THE DESCENT OF INANNA AS A RITUAL JOURNEY TO KUTHA?

Giorgio Buccellati
University of California, Los Angeles

The Sumerian *Descent of Inanna*[1] relates, in a poetic narrative form, events and situations of the divine world—it is, in the common understanding of the word, a myth. It seems, however, possible to suggest a cultic setting for the story, which, if correct, would improve our understanding of certain aspects of the text, would add immediacy and concreteness to its *Sitz im Leben* and might also help in dating the composition. There are two parts to my argument.

1. The Itinerary of Inanna's Journey

The first is geographical in nature. The beginning of the Sumerian version states that Inanna "abandoned" her various temples in a number of Sumerian cities and "descended" to the Netherworld. The cities are mentioned by name; in the order in which they are introduced in one manuscript,[2] they are Uruk, Badtibira, Zabalam, Adab, Nippur, Kish and Akkad. Checking their location on the map, one notices that the sequence corresponds to a line going from the south to the northwest,[3] except for an initial swing to the east from Uruk to Badtibira. The "abandoning" of her cities on the part of Inanna may then be taken not as a simultaneous happening, but as a progression of events: she abandons one city after another as she goes *from* one *to* the next in a generally northward direction. But where does this progression lead? The last city mentioned by name in the sequence is Akkad, yet we know that this is not the destination point, since at the very beginning of the story we are told that the goddess "sets her mind to the Great Below" and "descended to the Netherworld." Now, if we continue on the map in the same northerly direction as is indicated by the sequence of cities, a very natural destination point presents itself at the end of the line: Kutha. Kutha is the residence of the Netherworld gods, and in point of fact the Akkadian version of the myth refers explicitly to the Netherworld as Kutha: "Enter, my lady, that *Kutha* may rejoice over thee," says the gatekeeper to Ishtar when she is about to enter the Netherworld (Obv. 40).

[1] On this text see S. N. Kramer, "Inanna's Descent to the Nether World" Continued and Revised, *JCS* 5 (1951):1-17; Idem, Cuneiform Studies and the History of Literature: the Sumerian Sacred Marriage Texts, *PAPS* 107(1963):491-93, 510-16; A. Falkenstein, Der Sumerische und der Akkadische Mythos von Inannas Gang zur Unterwelt, *in* E. Graf (ed.), *Festschrift W. Caskel*, Leiden, 1968, 96-110; S. N. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite*, Bloomington, 1969, 107-121; T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, New Haven and London, 1976, 55-61. I wish to thank Thorkild Jacobsen and Jerrold Cooper for their comments on an earlier version of the manuscript. [See also below, n. 14]

[2] Ni 368 & CBS 9800; other manuscripts present some variation in the sequence and/or the list of names.

[3] A similar geographical orientation is also to be found in other Mesopotamian texts, see the discussion by C. Wilcke, Der aktuelle Bezug der Sammlung der sumerischen Tempelhymnen und ein Fragment eines Klageliedes, *ZA* 62(1972):39-42.

Before plotting the course of Inanna's voyage on a map, two more observations are in place. First, the cities listed are at an even distance, approximately, one from the other (leaving aside Akkad, for which no firm localization can be advanced): this would be consistent with the notion of a journey which requires interruptions at intermediary stations regularly spaced one from the other. The second remark is that when Inanna is finally released from the Netherworld, she returns to Uruk by the same road, except that only two stations are explicitly mentioned in the preserved portion of the text, one of them (Umma) probably taking the place of another city in the same vicinity (Zabalam) mentioned in the north-bound journey, while the other (Badtibira) remains the same in both portions of the trip.

We may now transfer our remarks onto a map,[4] indicating the course of the ancient rivers and canals, the names of the cities listed in Inanna's itinerary and, in parentheses, the most important cities omitted in the same itinerary:

