Whether the medieval form descends from the Sumerian through channels of transmission the evidence does not allow us to trace, or whether the structure emerged independently wherever literate cultures confronted the fact that seasons alternate and someone had to decide which one mattered more, is a question scholars have raised without settling.

The broader motif of seasonal cycles explained through divine narrative is widespread. The Greek Demeter/Persephone myth provides a different structural solution to the same problem—the goddess's descent to the underworld and annual return explains the alternation of seasons through a story of loss and reunion rather than through a competitive debate. But the underlying question is the same: why do the seasons change, and which season is the productive one? The Sumerian answer is that the seasons change because Enlil designed them to change, each with assigned responsibilities, and that the productive season is the wet one—Winter—because water is the foundation on which everything else is built.

This last point deserves emphasis, because it inverts the seasonal symbolism that readers from northern latitudes carry as an unexamined assumption. In the European tradition, winter is death and summer is life. In southern Mesopotamia, winter is water and summer is heat. The verdict for Enten is not a verdict for dormancy. It is a verdict for the season that fills the canals, softens the soil, and makes cultivation possible. A civilisation that had built its cities, its temples, and its entire economy on the controlled distribution of water through an artificial canal network naturally concluded that the season of water was the season that mattered most. The theology reflects the hydrology, and the hydrology reflects the landscape.

[1] ETCSL 5.3.3, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 5.3.3, composite text.

[3] Black et al. 2004, pp. 226–233.

[4] ETCSL 5.3.3, composite text, lines 1–318; Black et al. 2004, pp. 226–233.

[5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 226–227; Kramer 1961, pp. 72–73.

[6] Civil 1994, *passim* (agricultural calendar and seasonal terminology); Black et al. 2004, p. 226.

[7] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 226–227.

[8] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 1–20; Black et al. 2004, p. 226.

[9] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 20–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 226–227.

[10] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, p. 226.

[11] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, p. 226.

[12] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines ~30–60; Black et al. 2004, pp. 227–228.

- [13] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines ~60—100; Black et al. 2004, pp. 228—229.
- [14] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines ~100—140; Black et al. 2004, pp. 229—230.
- [15] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 50—280; Black et al. 2004, pp. 228—232.
- [16] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines ~160—200; Black et al. 2004, pp. 230—231.
- [17] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines ~200—250; Black et al. 2004, pp. 231—232.
- [18] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines ~280—310; Black et al. 2004, pp. 232—233.
- [19] Inference: Southern Mesopotamia is an alluvial floodplain entirely dependent on water management; the text's internal logic consistently privileges the season that provides water. Risk: The text does not state the reasoning in explicit ecological terms; this is scholarly interpretation grounded in Civil 1994 and the text's own argument structure.
- [20] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines ~300—310; Black et al. 2004, p. 233.
- [21] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 50—280; Civil 1994, *passim*.
- [22] ETCSL 5.3.3, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 226.
- [23] ETCSL 5.3.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 226—233.

Chapter 35. The Debate between Bird and Fish

The composition known as "The Debate between Bird and Fish" is catalogued as ETCSL 5.3.5 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets.^[1] It is exceptionally well-preserved and notable for its rich technical vocabulary for fauna.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text, supplemented by Black et al. 2004, pp. 234–240.^[3]

Multiple well-preserved Old Babylonian copies survive, which points to active use in the *edubba*—the scribal school where these texts were copied and taught.^[4] The text belongs to the Sumerian debate genre and features two divine personifications—Bird (Sumerian *mušen*) and Fish (Sumerian *ku*)—who argue their relative merits and bring their case before King Shulgi, who renders the final verdict.^[5] The composition closes with a doxology praising Father Enki—god of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu—whose wisdom is understood to have guided the king's judgment.

The choice of King Shulgi as judge sets this debate apart from others in the genre. In the preceding compositions—Hoe and Plough, Ewe and Grain, Winter and Summer—a deity rendered the final verdict. Here, for the first and only time in the surviving debate corpus, a human king sits in judgment over two divine personifications. The distinction is not incidental. It reflects the Ur III political context in which the text was composed and frames Shulgi's authority as divinely inspired: Enki's wisdom stands behind the royal verdict, acknowledged in the closing doxology but never exercised directly.^[6]

35.1. The natural order

The composition opens by describing the natural order established by the gods, in which Bird and Fish each have their proper domain—the sky and the waters respectively.^[7] Enki fills the reed-beds and marshes with Fish and Bird, shows them their positions, and instructs them in their divine rules. The placement is deliberate: each creature belongs to a realm assigned by divine decree. The marsh is not an undifferentiated landscape but a structured cosmos in miniature, with air above and water below, and two creatures set into it like instruments calibrated for distinct tasks.

Bird occupies its natural habitat among the reeds, and Fish inhabits the deep waters, abundant in the rivers and canals. Each sustains life in its own right, and each lives within the framework of rules that Enki has laid down.^[8] The prologue does not linger over their separate lives. It makes the essential point and moves on: a god has assigned these two creatures their places, and the dispute that follows is, at bottom, a dispute about whether those assignments carry equal weight.

35.2. The dispute

Fish starts the dispute. The text is explicit: Fish takes up a stand and cries out, grandiosely opening hostilities.^[9] Fish addresses Bird murderously, accusing it of being noisy, gluttonous, and a pest

caught in the traps of farmers and fowlers. The opening salvo is not a polite declaration of one's own merits but an attack—a denunciation of the opponent's way of life delivered with the force of a prosecutor's indictment. Fish does not begin by saying "I am excellent." Fish begins by saying "You are contemptible."

Bird responds by claiming superiority through beauty, song, and its role in the royal palace—it soars above the world, sings praises to the gods, and adorns the landscape.^[10] Where Fish attacked, Bird boasts. Bird's plumage is multicoloured; its face is beautiful; its singing is sweet. It struts about in the E-kur, the temple of Enlil at Nippur, and its presence there is a glory. The argument is aesthetic and liturgical: Bird is beautiful, Bird is musical, and Bird serves the gods in their holiest precincts.

Fish responds in kind, claiming superiority through purity, abundance, and association with sacred waters. Fish are offerings fit for the gods and a staple of the temple economy.^[11] Fish does not concede the aesthetic argument. It shifts the ground. Beauty and song are pleasant, but the temple needs food, and the food it needs is fish. The argument is economic: measured by what actually appears on the offering table, Fish outranks Bird.

[At this point the tablet breaks. Minor damage to a few lines in the central exchange (lines 85—90). The text is exceptionally well-preserved and overlapping copies fill almost all gaps.]

The debate escalates from self-praise to increasingly personal and aggressive insults, as each contestant denigrates the other's appearance, habits, and social worth.^[12] The early rounds are almost civil—each side presents its credentials, its relationship to the temple, its utility to the divine order. But the tone shifts. The insults turn specific, physical, and contemptuous. The argument moves from "I am better than you" to "You are disgusting," and the distinction matters. A debate about relative merit is a debate about rank. A debate about the opponent's revolting qualities is a debate about whether the opponent deserves to exist at all.

Bird mocks Fish for its smell—awful enough to make people throw up, to make them bare their teeth in disgust. Its mouth is flabby. Its appearance is repulsive.^[13] The insults are sensory and visceral: not arguments about economic function but reactions of the body. Bird does not say Fish is useless. Bird says Fish is nauseating. The shift from economic argument to aesthetic revulsion marks a new phase in the dispute.

Fish retorts that Bird is gluttonous, malformed, and fills the courtyard with droppings. The little sweeper-boy sets nets in the house and chases Bird with ropes.^[14] The image is devastating in its specificity. Bird, who boasted of strutting through the E-kur, is reduced to a pest that fouls the courtyard and must be chased out by a child. The insult does not merely contradict Bird's claim to grandeur. It inverts that claim: the same temple where Bird walks in glory is the temple whose courtyard Bird dirties, so that a boy with a net must clean up the mess.

35.3. Escalation: physical aggression

The debate passes beyond verbal argument and erupts into physical violence. Fish destroys Bird's nest, turning the well-built brushwood construction into a haunted ruin. Fish smashes the eggs Bird has laid and hurls them into the sea.^[15] The attack is targeted with precision. Fish does not merely

insult Bird's offspring. Fish destroys them. The nest that Bird built is demolished. The eggs that would have been the next generation are thrown into the water—into Fish's own domain, as if Fish were claiming territorial supremacy over everything that falls into the sea.

Bird retaliates by snatching Fish's spawn from the water and gathering them all together. The violence is now reciprocal, and the stakes have passed beyond anything that rhetoric can settle. Both creatures have struck at each other's capacity to reproduce—the most fundamental act of biological destruction short of killing the opponent outright.

This escalation from rhetoric to physical destruction is exceptional within the debate genre. Most other Sumerian debates stay verbal, which makes the Bird-Fish contest distinctive for its dramatic violence.^[16] In the preceding compositions, Hoe and Plough argued; Ewe and Grain argued; Winter and Summer argued. None of them attacked the other's offspring. None of them destroyed the other's nest. The Bird-Fish debate is the only one in the surviving corpus that crosses the line from words to action, and the crossing is not gradual. It is abrupt and total: one moment they are trading insults, the next moment eggs are smashed and spawn is gathered from the water.

(The escalation to violence may serve a literary purpose—demonstrating what happens when debate fails to resolve a dispute and force is used instead, necessitating judicial intervention to restore order.^[17])

The mutual destruction drives both parties to seek formal judgment. The failure of argument—the moment when words stopped being sufficient and violence began—is precisely the moment that creates the need for a judge. A dispute that could have been settled by persuasion must now be settled by authority.

35.4. The verdict

King Shulgi, son of Enlil, renders the final verdict in favour of Bird, declaring Bird the winner of the contest.^[18] The judgment speech occupies the closing section of the composition. To strut about in the E-kur is a glory for Bird, Shulgi declares, for its singing is sweet. At Enlil's holy table, Bird takes precedence. The verdict echoes Bird's own boasts—beauty, song, liturgical function—but the words now carry the weight of royal authority rather than the self-interest of a contestant. What Bird claimed for itself, Shulgi confirms from the bench.

After the verdict, Fish accepts Bird's superiority, and the two creatures are reconciled under Shulgi's authority.^[19] The reconciliation follows the standard pattern of the debate genre: the loser submits, the winner does not gloat, and the order that violence disrupted is restored. The composition closes with a doxology praising Father Enki, whose wisdom is understood to have guided the king's judgment. Shulgi spoke the verdict, but Enki's wisdom stood behind it—a theological formulation that elevates the king's authority by grounding it in divine intelligence without requiring the god to appear and speak.

35.5. The composition in context

The composition served a didactic function in the *edubba*, teaching scribal students the rich vocabulary of natural history—the names and habits of birds and fish—through the competitive debate structure.^[20] The debate genre was, among other things, a pedagogical technology. A student who copied this text was not merely practising cuneiform signs. The student was absorbing the technical terminology of fauna—the Sumerian words for nest and spawn, for plumage and scale, for the specific insults that one creature hurls at another. The vocabulary lesson was embedded in the argument, and the argument made the vocabulary memorable.

Modern scholars praise the text for its vivid imagery, escalating rhetoric, and the dramatic intensity of its action sequence, and count it among the most literarily accomplished debate poems in the Sumerian corpus.^[21] The praise is deserved. The composition does something the other debate poems do not: it lets its contestants lose control. The escalation from polite self-promotion to personal insult to physical destruction gives the Bird-Fish debate a narrative arc that the other compositions—for all their rhetorical sophistication—do not achieve. The Hoe-Plough debate is clever. The Ewe-Grain debate is systematic. The Winter-Summer debate is intellectually rigorous. The Bird-Fish debate is dramatic.

Multiple well-preserved copies confirm the composition's active use in Old Babylonian scribal schools.^[22] Minor translational differences between ETCSL and Black et al. 2004 in animal epithets do not affect the narrative substance.^[23]

The broader pattern of personified animals arguing their merits before a judge connects this composition to one of the most persistent structures in world literature. The animal fable with moral judgment and hierarchy among creatures appears in the Greek tradition, where Aesop's fables stage disputes between creatures that end in a moral resolution—though Aesop's animals typically learn their lessons through misfortune rather than through formal adjudication. The didactic animal contest also appears in the Indian tradition, where the Panchatantra uses personified animals to convey practical wisdom through competitive interaction—though the Panchatantra's frame-story structure differs fundamentally from the Sumerian debate format.

What sets the Bird-Fish debate apart from these later traditions is the escalation from verbal contest to physical violence—the breakdown of rhetorical order that requires judicial intervention to restore harmony. Aesop's animals suffer consequences; they do not destroy each other's offspring and then petition a king for a verdict. The Sumerian composition takes the animal fable to a place that later traditions, on the whole, chose not to follow: the place where argument fails and force begins. Here, a legitimate authority to settle the matter is not a given but a necessity discovered through the experience of destruction.

[1] ETCSL 5.3.5, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 5.3.5, composite text.

[3] Black et al. 2004, pp. 234–240.

[4] ETCSL 5.3.5, composite text, lines 1–190; Black et al. 2004, pp. 234–240.

[5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 234–235; Kramer 1961, pp. 72–73.

[6] Black et al. 2004, pp. 234–235.

[7] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 234–235.

[8] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~10–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 234–235.

[9] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~30–60; Black et al. 2004, pp. 235–236.

- [10] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~60—90; Black et al. 2004, pp. 236—237.
- [11] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~60—90; Black et al. 2004, pp. 236—237.
- [12] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~90—130; Black et al. 2004, pp. 237—238.
- [13] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~100—120; Black et al. 2004, pp. 237—238.
- [14] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~120—140; Black et al. 2004, p. 238.
- [15] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~140—170; Black et al. 2004, pp. 238—239.
- [16] Black et al. 2004, pp. 234, 238—239.
- [17] Inference: The verdict by King Shulgi follows directly upon the violent act, as if provoked by the breakdown of legitimate argument. Risk: The text does not explicitly state this pedagogical function; this is interpretive.
- [18] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~170—190; Black et al. 2004, pp. 239—240.
- [19] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines ~185—190; Black et al. 2004, p. 240.
- [20] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines 30—170; Civil 1994, *passim*.
- [21] Black et al. 2004, pp. 234—240.
- [22] ETCSL 5.3.5, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 234.
- [23] ETCSL 5.3.5; Black et al. 2004, pp. 234—240.

Chapter 36. The Debate between Copper and Silver

The composition known as "The Debate between Copper and Silver" is catalogued as ETCSL 5.3.6 and survives on Old Babylonian tablets in a fragmentary state.^[1] Fewer copies survive than for any other debate poem. CDLI records only eleven manuscript witnesses, all from Nippur, against sixty or seventy for Hoe and Plough or Ewe and Grain. The text seems to have circulated less widely in the *edubba*, the scribal school where these compositions were copied and taught.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text.^[3]

The text belongs to the Sumerian debate genre. Two personified metals — Copper (Sumerian *urudu*) and Silver (Sumerian *ku-babbar*) — argue their relative merits before Enlil, king of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur (Sumerian: Nibru).^[4] Significant breaks and gaps interrupt the surviving tablets across multiple segments, but the core arguments of both sides and the final verdict are substantially preserved.^[5]

[At this point the tablet breaks. Significant breaks and gaps across the surviving tablets throughout the composition, though the core arguments and verdict are substantially preserved. No additional manuscripts available to fill the major gaps; fewer copies survive than for other debate poems.]

36.1. Silver's claim

Silver speaks first. Its argument rests on prestige, ceremony, and the refinements of palace life.^[6] Silver is the metal of banquets and households, of adornment and royal display — the metal that sits in the palace and graces the table when important guests arrive. The argument is one of rank: Silver occupies a higher station in the order of civilisation because it belongs to occasions of dignity rather than occasions of labour.

Silver argues that prestige and ceremonial function outweigh mere utility — that the metal used for adornment and royal treasure stands above the metal that gets dirty in the fields.^[7]

The claim has a certain logic. In any society that distinguishes work from ceremony, the materials of ceremony carry a symbolic weight that the materials of work do not. Silver gleams. Silver adorns. Silver is displayed. Copper digs.

36.2. Copper's reply

Copper responds with devastating practicality. Its case rests not on prestige but on indispensability, and the indispensability it claims is agricultural.^[8] Copper supplies the hoes that chop weeds when the wet season arrives. Copper supplies the adzes that shape ploughs. Copper supplies the axes that cut firewood. Copper supplies the sickles that reap grain.^[9] The argument is a catalogue of tools, each named and each tied to a specific task in the agricultural cycle. Without copper hoes, the weeds choke the fields. Without copper adzes, no ploughs are built. Without copper axes, no wood

is cut. Without copper sickles, no grain is harvested. The practical infrastructure of civilisation depends on Copper, and Copper makes certain that the judge knows it.

Copper does not stop at listing its own merits. It turns on Silver with contempt: the palace is Silver's station, and banquets are Silver's assigned task — but what happens to Silver when the banquet is over? Someone digs a hole in the middle of the cattle-pen and buries it. Someone pours clay on top of it. Someone hides it in the most obscure corner of a grave.^[10] The insult is precise. Silver boasted of prestige; Copper replies that Silver's prestige amounts to being buried in dirt between uses. Copper, by contrast, is never hidden. Copper is always in someone's hand, always at work, always necessary.

(The debate stages a tension between practical utility and ceremonial prestige that modern readers may recognise as an early form of the distinction between use-value and exchange-value.^[11])

36.3. The verdict

Enlil, calling his minister Nuska, renders the final verdict in favour of Copper. The surviving text is explicit: "Strong Copper had the lead over Silver in Enlil's house — Father Enlil be praised!"^[12] Copper wins. The verdict makes this composition unique among the Sumerian debate poems: it is the only one in which the contestant who does not open the debate goes on to win it.^[13]

Enlil's judgment follows the logic the composition has been building from the start. Silver is beautiful, Silver adorns the palace, Silver graces the banquet table — but the fields must be ploughed, the weeds must be chopped, the grain must be reaped, and for all of these tasks the civilisation of southern Mesopotamia required copper. The verdict is pragmatic, as Enlil's verdicts tend to be. The god who separated heaven from earth and established the conditions for agriculture was not likely to be impressed by banquet settings.

36.4. The composition in context

Despite its fragmentary state and limited manuscript attestation, the surviving portions reveal a composition with a distinctive economic theme — the tension between the metal of daily labour and the metal of ceremonial display, a question that was not abstract in Mesopotamian life.^[14] The composition receives less scholarly treatment than the major debates — Hoe and Plough, Ewe and Grain, Winter and Summer — but scholars note it for this unusual focus on material value.^[15]

The ETCSL composite represents the primary available reconstruction, built from the limited fragmentary witnesses recovered from Nippur and supplemented by earlier scholarly work including van Dijk's 1953 edition and Civil's reconstructions.^[16]

The question the composition asks is, at bottom, a question about what matters more: the thing that impresses or the thing that works. The Sumerian answer, delivered by the king of the gods in his own house, is that the thing that works comes first. Silver is lovely. Copper feeds the world. And in the alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia, where every field depended on a dug canal and every harvest on a sharpened sickle, that was not a difficult judgment to reach.

