

Inana's descent to the nether world

also known as “The Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld”

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Entry tags: Divine powers, Divine functions, Funerary practices, Death conceptions, Mesopotamian Religions, Ancient Western Asia, Religious Group, Text, Sumerian Text, Ancient Mesopotamian Text, Cosmology, Ritual text, Excavated text, Cuneiform tablet, Cosmic domains, Language Isolates, Language

"Inana's descent to the nether world" is a Sumerian literary composition focused on describing this goddess' plan to conquer the realm of the dead, ruled by her divine sister, Ereškigal, as well as the results of such attack. To reconstruct these 412 lines of composition, modern scholars have used more than fifty cuneiform fragments and tablets, from different space-temporal contexts. Though most of the surviving copies, identified at Ur and Nippur, are dated to the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE, the origins of this story appear rooted in the preceding millennium. The composition can be divided into five main sections: a) Inana's decision and preparations for the journey and the consequent arrival at the first gate of the Netherworld (lines 1-73); b) the goddess' interaction with Neti, the guardian of the Netherworld, and her subsequent passage through its seven gates (lines 74-163); c) the confrontation between Inana and Ereškigal and her captivity (lines 164-172); d) the process for rescuing Inana and the attempts to find her a substitute (lines 173-367); e) the imprisonment of Dumuzi, Inana's traditional divine lover, and the ultimate decision of having his sister, Geštinanna, taking turns with him in the Netherworld as Inana's substitutes. Sladek (1974:51) identified how this last section integrated an original independent story, focused on Dumuzi's death and known traditionally as “Dumuzi's Dream”, which appears in circa seventy tablets. This composition has a profound literary richness, dealing with several different themes, such as the limits and rules of cosmic domains; limits to divine powers; conceptions on death and funerary practices; and of course, the nature and roles of goddess Inana. Despite the deep parallelisms with the storyline of the Akkadian composition known as “Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld”, a closer look allows to observe a certain autonomy between both texts, which is visible in the goals, tone, and literary mechanisms of each one. For instance, it should be stressed how the Sumerian composition is more focused on Inana's actions and individual consequences, while the Akkadian text boosts this "personal" dimension into a cosmic one. In fact, by describing how Ištar's imprisonment impacted the fertility on both heavenly and earthly domains, the tone of the Akkadian text is much more intense (Katz 2003:256-258; Almeida 2015: 268-270). Accordingly, each introductory section expresses a thematic shift, which is deepened as the events are unfolded in the following segments.



Date Range: 1900 BCE - 1600 BCE

Region: Mesopotamia2

Region tags: Middle East, Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia

Status of Readership:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists

Sources and Corpora

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: William Sladek. 1974. Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld. PhD diss. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University.
- Source 2: Dina Katz. 2003. The image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources. Bethesda: CDL Press.
- Source 3: Isabel Gomes de Almeida. 2015. A construção da figura de Inanna/Ištar na Mesopotâmia: IV-II milénios a.C.

Notes: For Almeida (2015) see: <http://hdl.handle.net/10362/16014>

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 2 URL: <https://collections.peabody.yale.edu/search/Record/YPM-BC-018686>
- Source 2 Description: Inanna's Descent in Old Babylonian tablet (Yale Peabody Museum)
- Source 3 URL: <https://cdli.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/artifacts/345344>
- Source 3 Description: Inanna's Descent in Old Babylonian tablet (Penn Museum)

Online Corpora

Relevant online Primary Textual Corpora (original languages and/or translations)

- Source 1 URL: <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.4.1#>
- Source 1 Description: ETCSL translation (and transliteration) of Inana's descent to the netherworld (1.4.1)
- Source 2 URL: <https://cdli.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/artifacts/composites-score/Q000343>
- Source 2 Description: CDLI Literary 000343 (Inanna's Descent) composite

General Variables

Materiality

Methods of Composition

- Incised or Inscribed



Method of inscription

- Other [specify]: Stylus

Medium upon which the text is written/incised

- Clay



Clay object

- Clay tablet

- ↳ Type of clay
 - Type of clay: I don't know

Was the material modified before the writing or incising process?

- Physical preparation

Was the text modified before the writing or incising process?

- Physical preparation

Location

Is the text stored in a specific location?

[Note at which point in time, for reference, if known; select all that apply]

- Yes

Notes: The many copies were probably part of several ancient archives/libraries' collections.