---
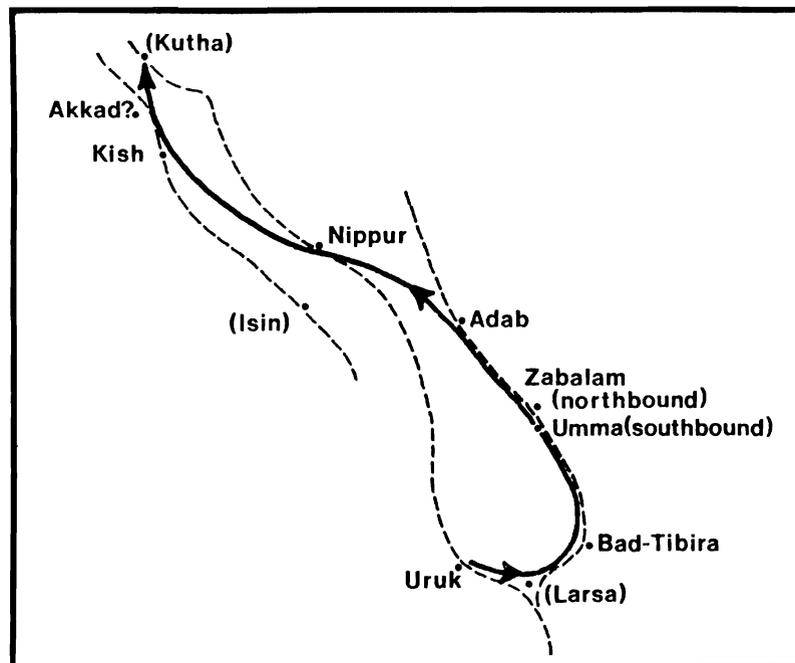
[4] Based on the surveys of Jacobsen and Adams, see T. Jacobsen, The Waters of Ur, *Iraq* 22(1960): 174-185, Pl. XXVIII = T. Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays,* Cambridge, 1970, 230-243; R. M. Adams, Survey of Ancient Water Courses and Settlements in Central Iraq, *Sumer* 14(1958): 101-3, figs. 1-6; Th. Jacobsen, A Survey of the Girsu (Telloh) Region, *Sumer* 25(1969):103-109; R. McC. Adams and H. J. Nissen, *The Uruk Countryside: The Natural Setting of Urban Societies,* Chicago and London, 1972, 2-3 and 42-46.

The initial detour to the East, in the direction of Badtibira and then up to Zabalam, may be explained on the basis of the special connection between Inanna and those cities. But it is also tempting to suppose that the choice of the Eastern instead of the Western branch of the Euphrates was due to the need of bypassing Isin, which was the main city on the direct northbound route from Uruk. If so (and the highly tentative nature of this hypothesis should be stressed) one may venture to suggest further that the text was composed geographically within the sphere of influence of Larsa, and chronologically at a time when Isin had begun to lose its political importance and territorial control, but was still in control of the main canal route between Uruk and Nippur.

2. Does the Myth Refer to the Cultic Renewal of a Statue?

A second line of reasoning which corroborates the argumentation advanced so far pertains to the nature of Inanna as she appears in the text. Following a suggestion of a former student of mine, Dr. Paul Gaebelein, I would like to see in certain portions of the text a reference to a *statue* of the goddess. The pertinent passages are two. First, the description of Inanna given by her messenger to the supreme gods in an effort to stir their compassion and interest in the miserable plight of the goddess acquires a much greater poignancy if it is taken to refer to an actual statue:

> "O Father Enlil, let not your daughter be put to death in the Netherworld,
> Let not your good metal be covered with the dust of the Netherworld,
> Let not your good lapis lazuli be broken up into the stone of the stoneworker,
> Let not your boxwood be cut up into the wood of the woodworker. . ."[5]

Second, the well-known sequence during which Inanna is disrobed could be conceived in a literal sense, as referring to a cultic setting, whereby a statue would in fact be disrobed and then dressed once again.[6] This would presume the performing of a ritual which would enact physically on a statue what the myth describes through the narrative.[7]

I do not intend to suggest here that the text, as we now have it, should be interpreted as a cultic libretto which would have accompanied the ritual action. The myth is essentially narrative, and the underlying plot cannot be understood simply in terms of an unfolding ritual. My interpretation would only presuppose that *some aspects* of the narrative were inspired by a ritual and can still be analyzed as such even though they were transposed

---

[5] Ll. 43-46, in the translation of Kramer, *Sacred Marriage Rite,* quoted, p. 108. Note, however, the different interpretation of this passage by Jacobsen, *Treasures,* quoted, p. 57, where an indicative, instead of an imperative, is implied: if Enlil does not let his silver, precious stones or hardwood be damaged, how could he let his own daughter Inanna be harmed?

[6] On the use of garments for divine statues see A. L. Oppenheim, The Golden Garments of the Gods, *JNES* 8 (1949), especially pp. 179f.; W. F. Leemans, *Ishtar of Lagaba and Her Dress,* Leiden, 1952, 19-24.