The tension between practical utility and prestige value that this composition explores prefigures distinctions that would become central to later economic thought — Adam Smith’s diamond-water paradox, the classical and Marxian distinction between use-value and exchange-value. The ranking of metals as markers of civilisational quality also finds a parallel in Hesiod’s Ages of Man, where gold, silver, bronze, and iron stand for declining cosmic epochs — though Hesiod’s hierarchy runs in the opposite direction, placing silver above bronze rather than below it.

[1] ETCSL 5.3.6, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 5.3.6, manuscript list; CDLI P478959.

[3] ETCSL 5.3.6, composite text.

[4] ETCSL 5.3.6, composite text, Segments A—I.

[5] ETCSL 5.3.6, composite text.

[6] ETCSL 5.3.6, Segment A.

[7] ETCSL 5.3.6, Segment A.

[8] ETCSL 5.3.6, Segment D.

[9] ETCSL 5.3.6, Segment D.

[10] ETCSL 5.3.6, surviving lines.

[11] Inference: The arguments as preserved explicitly contrast practical agricultural function against domestic and ceremonial prestige. Risk: The "use-value vs. exchange-value" framing is a modern analytical category; the Sumerian text does not use these terms.

[12] ETCSL 5.3.6, Segment I.

[13] ETCSL 5.3.6, Segment I.

[14] ETCSL 5.3.6, surviving lines.

[15] ETCSL 5.3.6, bibliography.

[16] ETCSL 5.3.6; van Dijk 1953, pp. 58—64.

Chapter 37. The Debate between Date Palm and Tamarisk

The composition known as "The Debate between Date Palm and Tamarisk" is catalogued as ETCSL 5.3.7 and survives on a single witness tablet, Sb 12354 (CDLI P357265), from Susa. Cavigneaux published the tablet in 2003.^[1] Only nineteen Sumerian lines survive, and the composition may be a Sumerian rendering of an Akkadian original.^[2] The present retelling follows the ETCSL composite text.^[3]

Nineteen lines is very little—less than a single column of a standard Old Babylonian tablet. Most Sumerian debate poems survive on dozens of manuscripts running to hundreds of lines; this one survives on a single tablet from a provincial archive, and what it preserves is a fragment of a fragment. The composition belongs to the debate genre but reaches us in a fragmentary state, and fewer copies survive than for the major debate poems—a sign of more limited circulation in Old Babylonian scribal schools.^[4]

What can be said with confidence is this: the text belongs to the Sumerian debate genre and features two personified trees—the Date Palm (Sumerian *gišimmar*), the supreme cultivated tree of Mesopotamia, and the Tamarisk (Sumerian *šinig*), a hardy wild tree used for ritual purification and fuel.^[5] The debate stages a tension between cultivated and wild nature: between the domesticated tree that yields fruit, syrup, and fibre, and the wild tree that grows without human care and serves ritual and practical ends.^[6]

37.1. The arguments

Date Palm argues its superiority on the grounds of immense economic value: it provides dates—a dietary staple—date syrup, palm wine, fibre for rope-making, and wood for construction, which makes it the most productive tree in the Mesopotamian landscape.^[7] The argument is practical and quantitative. Date Palm lists the things it gives to human civilisation, and the list is long. Date Palm emphasises its status as a cultivated tree—tended, irrigated, and pollinated by human labour—linking its worth to the civilisational enterprise of agriculture and horticulture.^[8] The claim is not merely that Date Palm is useful but that Date Palm is civilised: it exists because human beings chose to plant it, water it, and tend it, and its products are the fruits of that partnership between tree and cultivator.

Tamarisk counters by emphasising its hardiness, its independence from human cultivation, and its ritual purity—the tamarisk is used in purification rites and its wood serves as fuel and building material.^[9] Where Date Palm boasts of the human labour invested in it, Tamarisk boasts of needing no such investment. Tamarisk grows in the steppe, in the wasteland, in places where no irrigation canal reaches. It does not require pollination by hand. It does not demand the gardener's attention. And when it is cut, its wood purifies—a function that dates and syrup cannot perform.

(The cultivated-vs-wild opposition maps onto a broader Sumerian conceptual framework in which civilisation (the city, the irrigated garden) is valued over the untamed steppe.^[10])

37.2. What is lost

[At this point the tablet breaks. Substantial gaps across the surviving tablets; much of the central argument is lost. Fewer copies survive and no known manuscript fills the major gaps.]

[At this point the tablet breaks. The verdict and conclusion are poorly preserved or entirely lost. The ending is not securely attested; no manuscript preserves a clear verdict.]

The identity of the judge and the winner of the debate cannot be determined with confidence from the surviving evidence.^[11] In the other debate poems — Hoe and Plough, Ewe and Grain, Winter and Summer, Bird and Fish, Copper and Silver — a deity or a king renders a verdict, and the loser submits. Whether the same pattern held here, and if so which tree prevailed, the surviving nineteen lines do not tell us. The central argument, the escalation, the verdict, and the reconciliation — if they existed — are gone.

37.3. The composition in context

The composition belongs to a broader Ancient Near Eastern tree-debate tradition that includes Akkadian parallels. Debates between trees—cultivated versus wild, productive versus ornamental—appear in later Akkadian wisdom literature, pointing to a deep and persistent literary lineage.^[12] Despite its fragmentary state, what survives reveals a composition concerned with the relative merits of cultivated and wild nature—domesticated utility versus natural resilience—a theme with wide resonance in world literature.^[13]

Fewer copies survive than for the major debate poems, pointing to either more limited circulation in the *edubba* curriculum or poorer archaeological recovery.^[14] The ETCSL composite is the only available reconstruction from limited fragmentary witnesses, and Black et al. 2004 covers only the preserved portions.^[15]

The opposition between the cultivated tree and the wild tree is, in the end, the opposition between the garden and the steppe—between the irrigated field that human beings built and the open land that existed before them and will exist after them. The Date Palm needs the gardener; the Tamarisk needs only rain. Which of these is the greater virtue, the surviving text does not resolve. But the question itself—whether civilisation’s dependence on human labour is a strength or a vulnerability, whether self-sufficiency counts for more than productivity—has not lost its force. The same tension appears in the Greek tradition, where Aesop’s fable of the Oak and the Reed contrasts the strong, cultivated tree with the flexible, wild plant. It appears in the Hebrew Bible, where the Garden of Eden stands as cultivated paradise against the wilderness beyond. It is a question that the first agriculturalists posed and that no subsequent civilisation has definitively answered.

[1] ETCSL 5.3.7, bibliography.

[2] ETCSL 5.3.7, composite text.

[3] ETCSL composite text.

[4] ETCSL 5.3.7, composite text, fragmentary; Black et al. 2004, pp. 244–246.

[5] Black et al. 2004, pp. 244–245; Kramer 1961, pp. 72–73.

[6] ETCSL 5.3.7, surviving lines; Black et al. 2004, pp. 244–245.

[7] ETCSL 5.3.7, surviving lines; Black et al. 2004, pp. 244—245.

[8] ETCSL 5.3.7, surviving lines; Black et al. 2004, p. 245.

[9] ETCSL 5.3.7, surviving lines; Black et al. 2004, pp. 245—246.

[10] Inference: This opposition recurs across the Sumerian literary corpus, e.g. the Gilgamesh (note Bilgames) tradition where Enkidu moves from wild nature to civilised life. Risk: The fragmentary state of this text makes it difficult to confirm whether it explicitly engages this theme.

[11] ETCSL 5.3.7, editorial notes; Black et al. 2004, p. 246.

[12] Black et al. 2004, pp. 244—246; Kramer 1961, pp. 72—73.

[13] ETCSL 5.3.7, surviving lines; Black et al. 2004, pp. 244—246.

[14] ETCSL 5.3.7, manuscript list; Black et al. 2004, p. 244.

[15] ETCSL 5.3.7; Black et al. 2004, pp. 244—246.

Chapter 38. Comparative Perspectives: Sumer and Its Neighbours

Throughout this book, the rule has been strict: each chapter stays inside Sumer. When a Sumerian text recalled Genesis, or Hesiod, or the Norse Eddas, the echo was confined to a hidden marker in the manuscript — a comparative hook — and the body of the chapter did not wander. Almost five hundred such hooks lie buried in the thirty-six chapters and the introduction, and this final chapter is where they are finally allowed to do their work.

The reason for the quarantine is that comparative mythology has a long record of overreach. Nineteenth-century scholarship, under Max Müller and his solar mythologists, spent decades trying to resolve every deity into the sun. Early twentieth-century Pan-Babylonianism went the other way and tried to resolve every deity into the moon, or into Babylonian astral religion more generally. James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890, expanded through 1915) systematised the hypothesis of a universal "dying and rising god" across the ancient Mediterranean and beyond, and that hypothesis still colours popular writing about Inanna and Dumuzid even though several generations of specialist scholarship have eroded its empirical foundations.^[1] Jungian analytical psychology, and the popularising work of Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and *The Masks of God* (1959-1968), offered another tempting shortcut: the argument that all the world's mythologies are surface expressions of a single set of archetypes residing in the collective unconscious, so that Inanna, Persephone, Izanami, and the Virgin Mary are all, at some deep level, the same figure. These frameworks can illuminate as heuristics, but they cannot do the work of causal explanation. They tend to dissolve genuine historical and cultural difference into a soup of universality, and a book that takes its sources seriously — as this one has tried to — needs to hold them at arm's length.

What follows, therefore, is an attempt to be careful. Three kinds of comparison survive scholarly scrutiny. The first is shared cultural substrate: two traditions derive from a common source (whether linguistic, geographic, or institutional) and preserve features of that source independently. The second is diffusion through contact: two traditions are linked by a traceable path of transmission — merchants, scribes, bilingual communities, translated tablets — along which motifs and compositions travelled. The third is independent parallel invention, in which two traditions arrive at similar solutions to similar narrative problems without any direct contact. A fourth category, structural parallel, concerns not historical descent but patterns in how religious imagination organises the cosmos; the work of Georges Dumézil on Indo-European tripartite ideology and of Jaan Puhvel on comparative mythology offers the most disciplined version of this, and we will draw on it where it is directly relevant.^[2]

One general limit should be stated at the outset. The Sumerians were not Indo-European, and the most robust comparative frameworks — Dumézil's tripartite theory in particular — were built to explain the family of traditions descended from Proto-Indo-European religion: Vedic, Iranian, Greek, Roman, Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic. Sumer stands outside that family. Where Sumerian material converges with Indo-European material on a structural level, the convergence is therefore more interesting — it is not inherited from a common ancestor and must be explained either by independent invention or by long-distance contact. Where Sumerian material converges with Semitic or West Asian material — Akkadian, Ugaritic, Hebrew, Hittite with its Hurrian substrate — the explanation usually involves shared geography and documented diffusion, because

these cultures occupied overlapping territories and exchanged texts. Greek convergence can go either way, depending on period and route; Egyptian convergence usually demands evidence of direct contact; East Asian, Polynesian, or sub-Saharan African convergence almost always means independent invention, because no plausible path of transmission existed during the relevant period. Keeping these registers distinct is the difference between comparative mythology as a discipline and comparative mythology as a parlour game.

With that in mind, let us go through the major clusters.

38.1. Cosmogonic Parallels

The Sumerian cosmogony does not survive as a single, coherent composition. Unlike the Hebrew *Genesis* or the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, which present continuous creation narratives in a single text, the Sumerian version must be assembled from opening lines, incidental references, and cosmological prologues embedded in longer compositions.^[3] The most important is the prologue of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* (Chapter 22), which opens with the separation of heaven and earth.^[4] Another is the opening of *Enki and Ninmah* (Chapter 2), which presupposes a primal state in which the gods labour and humanity has not yet been made. A third is the cycle of allusions to the primeval mother Nammu, the *abzu* as the underground freshwater deep, and the pairing of heaven (An) and earth (Ki) as a divine couple whose separation produces the organised cosmos.

The first comparison that suggests itself is with the opening of *Genesis*. In both traditions the primal state is watery: *Genesis* 1:2 describes the spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters; the Sumerian tradition names Nammu, the primeval mother of the gods, as the sea, and locates Enki's house in the *abzu*—the underground freshwater deep beneath Eridu.^[5] The parallel is real, but the mechanism differs. In *Genesis* a single creator acts on the waters from outside; in Sumer the waters are themselves divine, and the organised cosmos emerges through births and unions rather than through speech. The Sumerian model—divinity as the primal stuff, not the primal shaper—is closer in this respect to Hesiod's Greek cosmogony, in which Chaos generates Gaia, Tartarus, and Eros, and the gods emerge from the elements rather than from the word of a transcendent creator.^[6] M.L. West, whose *The East Face of Helicon* (1997) is the most comprehensive study of Near Eastern influence on early Greek poetry, argues that the Hesiodic sequence depends directly or indirectly on Mesopotamian models, most conspicuously through the intermediate Hurro-Hittite *Song of Kumarbi*; the chain of castrations in *Kumarbi* and in Hesiod is too specific to be coincidence.^[7] The Sumerian material, predating the Hurro-Hittite, stands at the beginning of this chain of influence, though it does not itself contain a castration sequence—that is a Hurrian development.

The clay creation of humans offers a second comparison. In *Enki and Ninmah* (Chapter 2), the mother goddess Ninmah moulds humanity from clay pinched off the surface of the *abzu*, with Enki offering advice and inspiration; the myth stages a drunken contest between the two deities in which Ninmah makes defective humans and Enki finds a social niche for each, until Enki makes a being so helpless that Ninmah can find nothing for it to do.^[8] The Greek parallel is Prometheus, who in later sources (notably the mythographic tradition from the Hellenistic period onward) shapes the first humans from clay mixed with water; the motif is absent in Hesiod but becomes prominent in later writers such as Apollodorus and Ovid.^[9] The *Genesis* parallel is Adam, formed by YHWH from the dust of the ground into which divine breath is blown (*Genesis* 2:7). In all three cases humanity is earth shaped by a divine hand, but the purpose differs: in Sumer, humanity is made to relieve the

gods of labour, a point the Akkadian *Atrahasis* later elaborates in more brutal terms;^[10] in *Genesis*, humanity is made to tend the garden and be fruitful; in the Prometheus tradition, the purpose is less clear and is often ambiguously tied to the Promethean fire-theft. The clay-creation motif may reflect a genuinely diffused Near Eastern theologoumenon rather than independent invention, because the same narrative slot—divine craftsman, earth substrate, breath or water to animate—appears across Sumerian, Akkadian, Hebrew, and Egyptian material (the potter god Khnum, who moulds each child on his wheel).^[11]

A third cosmogonic motif is the separation of heaven and earth. The prologue of *Gilgamesh*, *Enkidu, and the Nether World* is explicit: in the days after heaven had been separated from earth, after An had taken heaven and Enlil had taken earth, after Ereshkigal had been carried off into the *kur* as its queen.^[12] The motif is widespread. In Greek, Hesiod's *Theogony* narrates Kronos castrating his father Ouranos (heaven), after which Ouranos is pushed up and away from Gaia (earth), though here the separation follows a generational conflict rather than staging a primal cosmogonic act.^[13] In the Chinese tradition, the Pangu myth—preserved in texts of the third century CE and later, but drawing on earlier material—tells how the primordial cosmic egg split and the giant Pangu grew between its halves, pushing heaven upward and earth downward for eighteen thousand years before collapsing into the features of the world.^[14] In the Egyptian Heliopolitan tradition, Shu (air) separates Geb (earth) from Nut (sky), who would otherwise remain in permanent embrace.^[15]

The density of the heaven-earth separation motif—Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, Polynesian (Ranginui and Papatuanuku in Maori tradition), and several West African and Native American traditions—is the kind of worldwide spread that resists a single diffusionist story. Here one might invoke independent invention with some confidence: the image of sky and earth as a primordial embrace, forced apart to make room for the world, is a natural way to articulate the visible fact that the horizon is where they appear to meet and the zenith is where they are furthest apart.^[16]

A fourth and final cosmogonic point concerns the divine assignment of domains. In *Enki and the World Order* (Chapter 3), Enki tours the cosmos and assigns each land, river, craft, and institution to a specific deity.^[17] The Greek parallel is explicit: in *Iliad* 15.187-193, Poseidon recalls that he, Zeus, and Hades drew lots for the three cosmic domains—sea, heaven, and underworld respectively, with earth and Olympus held in common.^[18] The Egyptian Heliopolitan Ennead assigns each of the nine gods a specific domain; the Hesiodic tradition embeds a similar division. Here the typological parallel is clear but the mechanism is not. Walter Burkert, one of the most careful modern comparatists, argues that the Mesopotamian model of divine bureaucracy—a pantheon organised by portfolio, with each deity responsible for a specific sector of the natural or social order—is one of the defining contributions of the ancient Near East to later religious imagination, and that Greek religion bears traces of it from at least the archaic period.^[19] The bureaucratic character of the Sumerian divine assembly—An at the top, Enlil as executive, Enki as administrator, each minor deity with a clearly defined portfolio—is distinctive enough that it probably represents a genuine Mesopotamian contribution to the later organisation of the Greek Olympians, though direct textual dependence cannot be demonstrated.

38.2. The Chaoskampf and the Warrior God

The term *Chaoskampf*—"battle with chaos"—was coined by the German biblical scholar Hermann Gunkel in *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (1895) to name the pattern in which a young warrior god defeats a primordial monster of chaos and thereby organises the cosmos.^[20] Gunkel

developed the concept to explain why chaos-monster imagery (Leviathan, Rahab, Behemoth) persists in the Hebrew Bible despite the monotheistic rewriting, and his successors extended it into a comparative framework that now spans roughly three millennia of ancient Near Eastern and Indo-European material.