- ↳ Tomb
 - I don't know

- ↳ Cemetery
 - I don't know

- ↳ Temple
 - Yes

- ↳ Shrine
 - I don't know

- ↳ Altar
 - I don't know

- ↳ Devotional marker
 - I don't know

- ↳ Cenotaph
 - I don't know

- ↳ Church
 - No
- ↳ Mosque
 - No
- ↳ Synagogue
 - No
- ↳ Triumphal Arch
 - No
- ↳ Monument
 - No
- ↳ Mass Gathering Point
 - I don't know
- ↳ Cave(s)
 - I don't know
- ↳ Hilltops
 - I don't know
- ↳ Other natural sanctuaries
 - I don't know
- ↳ Boundary markers or lines
 - I don't know
- ↳ Domestic contexts
 - I don't know
- ↳ Library/archive
 - Yes

↳ Specify
— Specify: N/A

Production & Intended Audience

Production

Is the production of the text funded by the polity?

— Field doesn't know

Is the text considered official religious scripture?

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There are no data that allow us to speak of a definite religious canon ("official religious scripture") for the religious system of ancient Mesopotamia.

Written in distinctly religious/sacred language?

— No

Intended Audience

What is the estimated number of people considered to be the audience of the text

This should be the total number of people who would serve as the intended audience for the text.

— Field doesn't know

Does the Religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members?

— No

Are there clear reformist movements?

(Reformism, as in not proselytizing to potential new conservative, but "conversion" - or rather, reform - to the "correct interpretation"?)

— No

Is the text in question employed in ritual practice?

— I don't know

Notes: As far as I know, it was not used in any specific ritual. However, religious ritual practices in ancient Mesopotamia were not always specified in written/iconographic data.

Is there material significance to the text?

– No

Context and Content of the Text (Beliefs and Practices)

Context

Is the text itself accompanied by art?

– No

Notes: No, but there are some iconographic representations that might evoke aspects of the goddess Inana and her journey to the Netherworld, like the one depicted in the Burney Relief (The British Museum)

Are there multiple versions of the text?

– Yes

↳ Are multiple versions viewed as proper?

– Yes

↳ If multiple versions are proper, is there a differentiation among versions by any means?

– Yes

↳ Age of extant version of text?

– Yes

↳ Content of text?

– Yes

↳ Ritual purpose of text?

– Field doesn't know

↳ Is there debate about which version is proper?

– No

Is the text part of a collection of texts?

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There are other narratives about Dumuzi's death and Inana's reaction that can be considered as a specific cycle. The ETCSL editors combined these narratives into the same category: "Inana and Dumuzi"

If the text is not explicitly scripture, is it part of another important literary tradition?

— Yes

↳ Cultural with religious implications?

— Yes

↳ Behavioral literature?

— Yes

Notes: It presents the expected behaviors in the face of the death of someone close/loved.

↳ Other

— Other [specify]: No

Content

Is the text - or does the text include - a ritual list, manual, bibliography, index, or vocabulary?
(Select all that apply)

— Other [specify]: No

Are there lineages or a single lineage established by the text?

— No

Does the text express a formal legal code?

— No

Formulating a specifically religious calendar?

— Field doesn't know

Notes: Since this narrative could also explain the disappearance of planet Venus from the firmament during a certain period, and since Inana was considered to be "the morning and evening star", it can be possible that it was linked to specific moments related to the astral nature of the goddess.

Beliefs

Is a spirit-body distinction present in the text?

— I don't know

Is belief in an afterlife indicated in the text?

— Yes

Notes: A certain continuity is implied regarding the Netherworld after physical death. However, a complete existence in the afterlife is not explicit.

↳ Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group?

– Yes

↳ Afterlife in specified realm of space beyond this world?

– Yes

↳ Afterlife in vaguely defined "above" space?

– No

↳ Afterlife in vaguely defined "below" space?

– Yes

Notes: The realm of the dead, the netherworld, is repeatedly defined as being 'below' throughout the narrative.

↳ Afterlife in "other" space?

– Yes

↳ Is the temporality of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group?

– No

↳ Is there debate in the interpretation of the language of the afterlife?

– Yes

↳ What are the historically mainstream positions in the debate?

–Specify: There are debates on the entrance to the netherworld.