[7] On the possible connection between statues and another type of text, the hymns to deities, see W. W. Hallo, The Cultic Setting of Sumerian Poetry, *RAI* 17, Bruxelles, 1970, 119. For the performance dimension of ritual see T. Jacobsen, Religious Drama in Ancient Mesopotamia, *in* H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (eds.), *Unity and Diversity,* Baltimore and London, 1975, 65-97; for the role of statues in ritual see *ibid.,* pp. 71, 73.

within the framework of a true narrative myth. (The myth itself may in turn have been used as part of a festival,[8] but that of course is a different question.) The narrative myth as such is *not* to be understood as a liturgy *tout court*, and so some of its aspects appear to pose a problem for a simple cultic interpretation. For example, it is difficult to envisage exactly just what is meant by the fact that Inanna is said to "leave" the various sanctuaries which, in my interpretation, serve as stations on a processional way: was it one and the same statue touching down at the various stations and then setting off again, or were different statues joining the procession at each different sanctuary? And how about the return—was it also ceremonial, and if so how are we to account for the developments in the action which involve Inanna's entourage, especially Dumuzi? These problems may well remain insoluble from the viewpoint of a cultic interpretation, and may have to be explained only in terms of the myth. But even if the contribution of a cultic interpretation remains fragmentary, it seems nevertheless valid within given limitations and useful in throwing new light on certain aspects of the text.

Within these limitations, we may conjecture further on a possible *Sitz im Leben* for the assumed ritual. This may have been an annual renewal ceremony, which may have been a part of the regular, recurrent caring of the goddess, and might have originated in response to the breaking of a given statue, whether accidental or through enemy intervention.[9] A broken statue would explain the emphasis in the passage just quoted on the material components of the object: metal, stone and wood are reduced to raw materials once the unity of the anthropomorphic character has been lost. If the destruction of the statue was understood as the (temporary) dying of the deity, and if the dead deity was conceived as having gone to the Netherworld, then the journey to Kutha was a symbolic action through which one was retracing the steps of the dead goddess to her temporary location. There may have been, in other words, a ritual procession[10] during which the concrete counterpart of the dead goddess (i.e., the broken statue) was brought to Kutha, as if only there, where the dead goddess "really" was, could the broken statue be restored to its integrity—for to restore a broken divine statue is more than a simple act of craftsmanship, it is a religious act surrounded by

[8] Cf. H. Sauren, Besuchsfahrten der Götter in Sumer, *Or* NS 38(1969):232f.

[9] The almost complete lack in the archaeological finds of monumental divine statues is sometimes explained through the hypothesis of enemy plundering, see A. Spycket, *Les statues de culte dans les textes Mésopotamiens des origines à la Ire dynastie de Babylone*, Paris, 1968, 11 (the author does not consider our text in her documentation). A ritual text from Seleucid times speaks about the accidental breaking of a royal statue, *op. cit.*, p. 90. See also L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra, SANE* 1/3, Malibu, 1977, 32f., 1.133 with n. 36.

[10] The procession was a common institution of Babylonian religion as was the mythical account of divine journeys from one city to another, see among others B. Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien*, 1(1920): 293; 2(1925):63, 92, 101, 126, 169ff.; A. Salonen, Prozessionswagen der babylonischen Götter, *St. Or.* 13/2(1946):3; N. Schneider, Götterschiffe im Ur III-Reich, *St. Or.* 13/5(1946):7, 10ff.; H. Sauren, Besuchsfahrten des Götter in Sumer, *Or* NS 38(1969):214-36; A. Sjöberg, Götterreisen, *RLA* III/6-7(1969): 480-82; Hallo, Cultic Setting, quoted, p. 120; D. Reisman, Ninurta's Journey to Eridu, *JCS* 24(1971):3-10; A. J. Ferrara, *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nippur, Studia Pohl* SM2, Rome, 1973; B. Alster, On the Interpretation of the Sumerian Myth "Inanna and Enki," *ZA* 64(1975):20-34, especially 28f.; Jacobsen, Religious Drama, quoted, p. 67.

religious symbolism.[11] The symbolism which would characterize this particular ceremony is quite complex and the requirements made on the human community (a long processional journey) rather demanding. But even a trip across the land of Sumer[12] simply to perform the ritual renewal of a statue may not seem exaggerate, particularly if one considers two other aspects of the situation. On the one hand, the politics of territorial expansion pursued by the Larsa kings (if I am correct in dating the text to just this time) would welcome any opportunity to assert the unity of the territories then being brought under their control – and a procession arching its way around Isin from south to north would serve very well this purpose. On the other hand, the use of divine statues seems to have become more common precisely with the Old Babylonian period,[13] which may imply that at that time the role of the statue in the cult was still being defined, thus leaving ample room for creative innovation and experimentation, even of a type which was not going to be taken up and continued in the later periods of Mesopotamian religion.[14]

[11] Note in this connection the suggestion by Y. Rosengarten, Au sujet d'un théâtre religieux sumérien, *RHR* 174(1968):122, that the lamentation over the destruction of Ur was part of a liturgy commemorating the destruction of the city and possibly the return to it of its main goddess, Ningal; but cf. also Hallo, Cultic Setting, quoted, p. 119.

[12] Long journeys are not unusual for divine processions, cf. Sauren, Besuchsfahrten, quoted, p. 234.

[13] See Spycket, *Statues de culte,* quoted, p. 99.