The earliest securely dated instance of the pattern in literary form is Sumerian: *Lugal-e* (Chapter 7), the long composition in which Ninurta battles the demon Asag.^[21] The structural features are clear: a young warrior god (Ninurta), commissioned by the supreme god (Enlil), confronts a chaos being (Asag, a demon of sickness who has raised an army of stones), defeats it in combat, and returns to the divine assembly triumphant, having incidentally created the Tigris river system and organised the mineral world through his fate-decrees on the stones. Thorkild Jacobsen argued that *Lugal-e* should be read as the Sumerian prototype of the pattern, predating the Akkadian *Enuma Elish* by roughly seven or eight centuries and therefore standing at the head of the genealogy.^[22] The *Enuma Elish* itself is out of scope for this book — it is Akkadian, not Sumerian — but its relationship to the Sumerian tradition is a central comparative question. In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk defeats the primal sea goddess Tiamat, splits her body to make heaven and earth, and is installed as king of the gods. The composition postdates *Lugal-e* by centuries, and most specialists accept that it draws on the earlier Sumerian material in both structure and detail.^[23]

The Vedic parallel is Indra's slaying of Vrtra. *Rig Veda* 1.32 narrates how Indra, armed with the thunderbolt manufactured by Tvashtar, strikes down the serpent Vrtra, whose body has blocked the seven rivers; when Vrtra falls, the waters are released and flow freely to the sea.^[24] The structural match with *Lugal-e* is striking: warrior god, supreme-god commission, serpent or demon blocking waters, victory, release of waters, organisation of the cosmos. Puhvel in *Comparative Mythology* (1987) treats Indra-Vrtra and its Iranian and Greek cognates as reflexes of an inherited Indo-European pattern of dragon-slaying, which he calls the "second function" combat myth after Dumézil's scheme.^[25] But Sumer is not Indo-European, and the Sumerian material is older than any Indo-European text. Two explanations are possible. The first is that the Chaoskampf is a genuinely ancient West Asian motif that spread from Mesopotamia into the Indo-European-speaking world through contact in the third and second millennia BCE. The second is that warrior-versus-dragon is a natural narrative form that can be invented independently. Mary Bachvarova's more recent work on Hurrian-to-Greek transmission lends some support to the first: she has shown in detail how the *Kumarbi* cycle — Hurrian songs preserved on Hittite tablets — mediated between Mesopotamian and Greek traditions, carrying chaos-combat material westward through the second millennium.^[26]

The Greek parallel with which this connects most closely is Zeus against Typhon, narrated in Hesiod's *Theogony* (820-880).^[27] Typhon is a hundred-headed monster, born of Gaia and Tartarus, who challenges Zeus for the sovereignty of the cosmos. Zeus strikes him with the thunderbolt, defeats him, and buries him under Mount Etna. The match with *Lugal-e* — warrior god, supreme-god status at stake, monstrous challenger, thunderbolt or equivalent weapon, defeat, and burial in or association with a mountain — is close. The match with Indra-Vrtra is also close. West argued that the Zeus-Typhon episode borrows directly from the *Kumarbi* cycle and, behind that, from Mesopotamian models.^[28]

The Norse Thor-against-Jörmungandr combat belongs structurally to the same family but with a characteristic Germanic twist: the combat is eschatological, not cosmogonic. At Ragnarok, Thor will kill the world-serpent Jörmungandr but will himself die nine paces later from its venom.^[29] The structural parallel with Ninurta-Asag and Indra-Vrtra is real, but the Norse version sets the combat

at the end of time rather than at the beginning, and the warrior does not survive. This variation — cosmogonic in Sumer and India, eschatological in Scandinavia — has been taken by some scholars as evidence that the underlying pattern concerns the permanent tension between order and chaos rather than a single mythic moment, and that each tradition plants the combat at the structural position where the question of cosmic order is most urgent for its own theology.

Georges Dumézil's tripartite theory offers a framework for locating Ninurta within this comparative matrix. Dumézil argued that Indo-European societies organised both their mythology and their social ideology around three functions: sovereignty (the priest-king, often doubled into a magical and a juridical aspect), warrior power, and productive fecundity. In Vedic India the three functions map onto Varuna-Mitra (sovereignty), Indra (warrior), and the Ashvins (fecundity). In Rome they appear as Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus.^[30] The Sumerian pantheon is not Indo-European and was not built on this scheme, yet the Ninurta-Asag narrative nevertheless slots neatly into the second-function role: Ninurta is the warrior par excellence, a specialist in combat, and his relationship to his father Enlil (the sovereign) and to Ashnan and Lahar (the grain and cattle deities of the productive function) maps surprisingly well onto the Dumézilian scheme.^[31] The convergence may suggest that the tripartite structure, while Dumézil rightly identified it as Indo-European in its most systematic forms, reflects a more general feature of agrarian societies with a warrior class, a priestly class, and a productive peasantry — in which case its appearance in Sumer is independent and typological rather than genealogical.^[32]

A final observation on the Chaoskampf: one of the most distinctive features of *Lugal-e* is the extended fate-decree section in which Ninurta assigns cosmic destinies to each of the stones that fought for or against him. This mineralogical catalogue has no exact counterpart in the Marduk, Indra, Zeus, or Thor traditions, and it is one of the places where the Sumerian composition is most clearly itself: a victory narrative that is also an encyclopaedia, and that turns the battle's aftermath into a structured taxonomy of the world's materials.^[33]

38.3. The Descent Narrative and the Dying God

The most famous comparative claim about Sumerian mythology is that *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* (Chapter 14) parallels the Greek Persephone-Demeter myth: a goddess descends into the realm of death, is held there, and is returned to the upper world in a pattern that underwrites the seasonal cycle. The claim has been made repeatedly since Kramer, and the parallel is real enough to deserve careful unpacking.^[34]

First, the Sumerian text itself. Inanna, goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star, decides to descend to the underworld ruled by her elder sister Ereshkigal, queen of the dead. She passes through seven gates, at each of which she is stripped of one item of regalia, and she arrives naked and powerless before her sister. Ereshkigal kills her, and her corpse is hung on a hook. Enki, alerted to her absence by her minister Ninshubur, fashions two beardless creatures — the kurgara and the galatura — who slip unnoticed into the underworld, flatter Ereshkigal into granting them a boon, and revive Inanna by sprinkling her with the plant and the water of life. She leaves the underworld, but no one leaves without providing a substitute. The *galla* demons follow her back to the surface, and when she finds her consort Dumuzid enthroned under an apple tree, wearing splendid garments and showing no sign of mourning, she designates him as her substitute. Dumuzid tries to escape, transformed by Utu (sun god) into various animals, but the *galla* catch him. A companion piece, *Dumuzid's Dream* (Chapter 15), narrates his final capture and death; the

cycle is completed by *Inanna and Bilulu* (Chapter 16), in which Inanna avenges him, and by the arrangement recorded at the end of *Inanna's Descent* itself: Dumuzid spends half the year in the underworld, and his sister Geshtinanna spends the other half, so that one of them is always below and the other above.^[35]

The Greek Persephone myth, narrated most fully in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (seventh-sixth century BCE), runs as follows: Hades, with Zeus's connivance, abducts Persephone from a meadow where she is picking flowers; her mother Demeter searches for her, learns of the abduction, and in her grief causes the crops to fail; Zeus orders Hades to release her, but she has eaten pomegranate seeds in the underworld and must therefore return there for part of each year; the alternation produces the seasons.^[36]

The structural parallel is clear: a goddess descends (Persephone involuntarily, Inanna willingly), is trapped in the underworld, is partially released through divine intervention, and an alternation is established that links the underworld to the calendar of agriculture. But the parallels stop at that level of abstraction. The Persephone who descends is not the same figure as the one who returns; the whole point of the Greek story is her transformation from maiden to queen. Inanna, by contrast, returns as the same goddess she was, having accomplished an underworld visit that is theologically rather than personally transformative. The substitute motif—Dumuzid dying in Inanna's place—has no parallel at all in the Persephone tradition; it is Persephone herself who alternates, not a substitute. And the seasonal alternation in *Inanna's Descent* runs between Dumuzid and Geshtinanna, not between Inanna's presence and absence; the shepherd god and his sister cycle, while Inanna remains above.

M.L. West argued that the Greek tradition shows Mesopotamian influence mediated through the Near East, but that the influence is diffuse and structural rather than specific.^[37] The closer eastern parallel is the Akkadian *Descent of Ishtar*, a much shorter adaptation of the Sumerian text in which the goddess descends, is killed, and is revived, but the substitute-and-alternation material is truncated.^[38] The Akkadian version is demonstrably later than the Sumerian, and through it the narrative would have reached Aramaic-, Phoenician-, and Greek-speaking communities in the first millennium BCE. A chain of transmission from Sumer to Greece via Akkadian and Levantine intermediaries is plausible but underdocumented.

Dumuzid brings in another cluster of parallels. His is the original dying-god pattern in the ancient Near East. In the Greek world the figure most often compared is Adonis, whose cult—with its weeping women, its rapid blooming and wilting, and its seasonal mourning festival—originated in the Levant and reached Greece via Phoenician Cyprus. Adonis's very name is Semitic, from *ʾadon*, "lord," and the cult shows clear continuity with the West Semitic dying-shepherd traditions that were themselves influenced by Mesopotamian Dumuzid-Tammuz worship.^[39] The Hebrew Bible itself contains a trace: *Ezekiel* 8:14 mentions women weeping for Tammuz at the north gate of the Jerusalem Temple, a cult the prophet regards as an abomination.^[40] The line from Dumuzid to Adonis is therefore documented, if diffuse: it runs through the Akkadian Tammuz, through West Semitic intermediaries in the Levant, and into Greek cult by at least the sixth century BCE. This is one of the strongest cases of demonstrable diffusion in the comparative mythology of the ancient Mediterranean.

The Egyptian Osiris presents a more complicated parallel. Seth murders Osiris, dismembers him, and leaves him for Isis to reassemble (she finds all the pieces except the phallus, which she fashions anew); Osiris then becomes ruler of the dead, and his son Horus avenges him. The dying-and-

partially-returning pattern is there, and the Plutarchan version (*De Iside et Osiride*, second century CE) makes the seasonal interpretation explicit.^[41] But Osiris differs from Dumuzid in crucial respects: he is dismembered rather than killed whole, he does not return to the upper world (he rules the dead permanently), and his resurrection serves as the model for royal afterlife rather than for the agricultural cycle. Jonathan Z. Smith's devastating 1987 critique of Frazer's universal "dying and rising god" argued that the pattern, when examined closely, is neither universal nor uniform: Dumuzid, Adonis, Osiris, Attis, and Baldr each do something slightly different, and grouping them under a single Frazerian rubric flattens the distinctions that matter.^[42]

The Norse Baldr is perhaps the most instructive comparison because it shows how much work the category "dying god" is being asked to do. Baldr, the fairest of the Aesir, is killed by a mistletoe dart hurled by his blind brother Hod at Loki's instigation; all creation weeps for him, but one giantess refuses, and he stays in Hel until Ragnarok.^[43] Baldr does not return seasonally, he is not associated with agriculture, and his death is eschatological rather than cyclical. Calling him a dying-and-rising god in the Dumuzid sense is misleading: he dies, he waits, and he will return once at the end of time.

The interpretive history of all this material is instructive. Frazer's *Golden Bough* made the dying-god pattern the central engine of primitive religion, and Theodor Gaster's *Thespis* (1950) systematised its application to Mesopotamian material in a way that dominated popular comparative mythology for decades.^[44] But the specialist consensus since the 1970s has been that each tradition must be read on its own terms first, and that cross-cultural comparison is best used to illuminate differences rather than dissolve them into a universal type. Scholars such as Dina Katz and Pirjo Lapinkivi, working directly on the Sumerian and Akkadian material, have argued that Inanna's descent is fundamentally about the theology of divine authority — she acquires the *me* of the underworld as she acquired the others — and only secondarily about the seasonal cycle.^[45] On this reading the Sumerian narrative is not primarily a seasonal myth at all; it is a narrative about divine ambition, the limits of cosmic power, and the substitution logic that governs the boundary between the living and the dead. The seasonal reading, while attested in the text itself (Dumuzid's half-year alternation is explicitly agricultural), is secondary to these theological and narrative concerns.

One final comparison to register here. The Japanese myth of Izanagi and Izanami, preserved in the *Kojiki* (712 CE) and the *Nihon Shoki* (720 CE), tells how Izanagi descends to Yomi, the land of the dead, to retrieve his deceased wife Izanami. He is forbidden to look at her; he looks anyway, sees her rotting corpse, flees, and is pursued by the underworld hags and eventually by Izanami herself. He blocks the entrance to Yomi with a great rock, and the permanent boundary between the living and the dead is thereby established.^[46] The pattern is recognisable — descent, forbidden looking, flight, boundary — and it shares features with Orpheus and Eurydice, with Lot's wife in *Genesis* 19, and more distantly with Inanna's descent and Enki's rescue operation. But Japan was not in contact with Mesopotamia in any meaningful sense during the relevant period, and the Japanese material postdates the Sumerian by more than two thousand years. This is the clearest case in this chapter of independent invention: the narrative of a descent into the land of the dead, with its characteristic prohibitions and its establishment of the permanent boundary, is the kind of story ancient imaginations worldwide produce when they try to explain why the dead stay dead. The parallel is real, but it is not evidence of cultural contact.

38.4. Heroic Narratives

The Sumerian heroic corpus consists of the Gilgamesh poems (Chapters 19-23), the Enmerkar cycle (Chapters 24-25), and the Lugalbanda cycle (Chapters 26-27). Unlike the Akkadian *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh*, which fuses the separate Sumerian poems into a single extended narrative about mortality, the Sumerian Gilgamesh material remains distributed across five independent compositions, each with its own narrative arc.

The most direct comparison is with Greek heroic epic. Gilgamesh and Achilles share the central thematic preoccupation of the Iliadic tradition: the quest for immortal fame as compensation for mortal death.^[47] In *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* (Chapter 21), Gilgamesh makes the choice explicit: since everyone must die, he will go to the Cedar Mountain and "raise up a name" that will outlast him, performing a deed that people will remember.^[48] The parallel to Achilles' choice in *Iliad* 9.410-416 is close: Achilles knows that if he fights at Troy he will die young but his glory will be everlasting, and if he goes home he will live long but be forgotten; he chooses the short life and the long glory.^[49] The structural match is uncanny, and it is hard to read the Sumerian text after reading the *Iliad* without hearing the same argument for a heroic life. The Sumerian version predates Homer by roughly a millennium, and if there is a direct line of descent it runs through a long chain of oral epic traditions that the surviving texts only partly document. West argued that Greek epic inherits a whole complex of themes and formulae from Near Eastern models, including the hero's compensatory glory-quest;^[50] on his account Gilgamesh is not just a distant typological cousin of Achilles but an ancestor in something closer to a genealogical sense, transmitted westward through centuries of bilingual scribal and oral mediation.

The hero-versus-monstrous-guardian motif appears in *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* when the king and his companion Enkidu confront Huwawa, the giant appointed by Enlil to guard the Cedar Forest. Huwawa is terrifying, supernaturally protected by seven auras, and — this is important — doing his job. Enlil assigned him the guardianship, and the heroes are the aggressors. The ethical structure resembles Beowulf's encounter with Grendel less closely than it does the more ambivalent Greek material, such as Heracles' killings of creatures who had done him no direct harm.^[51] Beowulf, by contrast, kills Grendel in defense of Heorot, a cleaner moral structure. The Sumerian narrative has a self-awareness that is easy to miss: Huwawa pleads for his life, Gilgamesh wavers and is ready to show mercy, and it is Enkidu who insists on the kill. When the heroes return to Nippur, Enlil — whose order they have effectively trampled — is furious. *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* is not a simple triumph narrative; it questions the ethics of its own heroism, and in that respect it anticipates the moral complications of Sophoclean tragedy more than the clean oppositions of early medieval epic.

Lugalbanda's wilderness trial in *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* (Chapter 26) and *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird* (Chapter 27) offers a more distinctive kind of heroism. Abandoned sick in a mountain cave by his companions during a military campaign, Lugalbanda prays, recovers through individual piety and direct divine aid, wins the friendship of the monstrous Anzud bird by feeding and praising its chick, and is rewarded with the gift of supernatural speed. The parallels with Odysseus are several but loose: like Odysseus, Lugalbanda is a soldier separated from his companions and forced to survive by wit and persistence; like Odysseus, he negotiates with supernatural beings rather than overpowering them; like Odysseus, he uses cunning and courtesy rather than brute force.^[52] But the Sumerian text is explicitly religious in a way the *Odyssey* is not: Lugalbanda's survival is presented as the reward of personal devotion, and his relationship with

Anzud is mediated by his courteous attention to the bird's chick rather than by strategic deception. The Greek *metis* of Odysseus is closer to Enki's trickery than to Lugalbanda's piety.

The magical bird itself is a motif that invites wider comparison. Anzud is a lion-headed eagle, the divine bird of Enlil, described in the Sumerian texts as a creature of enormous size and supernatural power. The Arabic tradition of the Roc, which carries Sinbad between islands in the *1001 Nights*, shows a remarkably similar conceit—a bird large enough to lift and transport humans.^[53] The Hindu Garuda, divine bird of Vishnu, plays a similar role as a supernatural mount and protector.^[54] The motif of a giant supernatural bird that can bear a hero to impossible destinations has a distribution suggesting both a West Asian cultural substrate (Sumerian, Iranian, Arabic) and independent elaboration in India and further east. The specific Sumerian contribution is the narrative structure: the hero who earns the bird's favour by kindness to its young, and the gift that comes with a prohibition (Lugalbanda must not reveal the source of his speed). The latter—the conditional magical gift that the hero must keep secret, on pain of losing it—is a widespread folktale motif that appears in *Orpheus* (Eurydice lost when he looks back), in *Genesis* 19 (Lot's wife turned to salt), and in countless European folktales catalogued by Aarne-Thompson-Uther as tale type 425 and its relatives.^[55]

38.5. Divine Kingship and City Patronage

One of the distinctive features of Sumerian religion is the tight identification of each major deity with a single city. Enki's house is Eridu; Enlil's is Nippur; Inanna's is Uruk; Nanna-Suen's is Ur; Ninurta's is Nippur (as Enlil's son and warrior champion); the mother goddess has her temple at Kesh. The city-temple is not merely a shrine to the deity; it is, in a theologically precise sense, the deity's household, the physical site of divine presence, and the economic engine of the city's prosperity.^[56] When a city fell to another city, the defeated city-god was understood to have temporarily withdrawn—the defeat was, at one level, a divine decision—and when the city was rebuilt, the god's return was ritually enacted.

The Greek parallel is the polis-patron: Athena at Athens, Hera at Argos, Apollo at Delphi, Artemis at Ephesus. The structural match is close enough that ancient historians have long used the Greek model to illuminate the Mesopotamian, and vice versa. But there are significant differences. The Greek city-patron does not command the same exclusive identification; Athens had major shrines to Poseidon, Hephaestus, and other gods alongside Athena's Parthenon, and the whole Olympian pantheon was worshipped across the Greek world without being locally monopolised. The Sumerian model is more absolute: Enlil is the god of Nippur in a way Athena is not the god of Athens.^[57] The Greek system is more distributed, the Mesopotamian more centralised. The difference may reflect the underlying political structures—Sumerian city-states as theocratic polities with the temple as the primary redistributive institution, Greek poleis as more secular political communities with religion as one institution among several—but the causal direction (did theology shape politics, or politics shape theology?) is hard to determine.^[58]

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle offers the closest West Semitic parallel to the Sumerian pattern of divine kingship and temple-building. In the Baal Cycle, the young storm god Baal defeats the sea god Yam, seeks permission from the high god El to build a palace on Mount Saphon, wins the permission, builds the palace, and is subsequently challenged by Mot, the god of death, who swallows him temporarily before Baal's sister Anat kills Mot and releases him.^[59] The Ugaritic material postdates the Sumerian by roughly a millennium—the Baal Cycle tablets are from the fourteenth century

BCE — but its structural parallels with the Sumerian tradition are close enough that direct influence is widely accepted. *Enki's Journey to Nibru* (Chapter 4) is one of several Sumerian compositions in which a young god travels to seek the blessing of the supreme authority (Enlil at Nippur) before establishing or confirming his own cultic institutions.^[60] The Baal Cycle's scene in which Baal seeks El's permission for the palace is a direct West Semitic reflex of this pattern, adapted to a Canaanite theological landscape but preserving the essential shape.

The temple-building narrative is one of the most durable genres in the ancient Near East. It runs from the Sumerian Gudea cylinders (late third millennium BCE, on the margins of our corpus since they are more hymnic than narrative) through the Baal Cycle, through the accounts of Solomon's temple in *1 Kings* 5-8, to the Herodian temple narratives of the Second Temple period. In all of these the pattern is similar: the supreme god grants permission, the builder god or king gathers materials (often from distant forests and mountains), the temple is constructed with ritual precision, and the dedication produces a new stability in the cosmos or the polity.^[61] The Sumerian material stands at the beginning of this chain, and while *Enki's Journey to Nibru* is relatively brief, it contains the essential elements of what would become a long and productive literary tradition.

