

in 612 B.C.E. by Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians. The library was buried under sand for two millennia. In the mid nineteenth century, archeologists discovered clay tablets at Nineveh and other sites along the Tigris and Euphrates, rewriting ancient history. Assurbanipal's library is the primary source of most information about Akkad and Babylon before 1000 B.C.E. In addition to administrative records, the unearthed library contained a vast literature of Sumer and Babylon.

After translating Mesopotamian tablets, scholars concluded that myths and epics written in Akkadian (dialects of Babylonia and Assyria), which predate Greek and Hebrew literature by about a thousand years, were widely known throughout the ancient Near East. In 1872 George Smith announced to the newly founded Society of Biblical Archeology that in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* he had found a flood story very similar to the one told in Genesis. Because of the questions about meaning and chronology raised by Middle Eastern archeology and the comparison of literary texts from the Bible with other literatures from the region, biblical scholarship was permanently transformed. Similarities between Gilgamesh and the Greek heroes Achilles and Odysseus suggest a line of transmission from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Homeric epics: both Gilgamesh and Achilles are partly of divine origin and both are fated to die; and the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus resembles that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Gilgamesh and Odysseus each go on arduous quests and are aided by mysterious women—Siduri and Circe, respectively—and both must cross the water to the edge of the world.

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THE DESCENT OF INANNA

C. 2000 B.C.E.

The Descent of Inanna is the oldest text in this anthology. It was set down by scribes in cuneiform on clay tablets early in the second millennium B.C.E. The repetition and the formulaic phrasing in the text suggest that previous oral versions of it must have existed and that the stories of the goddess Inanna may easily go back to 3500 B.C.E. if not earlier. Inanna played an essential role in ancient Sumer, a kingdom of cities that flourished in the third millennium B.C.E. on the irrigated plains along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now southern Iraq, between Baghdad and the Persian Gulf. So highly regarded was Sumer's culture that even after the Babylonian conquest of the region c. 1800 B.C.E., when Semitic Akkadian became the area's common tongue, Sumerian remained the learned language of writers and scholars, just as classical Greek and Latin

The Goddess Inanna, 2000 B.C.E.

Before patriarchal societies became dominant during the second millennium B.C.E., the ancient Sumerians worshipped a host of goddesses, the most important among them the great goddess Inanna. Here she is seen in relief with her traditional wings and with horned animals at her feet. (Z. Radovan, Jerusalem)



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FROM



The Descent of Inanna

Translated by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer

From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below.
 From the Great Above the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.
 From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.

My Lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.
 Inanna abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.
 She abandoned her office of holy priestess to descend to the underworld.

In Uruk¹ she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
 In Badtibira she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
 In Zabalam she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
 10 In Adab she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
 In Nippur she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
 In Kish she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
 In Akkad she abandoned her temple to descend to the underworld.
 She gathered together the seven *me*.

The Descent of Inanna. The story of how this poem was pieced together is a remarkable bit of history and scholarship that reveals a great deal about why the West has been slow to acknowledge the religious and literary importance of ancient Sumer. The text was translated from thirty clay tablets that had been initially inscribed c. 1750 B.C.E. by mythographers, then buried in the ruins of Nippur, Sumer's spiritual center, for some four thousand years. Egyptian hieroglyphs were visible on temple and tomb walls long before they were translated, but *The Descent of Inanna* was a text found through difficult excavations at the ancient site of Nippur in today's Iraq between 1889 and 1900. Iraq was then part of the Turkish empire, and the thousands of clay fragments found at the site were divided between the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient and the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. Three pieces stored in Philadelphia and two fragments kept in Istanbul contained the first five sections of Inanna's descent—incomplete and obscure—and were published in 1914. In 1937 Samuel Noah Kramer reconstructed the first half of the story and revealed its coherence, and in 1942 he added fragments that brought the story to the point at which Inanna emerges from the underworld. After two more fragments of the story were found in 1951, Kramer published the next section, which describes how Inanna hands over her husband Dumuzi to the demons of the underworld. Finally, in 1963, after fifty years of scholarly detective work, the

¹ **Uruk:** Inanna's seven sacred cities and temples are listed here; Uruk is her major city, her primary residence. Seven appears several times in the text as a sacred number. Some speculate that the number came to be considered sacred because it was the number of visible bodies—the sun, the moon, and the five planets; others suggest it could be related to the menstrual cycle, since a twenty-eight-day month is divisible by seven. The number seven reappears in the Hebrew creation story.