↳ What are the historically minority positions?

–Specify: see above

Is belief in reincarnation in this world specified in the text?

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses dictated in the text?

– Yes

↳ Cremation?

– No

↳ Mummification?

– No

↳ Interment?

– Yes

Notes: Burial is implicit in Inanna's temporary imprisonment/death in the netherworld, which is systematically described as "below". Archaeological evidence confirms how interment was the common practice in Mesopotamia, throughout time.

↳ Cannibalism?

– No

↳ Exposure to elements (e.g. air drying)?

– No

↳ Feeding to animals?

– No

↳ Secondary burial?

– No

↳ Re-treatment of corpse?

– No

↳ Are there specific designations for parts of corpses?

– No

↳ Could parts of corpses become transformed into partial bodily relics?

– No

↳ Other intensive (in terms of time or resources expended) treatment of corpse?

– No

Does the text indicate if co-sacrifices should be present in burials?

– No

Does the text specify grave goods for burial?

– No

Are formal burials present in the text?

– No

Are there practices that have funerary associations presented in the text?

– Yes

↳ Do these practices take place at tombs/burial sites?

– Yes

Notes: The narrative describes the behavior that the bereaved should manifest when learning about the death of someone close/loved, in general. Hence, one can infer that these behaviors might have also occurred during the accompaniment of the body to the burial and/or during the burial.

↳ Do these practices take place for the veneration OR worship of the dead?

– Yes

↳ For the worship of a deceased person(s)?

– No

↳ For the worship of a deified human?

– No

↳ For the worship of a deceased hero?

– No

↳ For the veneration of a deceased person(s)?

– Yes

↳ For the veneration of a deified human?

– No

↳ For the veneration of a deceased hero?

– No

Are supernatural beings present in the text?

– Yes

↳ A supreme high-god is present

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god is anthropomorphic or described in anthropomorphic terms

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god is a sky deity

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god is fused with the monarch (king=high god)

– No

↳ The monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god

– No

↳ The supreme high god is a kin relation to elites

– No

↳ The supreme high god has another type of loyalty-connection to elites

– No

↳ The supreme high god is unquestionably good

– No

Notes: Enlil refuses to help rescue Inana from the Netherworld, being described as enraged by her actions

↳ Other features of the supreme high god

–Specify: Enraged

↳ The supreme high god has knowledge of this world

– No

Notes: Enlil did not know that Inana had traveled to the Netherworld, leaving her earthly cities as stated in the initial lines of the narrative. Enlil was only informed after Inanna was imprisoned, by Ninšubur, Inana's minister.

↳ Has deliberate causal efficacy in the world

– Yes

↳ Can reward

– Yes

↳ Can punish

– Yes

↳ Indirect causal efficacy in the world

– Yes

↳ Exhibits negative emotion

– Yes

↳ Possesses Hunger?

– No

Notes: Although divine banquets are commonly referred to in Sumerian narratives, in this one, Enlil (or any other divine entity) is not presiding over or attending a banquet.

↳ Can be hurt?

– Yes

Notes: Yes, in terms of being emotionally hurt, as Enlil is enraged by Inana's journey.

↳ Can be imprisoned?

– No

↳ Is it permissible to worship supernatural being other than the high god?

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god possesses/exhibits some other feature

–Specify: Not in this narrative.

- ↳ Does the text make communication with supreme high-god possible?
 - No

Previously human spirits are present

- No

Does the text attest to a pantheon of supernatural beings?

- Yes

- ↳ Organized by kinship based on a family model?
 - Yes

- ↳ Organized hierarchically?
 - Yes

- ↳ Power of beings is domain specific?
 - Yes

Notes: Sometimes, there are some overlaps and shared power over a specific domain

- ↳ Other organization of pantheon?
 - Specify: Yes. The pantheon was also organized by cosmic functions and roles of deities.

Are mixed human-divine beings present according to the text?

- No

Is there a supernatural being that is physically present in the/as a result of the text?

- I don't know

Are other categories of beings present?

- Mysterious?

Does the text guide divination practices?

- Field doesn't know

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present in the text?

– Yes

↳ There is supernatural monitoring of prosocial norm adherence in particular

– Yes

↳ Do expectations of ritual offerings play a role in supernatural monitoring?

– Yes

↳ Libations?

– No

↳ Food?

– No

↳ Animal sacrifice?