[14] A recent book about the myth is S. B. Perera, *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women,* "Studies in Jungian Psychology, 6," Toronto: Inner City Books, 1981. Written from the viewpoint of Jungian psychology, rather than Assyriology, it offers little in the way of an exegesis to the myth; it is, however, interesting as a committed re-reading of an ancient text in the light of contemporary concerns—to the point of establishing a quasi-religious empathy with the protagonists of the myth. Nothing in the book has a direct bearing on the interpretation proposed in this article.

Another recent non-Assyriological book deals at some length with the Descent of Inanna—W. I. Thompson, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light: Mythology, Sexuality and the Origins of Culture,* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981, pp. 172-181. Besides a psychological interpretation similar to that proposed by Perera ("descent into the subconscious"), there is special emphasis on an astral interpretation based on the movements of Venus and Mercury (= Enki, p. 174) around the Winter Solstice. This, too, however, has no bearing on the interpretation proposed in my article.

In a paper entitled "Observations on a Passage in 'Inanna's Descent' " presented at the 29th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale held in London in July 1982 while this article was in press, A. George has suggested a similar interpretation of ll. 43-46 as referring to a statue.

Monographic Journals of the Near East

General Editor: Giorgio Buccellati

o~Mesopotamian Studies

Editor: Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, Los Angeles
Associate Editor: Olivier Rouault, Paris
Assistant Editor: William Shelby, Los Angeles

Advisory Board:

Jean Bottéro, Paris
Ignace J. Gelb, Chicago
Giorgio Gullini, Turin
Thorkild Jacobsen, Harvard
Maurits Van Loon, Amsterdam

The Descent of Inanna as a Ritual Journey to Kutha?

by

Giorgio Buccellati

A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities

by

Wolfgang Heimpel

SYRO-MESOPOTAMIAN STUDIES

A journal devoted to the study of the civilizations of ancient Iraq and Syria from late prehistory to the first millennium B.C. —providing an outlet for the publication of primary sources and a forum for the archaeological, historical and linguistic analysis of pertinent phenomena.

MONOGRAPHIC JOURNALS OF THE NEAR EAST

MJNE is a system of journals on the Near East with each journal devoted to a specialized study area, and each issue consisting normally of a single article. Current journals in the system are *Afroasiatic Linguistics, Assur, Computer Aided Research in Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Occasional Papers on the Near East,* and *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies.*

GENERAL SUBSCRIPTION. For a prepayment of $23.00 the subscriber selects random issues from within the entire system as desired, up to a total of 200 pages. (A plate counts as two pages.) The subscriber also receives periodic lists of abstracts in card format to help in selection of the issues. It is also possible to enter a "reservation" for any journal within the system whereby issues of a given journal are sent on approval immediately upon publication (and may be returned for credit within two weeks of receipt).

LIBRARY SUBSCRIPTION. A prepayment of $23.00 for each journal in the system secures all issues of a single volume as soon as they are published. This subscription schedule does not allow the selection of random issues. Library subscriptions are available to both institutions and individual customers.

Individual issues are numbered *sequentially* within each volume. Each issue has its own pagination. A volume is closed when a total of about 200 pages is reached.

A *title page* and a *table of contents* listing all issues within each volume are sent on a library subscription at the close of a volume.

Journal fascicles are not necessarily published at regular calendar intervals. A volume, however, is generally completed within one year.

Back volumes are available for $27.00 per volume.

Please inquire from the publisher for trade and student discounts.

Order from: UNDENA PUBLICATIONS, P. O. Box 97, Malibu, CA 90265, USA

PAYMENT POLICIES. Payment must accompany orders from individual customers. Libraries and booksellers with established credit need not prepay. In every case there will be a charge for handling and postage in the amount of $1.40 for the first title or subscription, and $.40 for each additional title or subscription. A 6% sales tax must be added to California orders. Payment for foreign orders may be made by international money orders or drafts drawn on a bank in the United States. Checks or money orders in foreign currency will not be accepted. Prices listed are subject to change without notice.

THE DESCENT OF INANNA AS A RITUAL JOURNEY TO KUTHA?

by

Giorgio Buccellati

A CATALOG OF NEAR EASTERN VENUS DEITIES

by

Wolfgang Heimpel

Two complementary articles dealing with the Sumerian tale of Inanna's descent to the netherworld, with a survey of Near Eastern Venus deities. Buccellati proposes that the Inanna of the story was not only a divine person, but was, in addition, a statue on a ritual journey from southern to northern Babylonia (Kutha). Heimpel rediscovers that she was also, in addition to these two aspects, the planet Venus. One may wonder about this seemingly illogical concept, but the conclusion appears to be inescapable—that the Sumerians combined all three aspects in their belief about the same deity in the same tale.

Table of Contents