Inanna at Uruk is a special case. Her relationship to the city is not merely patronal but constitutive: *Inanna and Enki* (Chapter 10) narrates her acquisition of the *me* — the divine powers and cultural blueprints that govern civilisation — and their transfer from Enki's Eridu to her own Uruk. The composition encodes the theological shift that accompanied Uruk's rise to political prominence: Eridu, the oldest city and the theologically prior seat of Enki's wisdom, yielded cultural priority to Uruk, the expanding metropolis of Inanna.^[62] The Greek tradition has no precise analogue; the transfer of civilisational authority from one city to another is not narrated mythologically in the way the Sumerians narrated it. The closest Greek parallels are aetiological narratives of cultic transfer (Apollo's acquisition of Delphi from the previous oracular presence, narrated in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*) and the rationalising histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, which stage political transitions as secular events. The Sumerian habit of encoding political change as a theological transaction between city-gods is distinctive, and probably reflects the specifically theocratic character of the early city-states.

38.6. Underworld and Afterlife

The Sumerian underworld — the *kur* when the word carries its underworld sense, also called the *ki-gal* ("great earth") and, in later texts, the *arali* — is one of the most distinctive features of the corpus. Its characteristics are clear in the Sumerian narratives: it lies below the earth; it is ruled by Ereshkigal and her consort (Gugalanna in one tradition, Nergal in later Akkadian-influenced texts); it is a place of dust, darkness, and clay bread; the dead drink brackish water and eat dust; their fate is fundamentally undifferentiated, with only the honoured royal dead enjoying any superior amenities. *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* (Chapter 22) provides the most detailed catalogue, organised by manner of death and social status.^[63]

The Homeric Greek underworld shows striking similarities. In *Odyssey* Book 11, the Nekyia, Odysseus sails to the edge of the world, digs a pit, pours libations, and summons the shades of the dead. They come in crowds — warriors, women, mothers, the newly dead, the ancient dead. They drink the blood of sacrificed animals and briefly regain speech and memory. The geography is broadly similar to the Sumerian: dim, subterranean, ruled by a divine couple (Hades and Persephone), with the dead occupying an undifferentiated mass and only a few figures — Tityos,

Tantalus, Sisyphus — singled out for distinctive fates.^[64] West argued that the Nekyia shows direct knowledge of Mesopotamian underworld traditions, transmitted through the long chain of bilingual contact between Greece and the Levant in the archaic period.^[65] The *Odyssey*'s organisation of the dead by manner of death and heroic status — Elpenor the recently killed, Anticleia the mother, Achilles and Ajax among the warriors, Agamemnon the murdered king — resembles the catalogue in *Gilgamesh*, *Enkidu*, and *the Nether World* so closely that coincidence is unlikely.

The Virgilian *Aeneid* Book 6 elaborates the Nekyia tradition for a Roman audience, adding the more systematic moral topography of Tartarus, Elysium, and the Lethean river of forgetting.^[66] The Roman version shows the accumulated influence of Greek Orphic and Pythagorean speculation, of Platonic eschatology, and of native Italian beliefs; it stands considerably further from the Sumerian than the Homeric version does. But the underlying structural parallel — the living hero descends, interviews the dead, learns something the living cannot otherwise know, and returns — is preserved.

The Egyptian Duat is perhaps the most distinctive of the great ancient underworlds. It is elaborately mapped in the funerary texts — the *Book of the Dead*, the *Am-Duat*, the *Book of Gates* — with specific gates and guardian deities for each region, and a systematic judgment scene in which the deceased's heart is weighed against the feather of *ma'at* (truth, cosmic order) before Osiris, Thoth, and a jury of forty-two divine judges.^[67] The Egyptian version differs from the Sumerian in one crucial respect: it makes the afterlife radically dependent on moral conduct in life. A Sumerian who died well — in battle, as a king, with living sons — enjoyed slightly better accommodations in the *kur* than one who died badly, but the distinctions were of degree, not of kind. An Egyptian who passed the judgment of Osiris entered a different realm entirely, while one who failed was annihilated by the devourer Ammit.^[68] This moralising of the afterlife is an Egyptian contribution; it is not Sumerian and did not influence Sumerian theology, though it would later filter into Hellenistic Jewish and Christian eschatology.

The Hebrew Bible's Sheol stands closer to the Sumerian model than to the Egyptian: a shadowy, undifferentiated realm beneath the earth, where the dead descend together without moral distinction. *Isaiah* 14's mock-dirge over the king of Babylon describes his descent to Sheol, where the kings of the earth rise from their thrones to greet him, a scene recognisably continuous with the *Gilgamesh*, *Enkidu*, and *the Nether World* catalogue.^[69] The dead king of Babylon receives an elevated reception — the throne arrangement — in the same way that *The Death of Ur-Namma* (Chapter 30) narrates the king's elevated status among the dead. The moralising of Sheol into Gehenna on one side and the bosom of Abraham on the other is a development of the Second Temple and Rabbinic periods, not of the Hebrew Bible proper, and reflects later Persian and Greek influences on Jewish eschatology.^[70]

One feature of the Sumerian underworld tradition has no parallel anywhere, and it deserves to be flagged as distinctive. This is the law of substitute: the principle, established in *Inanna's Descent*, that no one leaves the underworld without providing a replacement. The law is not a matter of moral desert or ritual compliance; it is a flat structural rule of the cosmos, and even the gods are bound by it. When Inanna is revived, the *galla* demons follow her out explicitly to collect her substitute, and Dumuzid's handing-over is presented as inevitable, a consequence of cosmic accounting rather than a moral punishment for his failure to mourn his consort's absence. The half-year alternation between Dumuzid and Geshtinanna is a bookkeeping arrangement; the underworld is owed a body, and one of the two siblings must always be there. Nothing else in the

ancient comparative material I know of quite resembles this. The Greek Orpheus and Eurydice narrative plays with the idea of returning from the dead but does not frame it as a substitute transaction—Eurydice’s return is not conditioned on someone else’s descent. Persephone’s alternation is not a substitution for another figure but a condition on her own movements. The Norse and Celtic traditions have nothing comparable. The Egyptian underworld has no provision for return at all in the standard tradition, so the question of substitution does not arise. This is a genuinely distinctive feature of the Sumerian imagination, and it is worth preserving in the comparative reader’s mind as an instance where Sumer went somewhere no one else followed.

38.7. The Debate Genre and Wisdom Literature

The Sumerian debate poems—Hoe and Plough, Ewe and Grain, Winter and Summer, Bird and Fish, Copper and Silver, Date Palm and Tamarisk (Chapters 31-36)—constitute one of the most distinctive contributions of the Sumerian corpus. In the typical Sumerian debate, two personified entities—agricultural tools, seasons, animals, metals, trees—press competing claims about their relative usefulness, rank, or value; a divine judge (usually Enlil) delivers the verdict; and the loser is reconciled with the winner. The genre is highly formulaic, marked by elaborate insults, rhetorical inventiveness, and a concluding homage to the judging deity that functions as a curriculum frame for the scribal schoolroom.^[71]

The comparative question is sharp. The debate poems as a genre do not have direct parallels in the other major ancient literatures: Egyptian wisdom literature contains nothing structurally similar, and the Hebrew Bible’s wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes) develop different formal solutions. The genre reappears, centuries later, in two separate literary streams that must be evaluated separately.

The first is the medieval Latin and vernacular debate poem tradition. The *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis* (Debate of Spring and Winter), attributed in some manuscripts to Alcuin (eighth century CE), matches the Sumerian Winter-and-Summer debate strikingly: two personified seasons present their cases, the shepherds decide in favour of one, and the losing season reconciles.^[72] The Middle English *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c. 1200 CE) is a longer and more sophisticated exemplar, with two birds debating their relative merits before a human judge.^[73] The medieval tradition postdates the Sumerian by roughly three thousand years. No plausible path of direct transmission exists—the Sumerian debate poems were buried under desert sand for two millennia before their recovery in the nineteenth century—so the genre must have been reinvented in medieval Europe, probably from a combination of Classical rhetorical exercises (the *controversia* and *suasoria* of Roman rhetorical training), scriptural debate scenes (the book of Job, the Wisdom personifications of Proverbs 8), and local folk traditions.^[74] The parallel is typological, not genealogical.

The second stream is the ancient Indian *Panchatantra* and the broader fable tradition of animal debate. The *Panchatantra* (compiled in its current form perhaps in the third or fourth century CE, but drawing on older oral traditions) is a compendium of moral fables in which personified animals discuss, dispute, and illustrate practical wisdom. The Aesopic fables of Greek tradition (seventh-sixth century BCE, with later accretions) occupy a similar niche. Both traditions differ from the Sumerian debate in one crucial respect: they are framed as instruction for human conduct, with the debates serving as pedagogical illustrations of prudence, cowardice, courage, and so on. The Sumerian debates are not primarily pedagogical in that narrow moral sense; they are closer to rhetorical showcases and cosmological investigations, with the question “which of us is

better?" standing in for larger questions about the order of the world.^[75] The timing again argues against direct transmission: the Sumerian tradition was defunct by the time the *Panchatantra* took shape, and no plausible intermediate link exists. The animal-debate format may reflect a genuinely universal feature of how traditional literatures organise rhetorical practice, or it may reflect parallel elaborations of simpler folk forms in the various cultures where it appears.

There is, however, an Akkadian debate tradition directly continuous with the Sumerian. Akkadian disputes between Date Palm and Tamarisk, between Ox and Horse, between Nisaba and Wheat survive from the Old Babylonian period onward, and many are direct translations or adaptations of Sumerian originals.^[76] The Akkadian tradition then fed into the later Aramaic and Syriac literatures of the Levant, and from there into the Arabic dispute poems (*munāẓara*) of the medieval period. So there is a continuous channel of transmission from Sumer to medieval Islamic literature, but it runs through Akkadian and Aramaic rather than through Latin or Greek, and it does not reach the medieval Latin tradition that produced *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis* and *The Owl and the Nightingale*—those are independent reinventions. The comparative picture is therefore more complicated than a simple "Sumerian genre that reappeared in the Middle Ages" would suggest: the genre really did continue in one channel (Semitic, eastward into Islamic literature) while being reinvented in another (medieval Latin, drawing on Classical rhetoric).

38.8. The Flood Story

No comparison in this chapter can avoid the Flood. The Sumerian *Eridu Genesis* (Chapter 28) tells how the gods decided to destroy humanity, how Enki circumvented the decision by warning the pious king Ziusudra through a reed wall, how Ziusudra built a great boat, survived the flood, and was afterwards granted eternal life in Dilmun.^[77] The Akkadian *Atrahasis* elaborates the story with more attention to the motives of the gods (humanity is too numerous and noisy, a social rather than a moral grievance), and *Gilgamesh* Tablet XI incorporates the survivor's own first-person account into the later epic. The Hebrew *Genesis* 6-9 narrates the flood of Noah, with its own distinctive theological focus on human moral corruption and divine covenant.^[78]

The direction of dependence here is one of the most thoroughly established facts in ancient Near Eastern comparative literature. The Sumerian version is the earliest, the Akkadian versions (*Atrahasis*, *Gilgamesh* XI) develop it, and the Hebrew version shows detailed structural and verbal dependence on the Akkadian tradition. George Smith's 1872 discovery of the *Gilgamesh* XI tablet at the British Museum caused a sensation precisely because it demonstrated that the biblical flood narrative was not an autonomous Hebrew creation but drew on a much older Mesopotamian tradition. Modern scholarship has refined the picture in many details but has not undermined the basic point: the narrative travelled from Sumer to Babylon to the Levant to Israel, accumulating and shedding features at each stage.^[79]

The Greek Deucalion story—Zeus decides to destroy the degenerate bronze-age humanity, Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha build an ark on the advice of Prometheus, survive, and after the waters recede repopulate the earth by throwing stones that become the new humanity—clearly belongs to the same comparative family.^[80] The Greek version is attested no earlier than the classical period, and it shows enough independent features (the throwing of stones, the moralising of the flood as punishment for the bronze age's degeneration rather than for general corruption) that direct borrowing from Mesopotamia is not necessarily required; West has argued that a common eastern source (probably via Phoenician intermediaries) lies behind both the Hesiodic

bronze-age material and the Deucalion tradition, but the case is circumstantial.^[81]

The Indian flood story, narrated in the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (eighth-sixth century BCE) and elaborated in the *Mahabharata*, tells how Manu is warned by a fish (an avatar of Vishnu in the later versions) to build a boat; he survives the flood and becomes the ancestor of the next cycle of humanity.^[82] The Manu flood is too close to the Mesopotamian pattern for chance to be a plausible explanation; either the story entered Indian tradition through the Indo-Iranian migration (when Indo-European speakers passed through West Asia on their way into the subcontinent), or it reflects an even older shared inheritance. Either way, the convergence is substantial enough that independent invention is unlikely.

The most interesting contrast within this comparative family is theological. In the Sumerian and Akkadian versions, the flood is a bureaucratic miscalculation—the gods decide something they later regret (Enki's whispered warning to Ziusudra is in effect a workaround of the divine assembly's decision), and after the waters recede the gods promise not to do it again because humanity is useful to them. In *Genesis*, the flood is a moral response to human wickedness, and the post-flood covenant is framed in terms of righteousness and divine commitment. The Greek version moralises similarly but in different terms, framing the flood as an appropriate response to the degeneration of the bronze age. The Indian version is more cosmological, with the flood as part of a cyclical pattern of world-dissolutions and re-emergences.

The reed wall device is a distinctively Sumerian touch that deserves special attention. When Enki wishes to warn Ziusudra without violating his oath of silence, he addresses a reed wall, knowing that Ziusudra is listening on the other side. The device is theologically elegant: it preserves the letter of Enki's oath while subverting its spirit, and it foregrounds Enki's characteristic cunning. The motif survives into the Akkadian *Atrahasis* (Ea speaks to the reed hut, knowing Atrahasis is inside) and is reflected, distantly, in Greek tales of oracles delivered through indirect means. Its disappearance in the Hebrew and Indian versions is itself instructive: moralising the story made the trickster-god's workaround theologically awkward, and later traditions either reframed it (as a direct divine revelation) or omitted it entirely.^[83]

38.9. Closing: What Comparison Can and Cannot Show

A few concluding observations, in the spirit of the restraint this book has tried to maintain throughout.

The Sumerian corpus is the earliest securely dated literary mythology in the world. This is a historical fact, not a value judgment. The literary tablets of Abu Salabikh and Fara (roughly 2600 BCE) and the Old Babylonian compositions that continue and elaborate their themes (roughly 2000–1600 BCE) predate Hesiod by about fifteen hundred years, the *Rig Veda* in its earliest strata by perhaps twelve hundred years, the Hebrew narrative prose of *Genesis* and *Exodus* by at least a millennium, the Norse Eddas by nearly three thousand years, the Japanese *Kojiki* by roughly twenty-eight hundred years. When a Sumerian text contains a motif that appears elsewhere in the world's mythological traditions, the comparative question cannot be "which came first" — we know which came first.

But priority is not causation. The fact that Sumer produced the earliest surviving written mythology does not mean that Sumer is the origin of all mythology, nor even that Sumerian texts are the

source of every parallel we find elsewhere. In some cases — the Flood story, the Adonis-Dumuzid connection, the early Greek cosmogonic material — there is good evidence of a chain of transmission running from Mesopotamia outward. In other cases — the heaven-earth separation motif, the descent-to-the-dead narrative with its forbidden looking, the Chaoskampf as a worldwide pattern — the parallels are either structural typologies, independent inventions, or reflections of older substrates (Indo-European, Afroasiatic) that Sumer stood outside. Distinguishing these cases requires attention to historical detail, philological rigour, and a willingness to leave uncertain what cannot be settled.

The comparativist's temptation is always to universalise: to treat each parallel as evidence of a deep pattern uniting all of humanity's religious imagination. The scholar's obligation, on the other hand, is to treat each parallel as a hypothesis requiring investigation. Some parallels will survive investigation and some will not. The Indo-European Chaoskampf is a robust comparative pattern, and Sumer's relationship to it is one of the hard questions of comparative religion. The universal dying-god pattern, on the other hand, is a nineteenth-century construction that has not survived twentieth-century scrutiny, and Dumuzid needs to be understood first in his Sumerian context, with comparative extension handled carefully and case by case.

One might close on a note about the specific virtues of the Sumerian corpus for comparative work. Its great virtue is its age, its documentary density (every composition is preserved in multiple tablets from multiple cities, a redundancy that no other ancient mythology approaches), and the relative tightness of its cultural context (three millennia of Mesopotamian scribal tradition on a single alluvial plain). Its great limitation is its fragmentariness (almost every text has lacunae, some severe) and the gap between the texts we have and the oral tradition that stood behind them (our tablets are mostly Old Babylonian schoolwork, two or three centuries after the Third Dynasty of Ur stabilised the canon, and perhaps a thousand years after some of the underlying oral material). The corpus is both the richest source we have for third-millennium BCE literary imagination and a distant echo of something older and more diverse than the texts themselves can show.

What the Sumerian material offers, finally, is a vantage point. From it, we can look forward — into the Akkadian tradition that adapted and extended it, into the Levantine and Anatolian intermediaries that carried it westward, into the Greek and Indian literatures that received and transformed it, into the Hebrew scriptures that polemically reworked parts of it — and we can look sideways, at mythological traditions that developed independently and converge with Sumer by structural typology rather than by historical descent. Neither view can be complete; each enriches the other. The Sumerian texts themselves, read carefully and on their own terms, are the indispensable starting point for any comparative mythology of the ancient world, and the surest defence against the temptation to dissolve everything into a single universal pattern. They are what they are — the literary imagination of a specific people on a specific plain between specific rivers, preserved by the accident of fired clay and the stubbornness of scribal pedagogy — and what they are is enough.

[1] For the critique of Frazer's universal dying-god pattern, see especially Jonathan Z. Smith, "Dying and Rising Gods," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987); and the discussion in Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 104-131.

[2] Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Zone Books, 1988); Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

[3] On the absence of a single Sumerian cosmogony and the need to reconstruct it from prologues, see Black et al. 2004, pp. xxiv-xxv and pp. 8-11; and the survey in Kramer 1961, pp. 30-42.

[4] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1-26; Black et al. 2004, pp. 32-37.