She took them into her hands.
 With the *me* in her possession, she prepared herself:

She placed the *shugurra*, the crown of the steppe, on her head.
 She arranged the dark locks of hair across her forehead.
 She tied the small lapis beads around her neck,
 20 Let the double strand of beads fall to her breast,
 And wrapped the royal robe around her body.
 She daubed her eyes with ointment called "Let him come, Let him come,"
 Bound the breastplate called "Come, man, come!" around her chest,
 Slipped the gold ring over her wrist,
 And took the lapis measuring rod and line in her hand.

Inanna set out for the underworld.
 Ninshubur, her faithful servant, went with her.
 Inanna spoke to her, saying:

30 "Ninshubur, my constant support,
 My *sukkal* who gives me wise advice,
 My warrior who fights by my side,
 I am descending to the *kur*, to the underworld.
 If I do not return,
 Set up a lament for me by the ruins.
 Beat the drum for me in the assembly places.
 Circle the houses of the gods.
 Tear at your eyes, at your mouth, at your thighs.
 Dress yourself in a single garment like a beggar.

poem's last section was added, which begins with a fly giving information about Dumuzi's location to Inanna and concludes with Inanna's decree that Dumuzi's residence in the underworld would last half the year—roughly corresponding to winter—and Geshtinanna, his sister, would take his place the other half of the year. This incredibly important section ties the myth of Inanna's descent to the underworld to agricultural myths found in the Middle East and the Mediterranean that involve either the death and resurrection of the goddess herself, such as in the case of the Babylonian Ishtar, or the death and resurrection of the goddess's lover or child, such as in the stories of Attis and Adonis in Syria and Asia Minor, and those of Demeter and Persephone in Greece.

The importance of *The Descent of Inanna* lies not only in its antiquity and its influence on subsequent literature in the region but also in its revelation of a unique time in history when the rulers and subjects of Sumer paid reverence to a goddess whose rituals determined nothing less than the process of growing food and the sexual potency of the king, whose annual consummation of marriage with a goddess-priestess ensured the fertility of the land and legitimized his rule. In the Akkadian version of this myth, which dates from 1250 B.C.E., the goddess's name is Ishtar, her lover is Tammuz, and the dark sister of the underworld is still Ereshkigal.

A note on the translation: This translation is a reworking of Samuel Noah Kramer's rendering by noted folklorist and storyteller Diane Wolkstein. In the interests of readability, the translators have chosen not to indicate gaps or uncertainties in the text. All notes are the editors'.

Go to Nippur, to the temple of Enlil.²
 40 When you enter his holy shrine, cry out:
 'O Father Enlil, do not let your daughter
 Be put to death in the underworld.
 Do not let your bright silver
 Be covered with the dust of the underworld.
 Do not let your precious lapis
 Be broken into stone for the stoneworker.
 Do not let your fragrant boxwood
 Be cut into wood for the woodworker.
 Do not let the holy priestess of heaven
 50 Be put to death in the underworld.'

If Enlil will not help you,
 Go to Ur, to the temple of Nanna.
 Weep before Father Nanna.
 If Nanna will not help you,
 Go to Eridu, to the temple of Enki.³
 Weep before Father Enki.
 Father Enki, the God of Wisdom, knows the food of life,
 He knows the water of life;
 He knows the secrets.
 60 Surely he will not let me die."

Inanna continued on her way to the underworld.
 Then she stopped and said:
 "Go now, Ninshubur—
 Do not forget the words I have commanded you."

When Inanna arrived at the outer gates of the underworld,
 She knocked loudly.
 She cried out in a fierce voice:
 "Open the door, gatekeeper!
 Open the door, Neti!
 70 I alone would enter!"

Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the *kur*, asked:
 "Who are you?"

She answered:
 "I am Inanna, Queen of Heaven,
 On my way to the East."