- [5] On Nammu and the *abzu* as primeval waters in Sumerian cosmogony, see Jacobsen 1987, pp. 151-153; and Kramer 1961, pp. 38-41.
- [6] Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 116-138; standard edition M.L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 88-96, 191-198. For the comparison of Hesiodic and Mesopotamian cosmogonies, see M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 276-305.
- [7] West 1997, pp. 276-305 and 457-484.
- [8] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 1-139; Black et al. 2004, pp. 30-37; Kramer 1961, pp. 68-72.
- [9] Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.7.1; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.78-88. For the Greek tradition, see Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 152-166.
- [10] On the "humanity as labour relief" motif as a distinctive Mesopotamian theme, see Jacobsen 1987, pp. 151-166; for the Akkadian elaboration, out of scope for this book but relevant for the comparison, see W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard, *Atra-hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 1-21.
- [11] This parallel is speculative. Basis: the density of geographic proximity, documented cross-cultural contact through the second millennium BCE, and the specificity of the "pinched from a substrate" detail in both Sumerian and Egyptian sources. The main counterargument: clay is the universal artisanal material of the ancient Near East and Africa, and the conceit "gods shape humans as potters shape pots" is an obvious enough metaphor that it may have arisen independently in each culture where pottery was central to daily life..
- [12] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 8-13; Black et al. 2004, p. 32.
- [13] Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 154-187; West 1966, pp. 211-221.
- [14] The Pangu myth is first attested in Xu Zheng's *Sanwu liji* (Record of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors), third century CE. For a comparative treatment, see Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 32-35.
- [15] The Shu-Geb-Nut separation is depicted repeatedly in Egyptian funerary art and cosmological texts; see R.T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1959), pp. 42-66.
- [16] This parallel is speculative. Basis: typological clustering of the surviving mythographic evidence. The main counterargument: the typological distinction may reflect the accidents of later textualisation rather than genuinely separate imaginative acts, since in every case the earliest version is substantially later than the cultural moment that produced it..
- [17] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 1-473; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215-225.
- [18] Homer, *Iliad* 15.187-193. See the commentary in Richard Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume IV: Books 13-16* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 249-251.
- [19] Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, trans. Margaret E. Pinder and Walter Burkert (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 88-127.
- [20] Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895); translated as *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton*, trans. K. William Whitney Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
- [21] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 1-729; Black et al. 2004, pp. 163-191; for the philological discussion, see J. van Dijk, *LUGAL UD ME-LÁM-bi NIR-ĜÁL*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1983).
- [22] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233-272, especially pp. 266-272 on the relationship between *Lugal-e* and later Chaokampf narratives.
- [23] On the dependence of *Enuma Elish* on earlier Sumerian Ninurta material, see W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), pp. 439-465; and the summary in Andrew R. George, "The Poem of Erra and Ishum," in Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, pp. xii-xviii.
- [24] *Rig Veda* 1.32; standard translation Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. 1, pp. 135-138.
- [25] Puhvel 1987, pp. 45-74 (chapter on the "second function" combat myth).
- [26] Mary R. Bachvarova, *From Hittite to Homer: The Anatolian Background of Ancient Greek Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), especially pp. 186-243.
- [27] Hesiod, *Theogony* 820-880; West 1966, pp. 379-399.
- [28] West 1997, pp. 288-296 on Typhon and Illuyanka.
- [29] *Völuspá*, stanza 56; *Gylfaginning* 51. See the discussion in John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 286-289.
- [30] Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna*; see also his *Archaic Roman Religion*, trans. Philip Krapp (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
- [31] On Ninurta as a "second-function" figure from a comparative perspective, see the discussion in Bruce Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors, and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), especially pp. 80-95 on non-Indo-European convergences.
- [32] This parallel is speculative. Basis: the structural match without any possible genealogical link, plus Lincoln's demonstration of analogous structures in East African pastoralist societies. The main counterargument: Dumézil himself repeatedly warned against extending the tripartite framework beyond the Indo-European family, arguing that the specific linguistic and ritual details that

anchor the comparison in that family are absent elsewhere; the apparent Sumerian match may be an artefact of reading the Sumerian pantheon through Dumézilian lenses..

[33] On the stone-fate catalogue and its distinctiveness, see Jacobsen 1987, pp. 254-272; and the commentary in van Dijk 1983.

[34] Kramer 1961, pp. 83-96 offers the classical presentation; the more critical modern discussion is in Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2003), pp. 241-314.

[35] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 1-412; Black et al. 2004, pp. 52-62; full philological treatment in Sladek 1974.

[36] *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, lines 1-495; standard edition N.J. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

[37] West 1997, pp. 160-163 on the Demeter-Persephone narrative in its eastern context.

[38] The Akkadian *Descent of Ishtar* is out of scope for this book; for the text, see Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), pp. 498-505.

[39] On Adonis and his Semitic background, see Burkert 1992, pp. 98-105; and Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 79-101.

[40] *Ezekiel* 8:14; on the Tammuz cult in Judah, see Ackerman 1992, pp. 79-101.

[41] Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*; standard edition J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (Cambridge: University of Wales Press, 1970). For the broader discussion of Osiris and the dying-god pattern, see Mark Smith's critique cited above, and J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Origins of Osiris and His Cult* (Leiden: Brill, 1980).

[42] Smith, "Dying and Rising Gods"; see also M.S. Smith 2001, pp. 104-131.

[43] *Gylfaginning* 49-50; *Völuspá* 31-32. See Lindow 2001, pp. 65-72.

[44] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., 12 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1906-1915); Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

[45] Katz 2003, pp. 241-314; Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2004), especially pp. 189-234.

[46] *Kojiki* 1.7-10; standard translation Donald L. Philippi, *Kojiki* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1968), pp. 61-72.

[47] On *kleos* and its centrality to Homeric epic, see Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 1-41.

[48] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 1-200; Black et al. 2004, pp. 343-352; george-2003, vol. 1, pp. 7-17.

[49] Homer, *Iliad* 9.410-416; for the thematic analysis, see Nagy 1999, pp. 174-210.

[50] West 1997, pp. 334-401 on thematic and formulaic parallels.

[51] For the ethical ambiguity of heroic violence in Greek tradition, see the discussion in Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 7-44.

[52] For Odysseus's *metis* as the defining heroic virtue, see Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1978), pp. 11-26 and 106-130.

[53] The Roc appears in Sinbad's Second and Fifth Voyages; see Richard F. Burton's translation in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (London, 1885), vol. 6, pp. 16-20, 66-72. For the Arabic sources, see Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 202-214.

[54] On Garuda, see *Mahabharata* 1.14-30; for the comparative context, see Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), pp. 260-263.

[55] See Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales*, FF Communications 284-286 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004), vol. 1, pp. 247-266.

[56] On the city-god relationship in Sumerian theology, see Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 75-91; and Mark E. Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993), pp. 3-30.

[57] On the differences between Greek polis religion and Mesopotamian city-god theology, see Burkert 1992, pp. 46-87, especially pp. 72-75.

[58] This parallel is speculative. Basis: the well-documented economic centrality of the temple in third-millennium BCE Sumer versus the more diversified economic base of the Greek polis. The main counterargument: both traditions developed over centuries, and the synchronic snapshots we compare may obscure more complex historical trajectories in each case..

[59] For the Ugaritic Baal Cycle, see Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle, Volume I* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) and Mark S. Smith and Wayne T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle, Volume II* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); for a reader's edition, see Nicolas Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 2nd ed. (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 34-146.

[60] ETCSL 1.1.4; Black et al. 2004, pp. 330-333.

[61] On the temple-building type-scene across ancient Near Eastern literature, see Victor Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings*, JSOT Supplement Series 115 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

- [62] Kramer 1961, pp. 64-68; Black et al. 2004, pp. 63-70.
- [63] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 255-306; Black et al. 2004, pp. 32-37.
- [64] Homer, *Odyssey* 11.1-640; see the commentary in Alfred Heubeck and Arie Hoekstra, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Volume II: Books IX-XVI* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 75-151.
- [65] West 1997, pp. 151-167, especially pp. 160-167 on the Nekyia.
- [66] Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.236-901; for the commentary, see R.G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Sextus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
- [67] For the Egyptian afterlife, see Erik Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), especially pp. 75-111.
- [68] On the Egyptian judgment and its absence in Sumerian tradition, see Katz 2003, pp. 325-360.
- [69] *Isaiah* 14:9-15; for the comparative analysis, see Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 26-46.
- [70] On the development of Jewish eschatology from Sheol to a moralised afterlife, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 32-72.
- [71] On the debate genre in Sumerian literature, see Herman L.J. Vanstiphout, "Lore, Learning and Levity in the Sumerian Disputations: A Matter of Form, or Substance?" in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East*, ed. G.J. Reinink and H.L.J. Vanstiphout (Leuven: Peeters, 1991), pp. 23-46; and Black et al. 2004, pp. 225-234.
- [72] For the *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis*, see the edition in P. Klopsch, *Pseudo-Ovidius De Vetula* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), appendix; and the broader discussion in Hans Walther, *Das Streitgedicht in der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Munich: Beck, 1920).
- [73] For *The Owl and the Nightingale*, see the edition by Eric Gerald Stanley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972).
- [74] On the independent origins of medieval debate poetry, see the survey in Thomas L. Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), pp. 3-38.
- [75] On the differences between the Sumerian debate tradition and the Aesopic-Panchatantra tradition, see Vanstiphout 1991, pp. 37-46; for the *Panchatantra*, see Patrick Olivelle's edition and translation, *Pañcatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- [76] For Akkadian debate poems and their Sumerian origins, see Foster 2005, pp. 943-963; and the extended discussion in Enrique Jiménez, *The Babylonian Disputation Poems* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).
- [77] ETCSL 1.7.4, lines 1-260 (with heavy lacunae); Black et al. 2004, pp. 212-215; for the philological treatment, see Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 513-529.
- [78] *Genesis* 6:5-9:17. For the comparative discussion, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic and its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1-9," *Biblical Archaeologist* 40 (1977): 147-155.
- [79] For the history of the comparative discussion, see Helge S. Kvanvig, *Primeval History: Babylonian, Biblical, and Enochic* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 1-72.
- [80] For Deucalion, see Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.7.2; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.253-415; and the discussion in Gantz 1993, pp. 162-167.
- [81] West 1997, pp. 489-494.
- [82] *Shatapatha Brahmana* 1.8.1; *Mahabharata* 3.185; for the comparative treatment, see Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 27-48.
- [83] On the reed wall and its transmission, see Jacobsen 1981, pp. 523-527.

Appendix A: Characters

A reference guide to the named characters who appear in this book. Physical descriptions are included only where attested in the in-scope sources; where the sources are silent, this is noted explicitly. The inclusion rule is as follows: named divine and mortal figures who act or are acted upon in a chapter receive an entry; generic unnamed creatures (such as the serpent in the huluppu tree), collective groups treated as a body (such as the Anunnaki), and passing named places or artefacts are omitted.

A.1. Deities

A.1.1. An

Sky god, father of the gods, highest figure in the traditional Sumerian hierarchy, whose authority stands behind Enlil's executive rule.^[1]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Ninurta's Exploits* — named as the sky-father whose parentage (with Ki) engendered the demon Asag.^[2]
- *Ninurta's Return to Nibru* — one of the great gods alarmed by Ninurta's unchecked *me-lam* on the warrior's return.
- *Inanna and Ebih* — An warns Inanna against attacking Mount Ebih and is defied.^[3]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — in the cosmogonic prologue, An carries off heaven at the primordial separation.^[4]
- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — invoked by Lugalbanda among the four supreme deities at his wilderness sacrifice.^[5]
- *The Flood Story: The Eridu Genesis* — with Enlil, grants Ziusudra eternal life and settles him in Dilmun after the deluge.^[6]

Relevance. An is the remote sovereign of the Sumerian pantheon, senior to Enlil in genealogy but less active in narrative.^[7] The compositions repeatedly treat him as the ultimate source of sanction whose delegated authority Enki and Enlil actually exercise; his direct interventions are rare and, as in *Inanna and Ebih*, can be defied without immediate cosmic rupture.^[8]

A.1.2. Ashnan

Goddess of grain and cereal agriculture, one of the two divine personifications whose creation in the *dul-kug* (the "holy mound," the creation chamber of the gods) transformed humanity from animal existence to civilisation.^[9]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — assigned her domain over grain when Enki organises the crafts of civilisation.^[10]
- *The Debate between Ewe and Grain* — argues her superiority over Lahar (Ewe) at a drunken feast and is declared the winner by Enki.^[11]

Relevance. Ashnan embodies the theological grounding of cereal agriculture as the economic backbone of Sumerian civilisation.^[12] Her victory in the debate ratifies what the temple ration system and the administrative archives already recorded: grain, not wool, was the measure by which the Mesopotamian economy was counted.^[13]

A.1.3. Dumuzid

The shepherd-god, consort of Inanna, whose seasonal death and partial return underlie the central dying-god tradition of Sumerian literature.^[14]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The texts describe him by his regalia and setting rather than his person: *Inanna's Descent* notes that on Inanna's return he "sat on a magnificent throne, dressed in splendid garments," but these are his circumstances, not his body.^[15]

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — appointed by Enki as the divine overseer of the sheepfold and cattle-pen.^[16]
- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — designated by Inanna as her underworld substitute when she finds him enthroned and un-mourning on her return.^[17]
- *Dumuzid's Dream* — dreams of his capture, flees the *galla* demons across the steppe in successive animal transformations, and is betrayed and seized.^[18]
- *Inanna and Bilulu* — the slain shepherd for whom Inanna mourns and takes vengeance on Bilulu and Girgire.^[19]

Relevance. Dumuzid is the central figure of the dying-god cycle, the Sumerian literary engine of seasonal theology and ritual lament.^[20] His wailing cult is directly attested in Ur III and Old Babylonian ritual practice, and his alternation with Geshtinanna in the underworld grounds the pastoral and agricultural calendar in narrative.^[21]

A.1.4. Emesh

Divine personification of the dry summer season in the Sumerian agricultural calendar, created by Enlil to manage the ripening of crops and the harvest.^[22]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Winter and Summer* — disputes with Enten over seasonal primacy and accepts Enten's victory after Enlil's verdict.^[23]

Relevance. Emesh personifies the heat and harvest half of the Mesopotamian agricultural year.^[24] The composition's verdict against him reflects an ecological fact of southern Mesopotamia, where rain and flood-water — Enten's domain — underpin every agricultural activity that follows.^[25]

A.1.5. Enbilulu

Chthonic deity and canal inspector, one of three underworld gods born in Enlil's descent and, in a separate composition, the divine "canal-controller" of the Tigris.^[26]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — appointed by Enki as canal-controller of the Tigris.^[27]
- *Enlil and Ninlil* — one of the three chthonic deities engendered during Enlil's descent as underworld substitutes allowing Nanna-Suen to ascend.^[28]

Relevance. Enbilulu exemplifies the Sumerian taste for administrative precision even in theology: he is a specialist whose portfolio is the maintenance of watercourses, above and below.^[29]

A.1.6. Enki

God of wisdom, fresh water, and cunning, lord of the *abzu* beneath Eridu, the organising administrator of the cosmos and the most narratively productive deity in the pantheon.^[30]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — fathers a chain of goddesses in Dilmun, consumes eight forbidden plants, is cursed by Ninhursaja, and is healed through the birth of eight deities.^[31]
- *Enki and Ninmah* — devises the clay-creation of humanity and wins the drunken contest with Ninmah by creating the helpless Umul.^[32]
- *Enki and the World Order* — tours the cosmos assigning lands, rivers, crafts, and offices; answers Inanna's complaint by acknowledging her as the destabiliser of categories.^[33]
- *Enki's Journey to Nibru* — builds his temple the E-engura and sails by barge to Nippur to receive Enlil's blessing.^[34]
- *Ninurta and the Turtle* — humiliates the overreaching warrior god by digging a pit and setting a turtle to drag him into it.^[35]
- *Inanna and Enki* — gives the *me* to Inanna during a drunken feast and then fails to recover them through successive sea monsters.^[36]
- *Inanna and Shu-kale-tuda* — counsels Shu-kale-tuda to hide among the cities but cannot ultimately protect him from Inanna's justice.^[37]
- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — creates the sexless *kurgarra* and *galatur* from the dirt of his fingernails to revive the dead Inanna.^[38]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — sails toward the *kur* in the cosmogonic prologue and

later instructs Utu to open the hole through which Enkidu's ghost rises.^[39]

- *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* — the Incantation of Nudimmud, named for him, concerns the unity or confusion of tongues.^[40]
- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — invoked among the four supreme deities at Lugalbanda's wilderness sacrifice.^[41]
- *The Flood Story: The Eridu Genesis* — warns the pious king Ziusudra of the coming flood by speaking through a reed wall.^[42]
- *The Debate between Ewe and Grain* — renders the verdict for Grain over Ewe.^[43]
- *The Debate between Bird and Fish* — the marshland habitats of the disputants are assigned by him; the closing doxology praises "Father Enki" whose wisdom guided Shulgi's judgment.^[44]

Relevance. Enki is the pantheon's universal problem-solver, the figure whose cunning supplies solutions when direct force fails and whose administrative ordering underwrites the organised cosmos.^[45] More compositions centre on him than on any other deity, and the range of his interventions — cosmogonic, creational, hydraulic, theological, and comic — makes him the most versatile character in the Sumerian literary corpus.^[46]

A.1.7. Enkimdu

Farmer-god whom Enki appoints to oversee agriculture and the plough.^[47]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — assigned the plough when Enki orders the crafts.^[48]

Relevance. A minor administrative deity of the divine "org chart," Enkimdu personifies the institutional subdivision of agricultural labour under Enki's organising authority.^[49]

A.1.8. Enlil

King of the gods, lord of wind and command, supreme authority in Nippur, whose word is decisive in the divine assembly and on whose blessing the cities of Sumer stand or fall.^[50]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The epithet "Great Mountain" (*kur-gal*) is a title of office, not a literal image.^[51]

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — unable to cure the dying Enki; sits helpless in the dust among the great gods.^[52]
- *Enki and the World Order* — delegates cosmic organisation to Enki.^[53]
- *Enki's Journey to Nibru* — receives Enki's barge at Nippur and blesses the E-engura and its cult.^[54]
- *Enlil and Ninlil* — transgresses against Ninlil, is judged impure and exiled by the divine assembly, and engenders Nanna-Suen and three chthonic deities in the course of his

descent.^[55]

- *Enlil and Sud* — courts Sud with proper procedure through his vizier Nusku and her mother Nisaba; Sud is renamed Ninlil on their marriage.^[56]
- *Ninurta's Exploits* — dispatches encouragement to Ninurta through Sharur during the Asag campaign.^[57]
- *Ninurta's Return to Nibru* — uses his minister Nusku to channel the warrior's returning fury into a ceremonial homecoming.^[58]
- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — refuses to help the dead Inanna, judging her ambition to be her own.^[59]
- *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nibru* — receives his son's barge of offerings at the E-kur and blesses Ur.^[60]
- *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* — appointed Huwawa to the Cedar Forest; when the guardian is killed he redistributes the seven *me-lam* into the natural world.^[61]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — carries off earth at the primordial separation; refuses to help Gilgamesh recover Enkidu from the underworld.^[62]
- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — invoked in Lugalbanda's wilderness sacrifice.^[63]
- *The Flood Story: The Eridu Genesis* — plays a role in the gods' decision to send the flood; with An, grants Ziusudra eternal life in Dilmun.^[64]
- *The Debate between Hoe and Plough* — creates both implements and awards the verdict to Hoe.^[65]
- *The Debate between Ewe and Grain* — collaborates with Enki in creating Ewe and Grain to end humanity's animal condition.^[66]
- *The Debate between Winter and Summer* — creates the seasons and judges in favour of Enten.^[67]
- *The Debate between Copper and Silver* — renders the verdict for Copper over Silver.^[68]

Relevance. Enlil is the executive head of the Sumerian pantheon, the deity whose sanction transforms local cultic claims into cosmic authority.^[69] He is judge, king, father, and — in *Enlil and Ninlil* — a transgressor held to account by his own assembly, a combination that gives the Enlil compositions their characteristic balance of hierarchy and accountability.^[70]

A.1.9. Enten

Divine personification of the wet winter season in the Sumerian agricultural calendar, created by Enlil to manage rains, river floods, and the replenishment of irrigation canals.^[71]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Winter and Summer* — defeats Emesh in debate and is declared the winner by Enlil.^[72]

Relevance. Enten embodies the water half of the Mesopotamian agricultural year — the season

that makes every subsequent activity possible in the alluvial floodplain where rain falls only in winter.^[73]

A.1.10. Ereshkigal

Queen of the underworld, elder sister of Inanna, sovereign of the *kur* from the moment of its separation from heaven and earth.^[74]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. *Inanna's Descent* reports her in distress — groaning as if in labour or in mourning — but this is a behaviour, not a body.^[75]

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — receives and kills the descending Inanna, and is manipulated by the *kurgarra* and *galatur* into releasing the corpse.^[76]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — named in the cosmogonic prologue as the queen to whom the *kur* was given as her prize.^[77]
- *The Death of Gilgamesh* — receives offerings from the dead Gilgamesh at his reception in the nether world.^[78]
- *The Death of Ur-Namma* — receives the dead king's tribute at his entry into the underworld.^[79]

Relevance. Ereshkigal is the immovable administrator of death, the deity whose "powers are perfect" and whose rites cannot be questioned.^[80] Her sovereignty is coeval with the cosmos itself, and her enforcement of the law of substitution — no one leaves the nether world without a replacement — is the hinge on which the entire Inanna-Dumuzid cycle turns.^[81]

A.1.11. Galatur

One of two small, sexless creatures fashioned by Enki from the dirt under his fingernails to revive Inanna in the nether world; its companion is the *kurgarra*.^[82]

Physical description. Small and sexless; beyond this explicit textual statement, no further physical description survives in the in-scope sources.^[83]

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — slips unnoticed into the *kur*, mirrors Ereshkigal's suffering, receives the corpse as a gift, and sprinkles the "water of life" to revive Inanna.^[84]

Relevance. Together with the *kurgarra*, the *galatur* represents Enki's characteristic method of engineering around cosmic law rather than breaking it: a category-defying being can pass where gods cannot, and empathy exploited can deliver what force never could.^[85] Some scholars connect the pair to Mesopotamian traditions of liminal cultic personnel.^[86]

A.1.12. Geshtinanna

Goddess, sister of Dumuzid, the sibling whose loyalty stands as the ethical counterweight to her brother's complacency.^[87]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — offers herself as Dumuzid's underworld substitute; Inanna decrees that the two siblings alternate half-years in the *kur*.^[88]
- *Dumuzid's Dream* — interprets her brother's dream as foretelling his capture and later hides him in her sheepfold, refusing to betray him to the *galla* under interrogation.^[89]

Relevance. Geshtinanna is the figure through whom the Sumerian dying-god tradition finds its element of redemption: the substitution that saves Dumuzid half the year is her doing, not Inanna's, and her willingness to descend for her brother is the text's clearest statement that grief is the measure of loyalty.^[90]

A.1.13. Inanna

Goddess of love, war, and the morning and evening star; patron of Uruk and the figure whose independent action generates more narrative material than any other deity in the Sumerian corpus.^[91]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The texts repeatedly describe her regalia and adornments — the *shugurra* crown of the steppe, the measuring rod and line of lapis lazuli, beaded jewellery, the breastplate called "Come, man, come," the *pala*-garment of ladyship — but these are accoutrements, not a body.^[92]

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — complains at the close of the composition that she has been given no clear portfolio; Enki reframes her domain as the destabilisation of categories.^[93]
- *Inanna and Enki* — travels to Eridu, receives the *me* from the drunken Enki, and sails home to Uruk on the Boat of Heaven despite Enki's attempts to retrieve them.^[94]
- *Inanna and Ebih* — defies An's warning and destroys the defiant Mount Ebih with fire and flood.^[95]
- *Inanna and Shu-kale-tuda* — raped while sleeping by the gardener Shu-kale-tuda; unleashes three plagues on the land until she finds and condemns him.^[96]
- *Inanna and Gudam* — defeats the monstrous Gudam who terrorises Uruk and, unusually, spares and resettles him as a protector.^[97]
- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — descends to the underworld, is stripped through seven gates, killed and hung on a hook, revived through Enki's intervention, and designates Dumuzid as her substitute.^[98]
- *Inanna and Bilulu* — mourns the slain Dumuzid on the steppe and takes vengeance on Bilulu and Girgire, transforming them into ritual objects.^[99]
- *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* — sends the Bull of Heaven against Uruk after a quarrel with Gilgamesh; flees when Enkidu strikes her with a haunch of the slain beast.^[100]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — finds the huluppu tree on the Euphrates and appeals to Gilgamesh to clear it of its infesting creatures.^[101]

- *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* — the goddess both kings claim as patron; endorses Enmerkar's demand and eventually decides the contest.^[102]
- *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana* — the divine patron whose favour ensures Enmerkar's victory in the sorcery contest.^[103]
- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — addressed by Lugalbanda in the cave as one of the celestial triad; accepts his tears.^[104]
- *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird* — receives the swift-footed Lugalbanda in Uruk and gives him counsel for Enmerkar.^[105]

Relevance. Inanna is the goddess whose function is to violate the very categories that the rest of the pantheon establishes.^[106] Scholars agree that she is the most narratively productive figure in the Sumerian corpus: her cycles — the solo Inanna texts, the Inanna-Dumuzid tragedies, and her appearances across the Enmerkar, Gilgamesh, and Lugalbanda traditions — together map the limits of divine order, political authority, and emotional intensity that the literature takes the measure of.^[107]

A.1.14. Ishkur

The storm god, whose rains fall on Aratta at the close of the Enmerkar-Aratta contest.^[108]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* — sends rain that produces wild grain in Aratta, shifting the resolution of the contest toward trade rather than submission.^[109]

Relevance. Ishkur's brief intervention is the climatic mechanism through which the political asymmetry of the Enmerkar cycle is softened into an economic reciprocity.^[110]

A.1.15. Isimud

Enki's minister or vizier, a two-faced divine servant who acts as his master's intelligence agent and factotum.^[111]

Physical description. Two-faced, according to the attestation in the Enki cycle; no further physical description survives in the in-scope sources.^[112]

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — assists Enki in identifying the eight plants that Enki then consumes.^[113]
- *Inanna and Enki* — welcomes Inanna to Eridu, witnesses Enki's drunken gift of the *me*, and is later dispatched with sea monsters to attempt their recovery.^[114]

Relevance. Isimud illustrates a recurring Sumerian theological pattern in which great gods operate through named executive ministers; his two faces make visible the duplicity that Enki's cunning often requires.^[115]

A.1.16. Kulla

Divine patron of brick-making, assigned his craft by Enki during the world-ordering.^[116]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — receives the brick-moulding portfolio.^[117]

Relevance. Kulla is one of the specialised craft-gods through whom Enki's cosmic administration reaches the level of individual trades.^[118]

A.1.17. Lahar

Divine personification of Ewe — of sheep, wool, and pastoralism — one of the two goddesses whose creation in the *dul-kug* lifted humanity out of the animal state.^[119]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Ewe and Grain* — disputes with Ashnan, is defeated by Enki's verdict, and is reconciled to her subordinate role.^[120]

Relevance. Lahar personifies the Mesopotamian textile and dairy economy — a second pillar of civilisation that the debate ranks below cereal agriculture but never eliminates.^[121]

A.1.18. Lulal

A minor deity found in mourning on Inanna's return from the underworld.^[122]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — sitting in the dust in mourning for Inanna; spared from the *galla* by her recognition of his grief.^[123]

Relevance. Like Shara and Ninshubur, Lulal serves as one of the pointed contrasts to Dumuzid in the Descent: mourning is rewarded, its absence is not.^[124]

A.1.19. Martu

Divine personification of the Amorite peoples of the western steppe, the god of nomadic pastoralists who press on the borders of settled Sumer.^[125]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The friend's speech catalogues the customs of his people — eating raw meat, lacking houses, not burying their dead — but this is ethnography, not the god's body.^[126]

Appears in:

- *The Marriage of Martu* — attends the festival at Ninab, falls in love with Numushda's daughter, and is chosen by her as her husband despite her friend's ethnographic warnings.^[127]

Relevance. Martu is the theological face of the historical Amorite migration, and his marriage composition registers the Sumerian urban perspective on the absorption of pastoral peoples into Mesopotamian civilisation.^[128] By the Old Babylonian period of its transmission, Amorite dynasties already ruled most of Mesopotamia.^[129]

A.1.20. Mushdamma

Divine architect, assigned by Enki to the craft of building.^[130]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — receives the architecture portfolio, distinct from Kulla's brick-moulding.^[131]

Relevance. Mushdamma's separation from Kulla illustrates the Sumerian insistence on specialisation even within the divine bureaucracy: the brick-moulder is not the architect.^[132]

A.1.21. Nammu

Mother goddess of the watery deep, mother of Enki, who initiates the creation of humanity by rousing her sleeping son.^[133]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninmah* — kneads clay from above the *abzu* at Enki's instruction and, with Ninmah and the birth-goddesses, shapes the first humans.^[134]

Relevance. Nammu is the primordial maternal figure from whose water-realm Enki's authority derives, and it is her initiative — not Enki's — that sets the creation of humanity in motion.^[135]

A.1.22. Nanna-Suen

Moon god, son of Enlil and Ninlil, patron of Ur, whose nightly rise into heaven and monthly cycle organise the Mesopotamian ritual calendar.^[136]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — his city Ur is blessed by Enki as a prosperous city of trade and livestock.^[137]
- *Enlil and Ninlil* — conceived at the canal in Nippur; three chthonic substitutes are engendered during Enlil's descent so that Nanna-Suen can rise as the moon.^[138]

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — the second god to whom Ninshubur appeals after Inanna's death; refuses to help.^[139]
- *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nibru* — sails from Ur with a barge of agricultural offerings and receives Enlil's blessing for his city.^[140]
- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — the third member of the celestial triad addressed by the dying Lugalbanda; accepts his tears and grants him life.^[141]

Relevance. Nanna-Suen anchors the lunar cult at Ur, one of the most important religious institutions in the region, and his story ties the moon's monthly presence in the sky to the vertical logic of substitution between the cosmic levels.^[142]

A.1.23. Nanshe

Goddess assigned by Enki to oversee the sea and sea-trade.^[143]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — appointed to supervise the sea in Enki's ordering of the cosmos.^[144]

Relevance. Nanshe represents the administrative division of water domains: rivers, marshes, and sea each receive a separate divine supervisor in Enki's scheme.^[145]

A.1.24. Nergal

A chthonic deity engendered during Enlil's descent, identified in the composition as "lord of the underworld."^[146]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enlil and Ninlil* — born at one of the liminal stages of Enlil's descent; becomes lord of the dead.^[147]

Relevance. Nergal is one of the three underworld substitutes whose generation allows Nanna-Suen to ascend as the moon; his role here is structural, the first node in the Sumerian mapping of underworld authority.^[148]

A.1.25. Neti

Chief gatekeeper of the nether world.^[149]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — receives Inanna at the outer gate, reports her arrival to

Ereshkigal, and bolts and opens the seven gates one by one while the rules of the nether world strip her at each.^[150]

Relevance. Neti is the bureaucratic figure through whom the underworld's procedural law is executed: a doorkeeper who applies the rules without argument, regardless of the rank of the visitor.^[151]

A.1.26. Ninazu

A chthonic healing and underworld deity engendered during Enlil's descent.^[152]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enlil and Ninlil* — born at one stage of the disguised descent as an underworld substitute for Nanna-Suen.^[153]

Relevance. Ninazu is one of the three chthonic children of Enlil and Ninlil whose underworld residence enables the moon god's ascent; his particular domain of healing reflects the intertwining of disease and underworld authority in Sumerian thought.^[154]

A.1.27. Ningishzida

Underworld god known as "lord of the good tree," a deity of vegetation and a judge among the dead.^[155]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — mentioned alongside Dumuzid in the underworld passages as one of the chthonic residents.^[156]
- *The Death of Gilgamesh* — one of the underworld deities to whom the dying Gilgamesh presents ritual offerings in the Tell Haddad version.^[157]
- *Ningishzida's Journey to the Nether World* — seized by the *galla* demons and dragged below; his sister and mother raise the composition's surviving laments.^[158]
- *The Death of Ur-Namma* — sits beside Gilgamesh as a judge of the dead and receives Ur-Namma's funeral offerings.^[159]

Relevance. Ningishzida is a recurring figure across the underworld compositions — a god who is both victim of the nether world (in his own journey) and administrator of it (in the royal-death texts).^[160]

A.1.28. Ninhursaja

Mother goddess, "Lady of the Mountain," identified in some compositions as Ninmah and receiving the name Ninhursaja in *Lugal-e* at the close of Ninurta's victory.^[161]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — curses the plant-eating Enki with death, withdraws, then heals him by giving birth to eight healing deities corresponding to the eight afflicted body parts.^[162]
- *Enki and Ninmah* — as Ninmah, assists in shaping the first humans and engages Enki in the drunken contest over impaired beings.^[163]
- *Ninurta's Exploits* — visits her son at the *kur* after his victory and is renamed Ninhursaja — "Lady of the Mountain" — in recognition of the dam-mountain Ninurta has built.^[164]
- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — invoked at Lugalbanda's wilderness sacrifice among the four supreme deities.^[165]

Relevance. Ninhursaja is the Sumerian mother goddess in her several aspects — creatrix of humanity, bringer of healing, and patroness of the mountain — and the renaming in *Lugal-e* ties her directly to the physical landscape created by her son's engineering of the Tigris river system.^[166]

A.1.29. Ninkurra

Goddess, "Lady Pasture," born to Ninsar in the third generation of Enki's Dilmun line and herself the mother of Uttu by Enki.^[167]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — conceives Uttu by Enki after an accelerated nine-day gestation.^[168]

Relevance. Ninkurra is one of the four goddesses in the genealogical chain through which Enki's generative power concentrates in Dilmun.^[169]

A.1.30. Ninlil

Queen of the gods, wife of Enlil, in *Enlil and Sud* originally named Sud, daughter of Nisaba, before her marriage-renaming.^[170]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — named in conjunction with Enlil as parent of Nanna-Suen, patron of Ur.^[171]
- *Enlil and Ninlil* — the young goddess Enlil transgresses against at the Nunbirdu canal; follows her exiled husband, conceiving Nanna-Suen and three chthonic children during his descent.^[172]
- *Enlil and Sud* — as Sud, rebukes Enlil's first blunt approach and becomes his wife through a properly conducted courtship; at the marriage she is renamed Ninlil.^[173]

- *Ninurta's Return to Nibru* — receives the returning Ninurta with maternal warmth that, combined with Enlil's ceremonial framework, domesticates the warrior's fury.^[174]
- *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nibru* — named as Nanna-Suen's mother, the queen at Enlil's side in Nippur.^[175]

Relevance. Ninlil is the consort whose two compositions together form a diptych on marriage — one narrating transgression and exile, the other narrating procedure and elevation — and whose transformation from the young Sud to the queen of the gods stands as the paradigmatic Sumerian case of naming as theological change.^[176]

A.1.31. Ninmah

Great mother goddess, the "exalted lady," who in the creation of humanity collaborates with Enki and Nammu and who in *Lugal-e* is renamed Ninhursaja by her son Ninurta.^[177]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninmah* — with the birth-goddesses assists in shaping the first humans; challenges Enki to a drinking contest over impaired beings and loses when Enki creates Umul.^[178]
- *Ninurta's Exploits* — as Ninurta's mother, comes to the *kur* after his victory; at the close of the composition she is renamed Ninhursaja, "Lady of the Mountain."^[179]

Relevance. Ninmah is the creatrix who shares with Enki the authorship of humanity and whose renaming in *Lugal-e* makes her the divine patroness of the landscape Ninurta has engineered.^[180] The texts treat Ninmah and Ninhursaja as the same figure under successive titles.^[181]

A.1.32. Ninsar

Goddess, "Lady Greenery," firstborn of Enki and Ninhursaja in Dilmun.^[182]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — conceives Ninkurra by Enki in the second generation of the Dilmun sequence.^[183]

Relevance. Ninsar opens the accelerated four-generation divine chain whose names — Greenery, Pasture, Weaving — map Enki's generative power onto successive aspects of the cultivated world.^[184]

A.1.33. Ninshubur

Inanna's faithful minister and *sukkal*, her handmaiden, the most reliable figure in the Sumerian literary corpus.^[185]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Inanna and Enki* — repels each wave of sea monsters Enki sends to recover the *me* along the journey home.^[186]
- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — receives Inanna's pre-descent instructions and carries them out, pleading in the temples of Enlil, Nanna-Suen, and Enki after three days; later spared from the *galla* by Inanna for her mourning.^[187]

Relevance. Ninshubur embodies loyalty as a political and theological virtue in the Inanna cycle. Her competence is never in question, and the composition explicitly contrasts her mourning with Dumuzid's complacency as the test of character that decides who is handed to the *galla*.^[188]

A.1.34. Ninsikila

Goddess of Dilmun who appeals to Enki for fresh water; some scholars identify her with Ninhursaja, but the ETCSL text presents her as a separate figure.^[189]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — asks Enki to remedy Dilmun's lack of fresh water, prompting the irrigation that makes the paradisaal land productive.^[190]

Relevance. Ninsikila's appeal is the narrative hinge that activates Dilmun — the moment when the "pure and dry" paradise receives the water that turns it into a trading harbour and garden.^[191]

A.1.35. Ninti

Healing deity, "Lady of the Rib/Life," one of the eight healing deities born of Ninhursaja to cure Enki's ailments.^[192]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — born when Ninhursaja cures Enki's rib; her name sustains the Sumerian double meaning of *ti* as both "rib" and "life," a pun noted in scholarship since Kramer.^[193]

Relevance. Ninti is the most widely discussed of Enki's eight healing children because of the comparative resonance with Eve in Genesis 2, made possible in Sumerian by the *ti* pun and untranslatable into Hebrew.^[194]

A.1.36. Ninurta

Warrior god, son of Enlil and Ninmah (later renamed Ninhursaja), champion of the gods in the Sumerian Chaostkampf tradition.^[195]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. *Angim* describes his *me-lam* — the terrifying divine radiance that emanates from gods, monsters, and sacred objects —

as blazing with such intensity that it alarms all who behold it, but this is an attribute of his presence, not of his body.^[196]

Appears in:

- *Ninurta's Exploits* — defeats the demon Asag and his stone army, dams the primeval waters with the stones of the defeated enemy to create the Tigris river system, decrees the fates of every stone on the battlefield, and renames his mother Ninhursaja.^[197]
- *Ninurta's Return to Nibru* — returns from the *kur* laden with trophies and blazing with uncontained *me-lam*; his parents' combined authority and warmth domesticate his battle-fury.^[198]
- *Ninurta and the Turtle* — after defeating Anzud and recovering the Tablet of Destinies, tries to retain it for himself; Enki traps him in a pit with a turtle.^[199]

Relevance. Ninurta is the Sumerian warrior god par excellence, the protagonist of the Chaoskampf tradition whose defeat of Asag and subsequent engineering of the Mesopotamian landscape make *Lugal-e* one of the longest and most heavily copied compositions in the corpus.^[200] Taken together, the three Ninurta compositions form a triptych — cosmic battle, triumphant return, and comic deflation — suggesting that the Sumerian scribes treated their warrior champion in all three registers without apparent contradiction.^[201]