² **Enlil:** A god of unknown attributes; perhaps the god of wind and air. His symbol is a horned crown on a shrine. ³ **Eridu . . . Enki:** Eridu was an ancient city on the shore of the Persian Gulf; Enki is the god of water and wisdom.

Neti said:
 "If you are truly Inanna, Queen of Heaven,
 On your way to the East,
 Why has your heart led you on the road
 80 From which no traveler returns?"

Inanna answered:
 "Because . . . of my older sister, Ereshkigal,
 Her husband, Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven, has died.
 I have come to witness the funeral rites.
 Let the beer of his funeral rites be poured into the cup.
 150 Let it be done."

Neti spoke:
 "Stay here, Inanna, I will speak to my queen.
 I will give her your message."

90 Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the *kur*,
 Entered the palace of Ereshkigal,⁴ the Queen of the Underworld, and said:
 "My queen, a maid
 As tall as heaven,
 As wide as the earth,
 As strong as the foundations of the city wall,
 Waits outside the palace gates.

She has gathered together the seven *me*.
 She has taken them into her hands.
 With the *me* in her possession, she has prepared herself:

100 On her head she wears the *shugurra*, the crown of the steppe.
 Across her forehead her dark locks of hair are carefully arranged.
 Around her neck she wears the small lapis beads.
 At her breast she wears the double strand of beads.
 Her body is wrapped with the royal robe.
 Her eyes are daubed with the ointment called 'Let him come, let him come.'
 Around her chest she wears the breastplate called 'Come, man, come!'
 110 On her wrist she wears the gold ring.
 In her hand she carries the lapis measuring rod and line."

When Ereshkigal heard this,
 110 She slapped her thigh and bit her lip.

⁴ **Ereshkigal:** Although here Ereshkigal is Inanna's sister, it is probable that in different contexts they were treated as two sides of the same deity, the goddess of life and death, light and dark. In the Sumerian myth, Ereshkigal is portrayed as spiteful and unfulfilled.

She took the matter into her heart and dwelt on it.

Then she spoke:

"Come, Neti, my chief gatekeeper of the *kur*,
Heed my words:
Bolt the seven gates of the underworld.
Then, one by one, open each gate a crack.
Let Inanna enter.
As she enters, remove her royal garments.⁵
Let the holy priestess of heaven enter bowed low."

120 Neti heeded the words of his queen.
He bolted the seven gates of the underworld.
Then he opened the outer gate.
He said to the maid:
"Come, Inanna, enter."

When she entered the first gate,
From her head, the *shugurra*, the crown of the steppe, was removed.

Inanna asked:
"What is this?"

She was told:
130 "Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned."

When she entered the second gate,
From her neck the small lapis beads were removed.

Inanna asked:
"What is this?"

She was told:
"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned." [. . .]

[Inanna's strand of beads, breastplate, gold ring, and lapis measuring rod were taken from her at gates three to six, respectively.]

When she entered the seventh gate,
140 From her body the royal robe was removed.

⁵ **remove . . . garments:** The symbols of power and prestige in the world above have no value in the underworld; Inanna will be naked when she confronts death.

Inanna asked:
"What is this?"

She was told:
"Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned."

Naked and bowed low, Inanna entered the throne room.
Ereshkigal rose from her throne.
Inanna started toward the throne.
The Anunna,⁶ the judges of the underworld, surrounded her.
150 They passed judgment against her.

Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.
She spoke against her the word of wrath.
She uttered against her the cry of guilt.

She struck her.

Inanna was turned into a corpse,
A piece of rotting meat,
And was hung from a hook on the wall.

When, after three days and three nights,⁷ Inanna had not returned,
Ninshubur set up a lament for her by the ruins.
160 She beat the drum for her in the assembly places.
She circled the houses of the gods.
She tore at her eyes; she tore at her mouth; she tore at her thighs.
She dressed herself in a single garment like a beggar.

[Ninshubur seeks help from Enlil and Nanna (the moon god), both of whom refuse.]

Ninshubur went to Eridu and the temple of Enki.
When she entered the holy shrine,
She cried out:
"O Father Enki, do not let your daughter
Be put to death in the underworld.
Do not let your bright silver

⁶ **Anunna:** Also called the Anunnaki, these are the deities of the underworld, seven in number.