A.1.37. Nisaba

Goddess of grain and writing, patron deity of the scribal craft, mother of Sud, and in her scribal aspect the presiding goddess of every *edubba* in Sumer.^[202]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and the World Order* — assigned her dual portfolio as scribe of the gods and measurer of the land.^[203]
- *Enlil and Sud* — negotiates the marriage of her daughter Sud to Enlil through his envoy Nusku and accepts the bridal gifts.^[204]
- *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana* — her city Eresh is the setting for Urganinuna's magical attack and Sagburu's counter-sorcery.^[205]

Relevance. Nisaba is the patroness under whose authority the scribes themselves worked; her prominence in *Enlil and Sud* — directing the negotiations that restructure the divine household — gave students who copied the text a vision of their own patron goddess setting terms for the king of the gods.^[206]

A.1.38. Numushda

Local god of Ninab, father of the bride in *The Marriage of Martu*.^[207]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Marriage of Martu* — hosts the festival at Ninab at which Martu meets and pursues his daughter.^[208]

Relevance. Numushda exemplifies the minor city-god whose festival functions as the neutral ground on which the divine encounter between the settled and nomadic worlds occurs.^[209]

A.1.39. Nunbarshegunu

Mother of Ninlil; tells her daughter to bathe in the Nunbirdu canal, an instruction that leads directly to Enlil's transgression.^[210]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enlil and Ninlil* — gives the instruction that places Ninlil at the canal where Enlil encounters her.^[211]

Relevance. Nunbarshegunu is the figure whose maternal instruction triggers the entire chain of events that follows; whether she intends the encounter or merely enables it the text does not say.^[212]

A.1.40. Nungal

Goddess among whom Enlil distributes one of Huwawa's redistributed auras.^[213]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* — receives one of the seven *me-lam* that Enlil scatters across the natural world and specific beings after the guardian's death.^[214]

Relevance. Nungal appears only as a recipient in Enlil's angry redistribution of Huwawa's radiances, which illustrates the theological principle that divine terror, once concentrated, is redistributed but not destroyed.^[215]

A.1.41. Nusku

Enlil's trusted minister and vizier.^[216]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enlil and Sud* — dispatched to Nisaba to negotiate Enlil's marriage to Sud.^[217]
- *Ninurta's Return to Nibru* — dispatched by Enlil to meet the returning Ninurta and channel his battle-fury into ceremony.^[218]

- *The Debate between Copper and Silver* — called by Enlil at the moment of the verdict for Copper.^[219]

Relevance. Nusku is Enlil's standard executive instrument — the figure through whom the king of the gods conducts the diplomacy and mediation that direct royal speech would not permit.^[220]

A.1.42. Shara

A minor deity found in mourning for Inanna on her return from the underworld.^[221]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — mourning in dust and sackcloth; spared from the *galla* by Inanna.^[222]

Relevance. Shara, like Lulal and Ninshubur, serves in the Descent as a counter-instance to Dumuzid: mourning gods are spared because their grief is the proof of their loyalty.^[223]

A.1.43. Utu

Sun god, god of justice and the boundaries between lands, brother of Inanna and brother-in-law of Dumuzid.^[224]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — commanded by Enki to bring fresh water from the earth to irrigate Dilmun.^[225]
- *Enki and the World Order* — assigned oversight of justice and of the boundaries between lands.^[226]
- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — transforms Dumuzid's limbs into those of a snake or gazelle so he may flee the *galla*.^[227]
- *Dumuzid's Dream* — grants Dumuzid's transformation into a gazelle for the flight across the steppe.^[228]
- *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* — Gilgamesh secures his sanction before journeying into the Cedar Mountain; in Version A, Huwawa invokes him while pleading for mercy.^[229]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — at Enki's instruction, opens the hole through which Enkidu's ghost rises to speak with Gilgamesh.^[230]
- *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* — named as the divine father of Enmerkar, reinforcing the king's legitimacy.^[231]
- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — the first of the celestial triad to respond to the sick Lugalbanda's prayer.^[232]
- *The Flood Story: The Eridu Genesis* — shines into Ziusudra's boat when he opens the window after the flood.^[233]

Relevance. Utu is the Sumerian god whose reach is universal because his daily crossing of the heavens covers every land. He is the go-to deity for travel, justice, and transformation across cultural and species boundaries, and his interventions tend to be granted on the basis of kinship or piety rather than merit.^[234]

A.1.44. Uttu

Goddess of weaving, fourth in the Dilmun generation chain, born to Ninkurra by Enki.^[235]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enki and Ninhursaja* — warned by Ninhursaja to demand gifts of garden produce before yielding to Enki; from their union Ninhursaja later plants the eight forbidden plants.^[236]

Relevance. Uttu represents the point in the Dilmun genealogy at which the pattern breaks: the first goddess to impose a condition on Enki, and the one whose union produces the plants whose consumption triggers the composition's crisis.^[237]

A.1.45. Zangara

A dream god who appears to Lugalbanda in the wilderness and instructs him in the sacrifice of his captured animals.^[238]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — directs the form of Lugalbanda's ritual through a dream vision.^[239]

Relevance. Zangara is a minor but pointed figure: the god who ensures that wilderness ritual, when it must happen outside the temple, still conforms to divine expectation.^[240]

A.2. Heroes and Mortals

A.2.1. Aga

King of Kish, the rival city whose ultimatum forces Gilgamesh's decision in the bicameral assembly.^[241]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Gilgamesh and Aga* — sends envoys demanding Uruk's corvée labour, besieges the city, is captured, and is magnanimously released by Gilgamesh in acknowledgement of a prior debt.^[242]

Relevance. Aga is the historical-scale political adversary in the only Sumerian Gilgamesh composition wholly free of supernatural material; his defeat and release enact a Sumerian theory of kingship built on deliberation and reciprocal obligation rather than force alone.^[243]

A.2.2. Ansiga-ria

Minister of En-suhgir-ana, identifier of the sorcerer Urgirinuna as champion for the Aratta side.^[244]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana* — secures Urgirinuna for the sorcery contest.^[245]

Relevance. A minor courtly figure whose function is to lend plausible bureaucratic texture to En-suhgir-ana's escalation into sorcery.^[246]

A.2.3. Bilulu

Old woman — or bandit matriarch — held responsible, with her son Girgire, for Dumuzid's death.^[247]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. Jacobsen's reconstruction from the fragmentary text identifies her as an old woman of the steppe; beyond that, a specific physical portrait is not provided.^[248]

Appears in:

- *Inanna and Bilulu* — confronted by Inanna on the steppe and transformed into a waterskin used for desert libations to the dead.^[249]

Relevance. Bilulu's transformation supplies the aetiology for the desert libation practice in the Dumuzid cult, in which the vessel that holds the water poured for the dead shepherd is, by the text's logic, the punished killer herself. Sumerian divine justice here does not destroy offenders but repurposes them into the ritual apparatus that mourns the victim.^[250]

A.2.4. Birhurturre

A warrior of Uruk who ascends the city wall during Aga's siege.^[251]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Gilgamesh and Aga* — his appearance on the wall provokes a violent reaction from Aga's forces.^[252]

Relevance. Birhurturre is a named member of Uruk's defence whose appearance marks one of the climactic moments of the siege sequence.^[253]

A.2.5. Enkidu

Companion and servant of Gilgamesh, his partner across the Sumerian Gilgamesh compositions.^[254]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.^[255] (The Sumerian texts in scope do not describe his body; the familiar hairy, wild-man portrait belongs to the Akkadian Gilgamesh tradition, which is out of scope for this volume.)

Appears in:

- *Gilgamesh and Aga* — serves as counsellor and officer in the defence of Uruk.^[256]
- *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* — with Gilgamesh slays the Bull; strikes Inanna with a haunch of the beast, provoking her flight.^[257]
- *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* — accompanies Gilgamesh to the Cedar Forest; in Version A, urges the killing of the disarmed Huwawa and decapitates him.^[258]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — volunteers to descend after the lost *pukku* and *mekku*, violates every taboo Gilgamesh warned him against, is trapped among the dead, and returns as a ghost to deliver the catalogue of afterlife conditions.^[259]

Relevance. Enkidu in the Sumerian poems is the indispensable second — the companion whose counsel, combat, and ghostly report shape the action in every composition in which he appears. Unlike the Akkadian Gilgamesh epic's Enkidu, here he is not a wild-man foil but the hero's steady partner, and his extended testimony on the fates of the dead in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* is the fullest surviving Sumerian statement on the afterlife.^[260]

A.2.6. Enmerkar

King of Uruk, son of Utu, legendary founder of the first dynasty, credited with the invention of writing in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*.^[261]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* — demands the submission of Aratta; conducts the long contest of messengers and riddles; invents writing when the messenger's memory fails.^[262]
- *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana* — the king whose side wins the sorcery contest against Aratta through Sagburu's counter-magic.^[263]
- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — leads the army of Uruk across the mountains, with Lugalbanda as one of his soldiers.^[264]
- *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird* — army stalled before Aratta; dispatches Lugalbanda as supernatural messenger to consult Inanna in Uruk.^[265]

Relevance. Enmerkar is the peak literary figure of the Aratta cycle, and his invention of writing in the diplomatic contest with Aratta is one of the most celebrated aetiological passages in Sumerian literature — a claim that the cuneiform tablets on which it was copied quietly vindicated.^[266]

A.2.7. En-suhgir-ana

Lord of Aratta in *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana*, the Aratta king who challenges Enmerkar to the sorcery contest and, defeated, concedes Uruk's seniority.^[267]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana* — dispatches Urgirinuna against Uruk; after the sorcerer's defeat, acknowledges Enmerkar as the older brother whom he cannot match.^[268]

Relevance. En-suhgir-ana is the named Aratta king in the final act of the cycle. His concession closes the longer contest between Uruk and Aratta that the unnamed lord had sustained through diplomacy and riddles.^[269]

A.2.8. Gilgamesh

King of Uruk, two-thirds divine hero, Sumerian form Bilgames, the most famous figure in Mesopotamian literature.^[270]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. *Gilgamesh and Aga* notes that when he ascended the wall "his physical splendour and terrifying presence" had a decisive effect on the besiegers, but the text does not describe those features; it records the effect, not the form.^[271]

Appears in:

- *Gilgamesh and Aga* — consults the elders and the fighting men, chooses resistance, defeats Aga, and releases him in acknowledgement of a prior obligation.^[272]
- *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* — slays the Bull of Heaven with an axe of seven talents.^[273]
- *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* — journeys to the Cedar Forest with Enkidu, tricks Huwawa out of his seven auras, and returns with the guardian's head.^[274]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — clears the huluppu tree of its infesting creatures for Inanna; fashions the *pukku* and *mekku*; sits at the gate of the nether world to receive Enkidu's ghost.^[275]
- *The Death of Gilgamesh* — confronts his mortality, receives elaborate funeral rites, and is elevated to the status of judge among the dead.^[276]
- *The Death of Ur-Namma* — sits as a judge of the dead and receives Ur-Namma's offerings.^[277]

Relevance. Gilgamesh is the central heroic figure of the Sumerian narrative corpus, the king around whom five distinct compositions cluster without forming a unified epic. The Sumerian poems treat him across political, heroic, cosmological, and eschatological registers; taken together they articulate the bargain that his tradition insists on — fame, not eternal life, as the only compensation for mortality.^[278]

A.2.9. Girgire

Son of Bilulu, implicated with his mother in the death of Dumuzid.^[279]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Inanna and Bilulu* — transformed by Inanna into a desert spirit or protective genius of the steppe.^[280]

Relevance. Girgire is a secondary target of Inanna's vengeance, and like his mother is repurposed rather than destroyed — absorbed into the ritual apparatus of the Dumuzid cult as a steppe presence.^[281]

A.2.10. Gudam

A monstrous creature who terrorises Uruk, devouring its food and drink.^[282]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The opening lines that would have described him are lost in the tablet's damage.^[283]

Appears in:

- *Inanna and Gudam* — subdued by a junior fisherman of Inanna's with a double-axe, then spared by the goddess and resettled near Zabalam as a protector of Uruk.^[284]

Relevance. Gudam is unusual within the Sumerian patron-versus-monster pattern: rather than being destroyed, he is rehabilitated and put to work for the city he had been devouring, a distinctive form of Sumerian divine justice.^[285]

A.2.11. Lord of Aratta

The unnamed king of Aratta in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, Enmerkar's diplomatic adversary.^[286]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* — contests Enmerkar's demands, claims Inanna's favour for himself, matches riddle with counter-riddle, and ultimately accepts some form of accommodation after receiving Enmerkar's unreadable tablet.^[287]

Relevance. The lord of Aratta is a worthy adversary whose articulate resistance is the reason the composition is a contest rather than a proclamation. His defeat by writing — a message he cannot read — is the cycle's clearest demonstration that Uruk's advantage is ultimately technological.^[288]

A.2.12. Lugalbanda

Soldier and later king of Uruk, father of Gilgamesh in tradition, the pious individual whose

personal devotion becomes the theme of a linked pair of compositions.^[289]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The text compares his restored running to that of a "horse of the mountains," but this is a simile for speed, not a body.^[290]

Appears in:

- *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* — falls sick on the march to Aratta, is left for dead in a cave, and recovers through his prayers to Utu, Inanna, and Nanna-Suen.^[291]
- *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird* — cares for the Anzud chick and receives from its parent the gift of supernatural speed; returns to the stalled army at Aratta and runs Enmerkar's message to Inanna in Uruk.^[292]

Relevance. Lugalbanda is the Sumerian exemplar of piety and reciprocity rewarded: the abandoned soldier who becomes indispensable through attention, humility, and proper sacrifice.^[293] The two compositions that carry his name were heavily copied in the scribal curriculum and made him, alongside Gilgamesh, one of the most widely known Sumerian heroes.^[294]

A.2.13. Sagburu

"Wise Woman" of Eresh, the titled figure whose counter-sorcery defeats the foreign sorcerer Urgirinuna.^[295]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana* — defeats Urgirinuna through five rounds of animal-conjuring and throws him from the bank of the Euphrates.^[296]

Relevance. Sagburu is the only Sumerian narrative figure called "Wise Woman" in a formal sense and one of the few women in the corpus to prevail in a public magical contest. Her victory encodes the argument that Uruk's protection does not depend on imported specialists but runs through the local and divinely favoured territory itself.^[297]

A.2.14. Shu-kale-tuda

A mortal gardener, the perpetrator of the central crime in *Inanna and Shu-kale-tuda*.^[298]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Inanna and Shu-kale-tuda* — rapes the sleeping Inanna in the shade of the tree he planted; hides in the cities through three plagues; is eventually found by Inanna and condemned to death.^[299]

Relevance. Shu-kale-tuda is the mortal whose crime against a goddess drives the most sustained plague-and-pursuit narrative in the corpus. The composition closes on the paradox that the text

condemning him preserves his name: his infamy is the very medium of his posthumous survival.^[300]

A.2.15. Shulgi

Historical second king of the Third Dynasty of Ur (reigned ca. 2094–2047 BCE), son of Ur-Namma; invoked in the text by the divine-sonship epithet "son of Enlil," conventional for Ur III royal titlature.^[301]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Bird and Fish* — renders the final verdict in favour of Bird after the contestants resort to violence; the closing doxology praises "Father Enki" whose wisdom is understood to have guided the king's judgment.^[302]

Relevance. Shulgi's appearance as judge in *Bird and Fish* puts a historical Ur III monarch at the centre of a mythological debate — one of the few in-scope compositions in which a named king delivers the verdict rather than a god. The role reflects the Ur III dynasty's self-presentation as guarantor of cosmic and social order, continuous with the posthumous dignity granted to his father Ur-Namma in the royal underworld narrative.^[303]

A.2.16. Ur-Namma

Historical founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur (reigned ca. 2112–2095 BCE), builder of the great ziggurat at Ur, promulgator of one of the earliest known law codes.^[304]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The text compares his dying body to "a crushed vessel" — a simile for desolation, not a bodily portrait.^[305]

Appears in:

- *The Death of Ur-Namma* — dies of illness, lying abandoned on the battlefield "like a crushed vessel" (the opening lines are partly reconstructed); is prepared with elaborate funerary rites, presents gifts to Ereshkigal, Gilgamesh, Ningishzida, and the seven chief porters of the netherworld, and is given a throne among the dead. He laments the walls and temples he could not finish.^[306]

Relevance. *The Death of Ur-Namma* is the most detailed Sumerian account of a king's entry into the underworld, and the composition functioned as royal propaganda for the Ur III dynasty — demonstrating that even in death the king of Ur retained dignity and commanded respect from the powers below.^[307]

A.2.17. Urgirinuna

Male sorcerer from the destroyed city of Hamazu, En-suhgir-ana's hired champion in the magical contest against Uruk.^[308]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana* — redirects the milk of cows and goats to the wrong extremities as a first magical assault on Sumer; defeated in five rounds of animal-conjuring by Sagburu and killed by being thrown from the riverbank.^[309]

Relevance. Urgirununa is the Sumerian literary portrait of the unaffiliated supernatural specialist — the rootless technician whose skill is formidable but whose lack of divine patronage leaves him structurally inferior to the local defender.^[310]

A.2.18. Ziusudra

Pious king, the righteous survivor of the flood in the Sumerian Eridu Genesis.^[311]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Flood Story: The Eridu Genesis* — warned by Enki through a reed wall, builds a boat, survives the flood, prostrates himself before Utu, offers sacrifices, and is granted eternal life in Dilmun by An and Enlil.^[312]

Relevance. Ziusudra is the Sumerian flood hero, the earliest surviving figure of the pattern later elaborated by the Akkadian Atrahasis and Utnapishtim and, at further remove, by the biblical Noah. His translation into Dilmun is the only Sumerian instance in the corpus of a mortal raised to the condition of the gods.^[313]

A.3. Creatures and Monsters

A.3.1. Anzud

Divine lion-headed eagle, a creature of terrifying size whose wingspan darkens the mountains.^[314]

Physical description. Of enormous wingspan, the parent bird radiates the *me-lam*, the divine radiance that emanates from gods, monsters, and sacred objects.^[315] The lion-headed-eagle identification is iconographic rather than textual: it derives from the wider Mesopotamian visual tradition — cylinder seals and the Imdugud relief from Tell al-'Ubaid — rather than from any surviving physical description in the Sumerian compositions.^[316]

Appears in:

- *Ninurta and the Turtle* — the composition presupposes that Anzud has stolen the Tablet of Destinies from the *abzu* and has been defeated by Ninurta before the surviving text begins.^[317]
- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — nests in the crown of Inanna's huluppu tree with its young; Gilgamesh's killing of the serpent at the roots sends the Anzud fleeing to the mountains.^[318]
- *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird* — grants Lugalbanda supernatural speed in gratitude for his care of its chick, imposing a secrecy condition on the gift.^[319]

Relevance. Anzud is the great divine bird of Sumerian tradition, a being whose capacity for both theft and generosity makes him the pivot around which several of the corpus's most consequential narratives turn.^[320]

A.3.2. Asag

Monstrous demon of sickness, born of An and Ki, commander of the stone army in *Lugal-e*.^[321]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The text describes the effects of his *me-lam* — fish boil in the rivers, vegetation withers — but these are consequences of his presence, not a portrait of his body.^[322]

Appears in:

- *Ninurta's Exploits* — raises an army of stones from the mountains against the gods and is defeated by Ninurta in the central battle of the composition.^[323]

Relevance. Asag is the primordial adversary of the Sumerian Chaoskampf tradition, the enemy whose defeat and whose subsequent structural role in the landscape allow Ninurta to reshape southern Mesopotamia into its cultivable geography.^[324]

A.3.3. Bull of Heaven

Cosmic beast sent by Inanna against Uruk; in Sumerian *gud an-na* and known in scholarship as Gugalanna.^[325]

Physical description. A giant bull, large enough to devour the pasture, drink the river in great slurps, break the palm trees, and submerge the district of Kulaba within Uruk.^[326]

Appears in:

- *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* — attacks Uruk; slain jointly by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, its skull shattered by Gilgamesh's seven-talent axe.^[327]
- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — identified with Gugalanna, the husband of Ereshkigal, whose funeral rites Inanna claims as her reason for descending.^[328]

Relevance. The Bull of Heaven is the first attested instance of the cosmic-bull-slaying motif in world literature, and its story was so widely represented in cylinder-seal iconography that the visual tradition outlasted the textual one.^[329]

A.3.4. Galla demons

Underworld demons who enforce the laws of the dead; they do not eat food, drink water, accept bribes, or hear pleas.^[330]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The texts specify what they do not do — they do not eat, drink, or accept bribes — rather than how they look.^[331]

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — escort the revived Inanna to the surface, seize Dumuzid as her substitute, and pursue him through his transformations.^[332]
- *Dumuzid's Dream* — pursue Dumuzid across the steppe through his successive transformations, interrogate Geshtinanna without result, and are led to him by a friend's betrayal.^[333]
- *Ningishzida's Journey to the Nether World* — seize Ningishzida and drag him to the nether world.^[334]

Relevance. The *galla* are the mechanical arm of underworld enforcement — the texts' recurring instrument for demonstrating that death's claims are non-negotiable and that no deity's status lifts a body from their grip once it is theirs.^[335]

A.3.5. Huwawa

Guardian of the Cedar Forest, appointed by Enlil, wielder of seven *me-lam* — the divine radiances that guard his domain.^[336]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources beyond the attribution of the seven auras.^[337] (The familiar Akkadian portrait of a giant with a lion's face belongs to *Humbaba* in the Akkadian tradition, which is out of scope.)

Appears in:

- *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* — tricked by Gilgamesh into surrendering his seven auras one by one for gifts; pleads for mercy; decapitated by Enkidu. In Version B the guardian's weeping appeal is treated with particular weight.^[338]

Relevance. Huwawa stands at the centre of the Sumerian corpus's most morally ambiguous episode: a righteous guardian undone by a deception his divine mandate did not anticipate. The composition's refusal to resolve the ethics of his killing — Enlil's anger at the heroes is on record — makes him a figure through whom the literature tests the costs of heroic fame.^[339]

A.3.6. Kurgarra

One of two small, sexless creatures fashioned by Enki from the dirt under his fingernails to revive Inanna; its companion is the *galatur*.^[340]

Physical description. Small and sexless; beyond this explicit textual statement, no further physical description survives in the in-scope sources.^[341]

Appears in:

- *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* — with the *galatur*, mourns in sympathy with Ereshkigal, receives the corpse as a gift, and sprinkles the "food of life" to revive Inanna.^[342]

Relevance. With the *galatur*, the *kurgarra* is Enki's engineered answer to the problem of the underworld's borders: a being without fixed category can cross where gods and mortals cannot.^[343]

A.3.7. Phantom maid (ki-sikil-lil-la)

Phantom maid who dwells in the trunk of Inanna's huluppu tree.^[344]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources. The Sumerian name *ki-sikil-lil-la* denotes her category rather than her appearance; the identification with Lilith is contested.^[345]

Appears in:

- *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* — one of the three creatures infesting the huluppu tree; flees to the wilderness when Gilgamesh clears the tree.^[346]

Relevance. The phantom maid is the trunk-dweller in the tripartite infestation of the sacred tree; her presence completes the vertical cosmology in miniature — serpent at the roots, Anzud in the crown, phantom in the trunk — that Gilgamesh dismantles for Inanna.^[347]

A.3.8. Sharur

Ninurta's sentient mace, literally "smiter of thousands," the warrior god's battlefield counsellor.^[348]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources beyond its identity as a mace.^[349]

Appears in:

- *Ninurta's Exploits* — speaks, evaluates situations, flies from the battlefield to Enlil at Nippur, and carries encouragement back to Ninurta during the Asag campaign.^[350]

Relevance. Sharur gives the Sumerian warrior-god narrative its most distinctive literary device: a weapon with a mind, whose counsel transforms Ninurta from a mere force of destruction into a warrior whose strength is paired with intelligence.^[351]

A.4. Personified Concepts

A.4.1. Bird (Mušen)

Divine personification of the avian realm in *The Debate between Bird and Fish*.^[352]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources beyond the category itself; the text celebrates Bird's beauty, plumage, and song but does not individualise the figure.^[353]

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Bird and Fish* — boasts of beauty and of its place in the E-kur; exchanges insults and violence with Fish; is declared the winner by King Shulgi.^[354]

Relevance. Bird embodies the aesthetic and liturgical dimension of Mesopotamian ecological

categories; the verdict in her favour ties those dimensions to the royal and temple order that Shulgi represents.^[355]

A.4.2. Copper (Urudu)

Divine personification of copper and the practical tools made from it — hoes, adzes, axes, sickles.^[356]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Copper and Silver* — argues utility against prestige, mocks Silver for being buried between uses, and wins the verdict from Enlil.^[357]

Relevance. Copper represents the indispensability of the workaday metal on which Mesopotamian agriculture and construction depended; the verdict in its favour echoes the Hoe's victory in *Hoe and Plough* — utility ranking above ceremony.^[358]

A.4.3. Date Palm (Gišimmar)

Divine personification of the date palm, the supreme cultivated tree of Mesopotamia.^[359]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Date Palm and Tamarisk* — argues superiority on grounds of economic yield — dates, syrup, palm wine, fibre, timber — and of its status as a cultivated tree tended by human labour.^[360]

Relevance. Date Palm represents the productive, cultivated aspect of the Sumerian horticultural world; the loss of the composition's verdict leaves open whether the text ultimately preferred cultivated productivity or untended resilience.^[361]

A.4.4. Fish (Ku)

Divine personification of fish and the aquatic realm in *The Debate between Bird and Fish*.^[362]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources; Bird's insults impute a flabby mouth and an unpleasant smell, but these are rhetorical attacks rather than attested description.^[363]

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Bird and Fish* — opens hostilities; claims superiority through purity and abundance; destroys Bird's nest and loses the verdict to Shulgi.^[364]

Relevance. Fish embodies the economic value of the marsh and river economies that fed the Mesopotamian temple; the composition's unusual escalation into physical violence marks Fish as the most dramatically treated of the debate disputants.^[365]

A.4.5. Hoe (Al)

Divine personification of the hoe, the essential implement for digging irrigation channels, breaking ground, laying foundations, and planting orchards.^[366]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Hoe and Plough* — disputes with the Plough; argues from range and year-round utility; cites its primordial creation by Enlil; is declared the winner.^[367]

Relevance. The Hoe's victory ratifies the Sumerian conviction that infrastructure — canals, foundations, the constant maintenance of the irrigated landscape — is prior to and more fundamental than the seasonal operations built atop it.^[368]

A.4.6. Plough (Apin)

Divine personification of the seeder-plough used for large-scale cereal agriculture, drawn by oxen.^[369]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Hoe and Plough* — opens the dispute on grounds of prestige and its role in temple-offering grain; loses Enlil's verdict to the Hoe.^[370]

Relevance. The Plough stands for the institutional prestige of Mesopotamian cereal agriculture; its loss in the debate reflects the composition's underlying argument that ceremonial and institutional primacy is not the same as fundamental necessity.^[371]

A.4.7. Silver (Ku-babbar)

Divine personification of silver, the metal of banquets, adornment, and royal treasure.^[372]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Copper and Silver* — claims superiority through prestige and ceremonial function; mocked by Copper for being buried between uses; loses the verdict to Copper.^[373]

Relevance. Silver represents the ceremonial and prestige-metal economy of Mesopotamia; its defeat by Copper carries the same moral as the Hoe's victory over the Plough — workaday utility ranked above display.^[374]

A.4.8. Tamarisk (Šinig)

Divine personification of the tamarisk, a hardy wild tree used for ritual purification and fuel.^[375]

Physical description. No physical description survives in the in-scope sources.

Appears in:

- *The Debate between Date Palm and Tamarisk* — argues superiority through hardiness, independence from cultivation, and ritual purity.^[376]

Relevance. Tamarisk represents the virtue of self-sufficient, uncultivated nature — the steppe against the garden — in one of the few places in the Sumerian corpus where that side of the dichotomy gets its case argued at length.^[377]

- [1] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 1–60; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–217.
- [2] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 30–70; Black et al. 2004, pp. 165–167.
- [3] ETCSL 1.3.2, lines approx. 50–75; Black et al. 2004, pp. 73–74.
- [4] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, pp. 286–287.
- [5] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 326–393.
- [6] ETCSL 1.7.4, column vi; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 149–150.
- [7] Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–217.
- [8] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 50–80.
- [9] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 20–40; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 155–160.
- [10] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 360–375; Black et al. 2004, pp. 222–223.
- [11] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 180–192; Black et al. 2004, p. 225.
- [12] Black et al. 2004, pp. 219–220.
- [13] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 30–40.
- [14] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 340–355; Black et al. 2004, p. 60.
- [15] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 340–355; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 219–221.
- [16] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 395–415; Black et al. 2004, pp. 223–224.
- [17] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 348–356; Black et al. 2004, p. 60.
- [18] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 1–260; Alster 1972, pp. 40–80.
- [19] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 315–325.
- [20] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 205–207; Sladek 1974.
- [21] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 400–415; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 225–228.
- [22] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 20–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 226–227.
- [23] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 60–310; Black et al. 2004, pp. 228–233.
- [24] Civil 1994, *passim*.
- [25] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 280–310.
- [26] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 90–130; ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 250–270.
- [27] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 250–270; Black et al. 2004, pp. 220–221.
- [28] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 90–130; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 174–178.
- [29] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 250–270.
- [30] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 1–60; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–217.
- [31] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 1–278; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 181–204.
- [32] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 15–130; Kramer 1961, pp. 68–72.
- [33] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 60–473; Black et al. 2004, pp. 215–225.
- [34] ETCSL 1.1.4; Black et al. 2004, pp. 330–333.
- [35] ETCSL 1.6.3; Black et al. 2004, pp. 199–201.
- [36] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–70.
- [37] ETCSL 1.3.3; Black et al. 2004, p. 81.
- [38] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 220–245; Black et al. 2004, p. 58.
- [39] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 10–20, 230–245.
- [40] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 136–155; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 22–26.

- [41] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 326–393.
- [42] ETCSL 1.7.4, column iii–iv; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 147–148.
- [43] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 180–192; Black et al. 2004, p. 225.
- [44] ETCSL 5.3.5, lines 1–30, 185–190; Black et al. 2004, pp. 234–240.
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- [47] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 340–360; Black et al. 2004, p. 222.
- [48] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 340–360.
- [49] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 340–400.
- [50] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, p. 100.
- [51] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 1–10; Black et al. 2004, p. 100.
- [52] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 220–227.
- [53] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 50–80; Kramer 1961, pp. 59–60.
- [54] ETCSL 1.1.4, closing section; Kramer 1961, pp. 63–64.
- [55] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 15–130; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–180.
- [56] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 15–170; Black et al. 2004, pp. 108–115.
- [57] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 160–180; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 243–245.
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- [59] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 173–200; Black et al. 2004, p. 57.
- [60] ETCSL 1.5.1, lines 280–330.
- [61] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 190–202; Black et al. 2004, pp. 276–278.
- [62] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–10, 220–230.
- [63] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 326–393.
- [64] ETCSL 1.7.4, columns iii, vi; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 146–150.
- [65] ETCSL 5.3.1, lines 1–20, 170–190; Black et al. 2004, pp. 210, 217–218.
- [66] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 20–40; Black et al. 2004, p. 220.
- [67] ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 1–30, 280–310; Black et al. 2004, pp. 226–233.
- [68] ETCSL 5.3.6, Segment I.
- [69] Black et al. 2004, pp. 100–101; Kramer 1961, pp. 43–49.
- [70] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 50–65; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 170–172.
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- [73] Civil 1994, *passim*; ETCSL 5.3.3, lines 1–30.
- [74] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 1–10; ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 1–13.
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- [79] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 140–170; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.
- [80] ETCSL 1.4.1, gate sequence; Sladek 1974.
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- [88] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 380–415; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 225–228.
- [89] ETCSL 1.4.3, lines 20–55, 65–70; Alster 1972, pp. 50–75.
- [90] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 380–415; Alster 1972, pp. 65–75.

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- [92] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 14–25; Black et al. 2004, pp. 53–54; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 208–209.
- [93] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 430–473; Black et al. 2004, pp. 224–225.
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- [101] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 20–80; Black et al. 2004, pp. 287–289.
- [102] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 56–100; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 20–25.
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- [104] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 171–227; Black et al. 2004, pp. 265–266.
- [105] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 400–430; Black et al. 2004, pp. 20–21.
- [106] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 430–473; Black et al. 2004, pp. 224–225.
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- [108] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 536–556; Black et al. 2004, pp. 249–250.
- [109] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 536–556.
- [110] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 536–556; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 80–85.
- [111] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 202–219; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 194–196.
- [112] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 202–219.
- [113] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 202–219.
- [114] ETCSL 1.3.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 63–69.
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- [117] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 375–395.
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- [119] ETCSL 5.3.2, lines 20–40; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 155–160.
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- [124] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 300–355.
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- [127] ETCSL 1.7.1, lines 1–155; Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–162.
- [128] Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–162; Kramer 1961, pp. 101–103.
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- [130] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 375–395; Black et al. 2004, p. 223.
- [131] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 375–395.
- [132] Black et al. 2004, p. 223.
- [133] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 15–25; Kramer 1961, pp. 68–70.
- [134] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 15–37.
- [135] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 15–25; Kramer 1961, pp. 68–70.
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- [137] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 100–120.
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- [140] ETCSL 1.5.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 147–155.

[141] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 171–227; Black et al. 2004, pp. 265–266.

[142] Black et al. 2004, pp. 100–107; ETCSL 1.2.1.

[143] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 320–340; Black et al. 2004, p. 222.

[144] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 320–340.

[145] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 250–340.

[146] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 90–130; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 174–178.

[147] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 90–130.

[148] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 177–179.

[149] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 80–115; Black et al. 2004, p. 55.

[150] ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 68–170; Black et al. 2004, pp. 55–56.

[151] ETCSL 1.4.1, gate sequence.

[152] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 90–130; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 174–178.

[153] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 90–130.

[154] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 174–178.

[155] ETCSL 1.7.3; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 56–57.

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[161] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 690–720; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 267–270.

[162] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 186–278; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 197–203.

[163] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 24–130; Kramer 1961, pp. 68–72.

[164] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 650–729; Black et al. 2004, pp. 189–191.

[165] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 326–393.

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[167] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 88–107.

[168] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 88–107.

[169] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 188–195.

[170] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 140–170; Black et al. 2004, p. 115.

[171] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 100–120.

[172] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 5–145; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–180.

[173] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 15–170; Black et al. 2004, pp. 108–115.

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[176] Black et al. 2004, pp. 108–115; ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 140–170.

[177] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 24–37; ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 650–720.

[178] ETCSL 1.1.2, lines 24–141; Kramer 1961, pp. 68–72.

[179] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 650–720; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 267–270.

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[181] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 690–720.

[182] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 69–87; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 188–190.

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[185] ETCSL 1.3.1; ETCSL 1.4.1, lines 26–67.

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- [191] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 29–55.
- [192] ETCSL 1.1.1, line approx. 270; Kramer 1961, pp. 54–59.
- [193] ETCSL 1.1.1, line approx. 270; Kramer 1961, pp. 54–59.
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- [196] ETCSL 1.6.1, lines 25–50; Black et al. 2004, pp. 193–194.
- [197] ETCSL 1.6.2, lines 1–729; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 233–272.
- [198] ETCSL 1.6.1; Black et al. 2004, pp. 192–198.
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- [203] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 415–430; Black et al. 2004, p. 224.
- [204] ETCSL 1.2.2, lines 55–125.
- [205] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 170–228; Black et al. 2004, pp. 255–258.
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- [209] Black et al. 2004, pp. 156–157.
- [210] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 5–15; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–169.
- [211] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 5–15.
- [212] ETCSL 1.2.1, lines 5–15; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 167–169.
- [213] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 190–202; Black et al. 2004, pp. 276–278.
- [214] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 190–202.
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- [225] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 40–49.
- [226] ETCSL 1.1.3, lines 368–380.
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- [229] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 20–40, 150–170; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 160–165.
- [230] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 245–250.
- [231] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 33–37; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 15–17.
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- [235] ETCSL 1.1.1, lines 108–151.
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- [239] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 326–393.
- [240] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, lines 326–393.

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- [242] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 1–115; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 141–148.
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- [244] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 114–150; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 110–118.
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- [257] ETCSL 1.8.1.2, Segment D, lines 33–53; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 10–12.
- [258] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 180–190; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 165–167.
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- [261] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 33–37; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 15–17.
- [262] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 1–636; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1–95.
- [263] ETCSL 1.8.2.4; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97–169.
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- [265] ETCSL 1.8.2.2, lines 330–460.
- [266] Black et al. 2004, pp. 236–251; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 1–10.
- [267] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, opening and closing lines; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 97–105.
- [268] ETCSL 1.8.2.4, lines 114–281; Black et al. 2004, pp. 252–261.
- [269] Black et al. 2004, pp. 252–253.
- [270] ETCSL 1.8.1.5, lines 1–30; Black et al. 2004, pp. 269–270.
- [271] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 85–100.
- [272] ETCSL 1.8.1.1, lines 1–115; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 141–148.
- [273] ETCSL 1.8.1.2, Segment D, lines 33–53.
- [274] ETCSL 1.8.1.5 and 1.8.1.5.1; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 149–174.
- [275] ETCSL 1.8.1.4, lines 20–303.
- [276] ETCSL 1.8.1.3; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 195–208.
- [277] ETCSL 2.4.1.1, lines 180–200; Flückiger-Hawker 1999.
- [278] ETCSL 1.8.1.1–1.8.1.5; George 2003, vol. 1, pp. 141–208; Black et al. 2004, pp. 269–296.
- [279] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 318–320.
- [280] ETCSL 1.4.4; Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–325.
- [281] Jacobsen 1987, pp. 320–325.
- [282] ETCSL 1.3.4; Kramer 1961, pp. 83–85.
- [283] ETCSL 1.3.4, opening section (fragmentary).
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- [285] Black et al. 2004, p. 85; Kramer 1961, pp. 83–85.
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- [287] ETCSL 1.8.2.3, lines 200–636; Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 32–90.
- [288] Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 72–85.
- [289] ETCSL 1.8.2.1, opening lines; Black et al. 2004, pp. 262–263.

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