⁷ **three days and three nights:** A period of time found throughout the literature of the ancient Near East: In Hebrew scriptures, Jonah is in a whale's belly for three days and nights, and in the New Testament Jesus is in the tomb for the same amount of time. The origin of this three-day period may have been the three days in the lunar cycle when the moon disappears from view, since the moon was a favored symbol of death and rebirth in the ancient world.

170 Be covered with the dust of the underworld.
Do not let your precious lapis
Be broken into stone for the stoneworker.
Do not let your fragrant boxwood
Be cut into wood for the woodworker.
Do not let the holy priestess of heaven
Be put to death in the underworld."

Father Enki said:

"What has happened?
What has my daughter done?
180 Inanna! Queen of All the Lands! Holy Priestess of Heaven!
What has happened?
I am troubled. I am grieved."

From under his fingernail Father Enki brought forth dirt.
He fashioned the dirt into a *kurgarra*, a creature neither male nor female.
From under the fingernail of his other hand he brought forth dirt.
He fashioned the dirt into a *galatur*,⁸ a creature neither male nor female.
He gave the food of life to the *kurgarra*.
He gave the water of life to the *galatur*.
Enki spoke to the *kurgarra* and *galatur*, saying:

190 "Go to the underworld,
Enter the door like flies.
Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld, is moaning
With the cries of a woman about to give birth.
No linen is spread over her body.
Her breasts are uncovered.
Her hair swirls about her head like leeks.
When she cries, 'Oh! Oh! My inside!'
Cry also, 'Oh! Oh! Your inside!'
When she cries, 'Oh! Oh! My outside!'
Cry also, 'Oh! Oh! Your outside!'
200 The queen will be pleased.
She will offer you a gift.
Ask her only for the corpse that hangs from the hook on the wall.
One of you will sprinkle the food of life on it.
The other will sprinkle the water of life.
Inanna will arise."

⁸ *kurgarra* . . . *galatur*: These beings are able to cross from the living realm to the realm of the dead and back without dying, either because they are sexless or androgynous. The Greek messenger-god Hermes shares some of this sexual ambiguity.

The *kurgarra* and the *galatur* heeded Enki's words.
They set out for the underworld.
Like flies, they slipped through the cracks of the gates.
210 They entered the throne room of the Queen of the Underworld.
No linen was spread over her body.
Her breasts were uncovered.
Her hair swirled around her head like leeks.

Ereshkigal was moaning:
"Oh! Oh! My inside!"

They moaned:
"Oh! Oh! Your inside!"

She moaned:
"Ohhhh! Oh! My outside!"

220 They moaned:
"Ohhhh! Oh! Your outside!"

She groaned:
"Oh! Oh! My belly!"

They groaned:
"Oh! Oh! Your belly!"

She groaned:
"Oh! Ohhhh! My back!!"

They groaned:
"Oh! Ohhhh! Your back!!"

230 She sighed:
"Ah! Ah! My heart!"

They sighed:
"Ah! Ah! Your heart!"

She sighed:
"Ah! Ahhhh! My liver!"

They sighed:
"Ah! Ahhhh! Your liver!"

Ereshkigal stopped.
She looked at them.

240 She asked:

“Who are you,
Moaning—groaning—sighing with me?
If you are gods, I will bless you.
If you are mortals, I will give you a gift.
I will give you the water-gift, the river in its fullness.”

The *kurgarra* and *galatur* answered:
“We do not wish it.”

Ereshkigal said:
“I will give you the grain-gift, the fields in harvest.”

250 The *kurgarra* and *galatur* said:
“We do not wish it.”

Ereshkigal said:
“Speak then! What do you wish?”

They answered:
“We wish only the corpse that hangs from the hook on the wall.”

Ereshkigal said:
“The corpse belongs to Inanna.”

They said:
“Whether it belongs to our queen,
260 Whether it belongs to our king,
That is what we wish.”

The corpse was given to them.

The *kurgarra* sprinkled the food of life on the corpse.
The *galatur* sprinkled the water of life on the corpse.
Inanna arose. . . .

Inanna was about to ascend from the underworld
When the Anunna, the judges of the underworld, seized her.
They said:

270 “No one ascends from the underworld unmarked.
If Inanna wishes to return from the underworld,
She must provide someone in her place.”

As Inanna ascended from the underworld,
The *galla*, the demons of the underworld, clung to her side.
The *galla* were demons who know no food, who know no drink,
Who eat no offerings, who drink no libations,
Who accept no gifts.
They enjoy no lovemaking.
They have no sweet children to kiss.
They tear the wife from the husband's arms,
280 They tear the child from the father's knees,
They steal the bride from her marriage home.

The demons clung to Inanna.
The small *galla* who accompanied Inanna
Were like reeds the size of low picket fences.
The large *galla* who accompanied Inanna
Were like reeds the size of high picket fences.

The one who walked in front of Inanna was not a minister,
Yet he carried a sceptre.
The one who walked behind her was not a warrior,
290 Yet he carried a mace.
Ninshubur, dressed in a soiled sackcloth,
Waited outside the palace gates.
When she saw Inanna
Surrounded by the *galla*,
She threw herself in the dust at Inanna's feet.

The *galla* said:
“Walk on, Inanna,
We will take Ninshubur in your place.”

Inanna cried:
300 “No! Ninshubur is my constant support. [. . .]

[The demons suggest taking first Shara and then Lulal in Inanna's stead, but Inanna will not let them go, as they are her sons.]

The *galla* said:
“Walk on to your city, Inanna.
We will go with you to the big apple tree in Uruk.”

In Uruk, by the big apple tree,
Dumuzi, the husband of Inanna, was dressed in his shining *me*-garments.
He sat on his magnificent throne; (he did not move).

The *galla* seized him by his thighs.
They poured milk out of his seven churns.
They broke the reed pipe which the shepherd was playing.

- 310 Inanna fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death.
She spoke against him the word of wrath.
She uttered against him the cry of guilt:
"Take him! Take Dumuzi away!"

The *galla*, who know no food, who know no drink,
Who eat no offerings, who drink no libations,
Who accept no gifts, seized Dumuzi.
They made him stand up; they made him sit down.
They beat the husband of Inanna.
They gashed him with axes.

- 320 Dumuzi let out a wail.
He raised his hands to heaven to Utu, the God of Justice, and beseeched him:
"O Utu, you are my brother-in-law,
I am the husband of your sister.
I brought cream to your mother's house,
I brought milk to Ningal's house.
I am the one who carried food to the holy shrine.
I am the one who brought wedding gifts to Uruk.
I am the one who danced on the holy knees, the knees of Inanna.

- 330 Utu, you who are a just god, a merciful god,
Change my hands into the hands of a snake.
Change my feet into the feet of a snake.
Let me escape from my demons;
Do not let them hold me."

The merciful Utu accepted Dumuzi's tears.
He changed the hands of Dumuzi into snake hands.
He changed the feet of Dumuzi into snake feet.
Dumuzi escaped from his demons.
They could not hold him. . . .

[After Dumuzi runs away and hides, a fly tells Inanna where to find him.]

Then a fly appeared.⁹

- 340 The holy fly circled the air above Inanna's head and spoke:

⁹a fly appeared: The messengers sent to the underworld to rescue Inanna took the form of flies; it is not known if this fly is related to them.

"If I tell you where Dumuzi is,
What will you give me?"

Inanna said:

"If you tell me,
I will let you frequent the beer-houses and taverns.
I will let you dwell among the talk of the wise ones.
I will let you dwell among the songs of the minstrels."

The fly spoke:

- 350 "Lift your eyes to the edges of the steppe,
Lift your eyes to Arali.
There you will find Geshtinanna's brother,
There you will find the shepherd Dumuzi."

Inanna and Geshtinanna went to the edges of the steppe.
They found Dumuzi weeping.

Inanna took Dumuzi by the hand and said:

- 360 "You will go to the underworld
Half the year.
Your sister, since she has asked,
Will go the other half.
On the day you are called,
That day you will be taken.
On the day Geshtinanna is called,
That day you will be set free."

Inanna placed Dumuzi in the hands of the eternal.

*Holy Ereshkigal! Great is your renown!
Holy Ereshkigal! I sing your praises!*