– No

↳ Human sacrifice?

– No

↳ Sacred objects?

– No

↳ Daily life objects?

– Yes

Notes: Beating the drum while mourning the deceased goddess.

↳ Other?

– Specify: Dressing in filthy clothes, mourning and self-mutilation, while grieving for the deceased goddess

↳ Supernatural being care about taboos

– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of coreligionists

– No

Notes: Humans are not present in the narrative.

↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other religions
– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other polities
– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about sex
– No

Notes: Sex is not displayed in the composition.

↳ Supernatural beings care about lying
– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about honouring oaths
– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about laziness
– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about sorcery
– Yes

Notes: Enki creates a being to rescue Inana, recurring to his magical knowledge/power

↳ Supernatural beings care about non-lethal fighting
– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about shirking risk
– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about disrespecting elders
– Yes

Notes: Not explicitly, but Inana's actions anger Enli, Nanna, who can be seen as older (they refer to her as "my daughter").

↳ Supernatural beings care about gossiping

– I don't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about property crimes

– No

Notes: Not a motif in this composition

↳ Supernatural beings care about proper ritual observance

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about performance of rituals

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about conversion of non-religionists

– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about economic fairness

– No

Notes: Not present in this narrative

↳ Supernatural beings care about personal hygiene

– Yes

Notes: In the sense that Inana's preparation before the journey shows care with her appearance.

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect the maintenance of the place?

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about other

– Specify: Inana cares for those who are faithful to her, such as Ninšubur, Šara and Lulal. And despite condemning Dumuzi to the netherworld, at the end of the narrative she also worries about his fate.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment in the text?

– No

Notes: The punishment is to other supernatural beings.

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards in the text?

– Yes

↳ Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known?

– Yes

↳ Done only by high god

– No

↳ Done by many supernatural beings

– Yes

↳ Done through impersonal cause-effect principle

– No

↳ Done to enforce religious ritual-devotional adherence

– No

↳ Done to enforce group norms?

– No

Notes: But the reward is due to the observance of the expected mourning rituals.

↳ Done to inhibit selfishness?

– No

↳ Done randomly

– No

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife?

– No

Notes: Inana's rewards Ninšubur, Šara and Lulal who are also divine beings.

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime?

– No

Notes: see above

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present in the text?

– No

Is an eschatology present in the text?

– No

Norms & Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the text?

– Yes

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious text?

– No

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the text?

– Yes

↳ Honesty/trustworthiness/integrity
– Yes

↳ Courage (in battle)
– No

↳ Courage (generic)
– Yes

↳ Compassion/empathy/kindness/benevolence
– Yes

↳ Mercy/forgiveness/tolerance
– Yes

↳ Generosity/charity
– No

↳ Selflessness/selfless giving
– Yes

↳ Righteousness/moral rectitude

– Yes

↳ Ritual purity/ritual adherence/abstention from sources of impurity

– Yes

↳ Respectfulness/courtesy

– Yes

↳ Familial obedience/filial piety

– Yes

↳ Fidelity/loyalty

– Yes

↳ Cooperation

– Yes

↳ Independence/creativity/freedom

– Yes

↳ Moderation/frugality

– Yes

↳ Forbearance/fortitude/patience

– No

↳ Diligence/self-discipline/excellence

– Yes

↳ Assertiveness/decisiveness/confidence/initiative

– Yes

↳ Strength (physical)

– No

↳ Power/status/nobility

– Yes

↳ Humility/modesty

– Yes

↳ Contentment/serenity/equanimity

– No

↳ Joyfulness/enthusiasm/cheerfulness

– Yes

↳ Optimism/hope

– Yes

↳ Gratitude/thankfulness

– Yes

↳ Reverence/awe/wonder

– Yes

↳ Faith/belief/trust/devotion

– Yes

↳ Wisdom/understanding

– Yes

↳ Discernment/intelligence

– Yes

↳ Beauty/attractiveness

– Yes

↳ Cleanliness (physical)/orderliness

– Yes

↳ Other important virtues

– Yes

Advocacy of Practices

Does the text require celibacy (full sexual abstinence)?

– No

Does the text require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence)?

– No

Does the text require castration?

– No

Does the text require fasting?

– No

Does the text require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods)?

– No

Does the text require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations?

– No

Does the text require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of adults?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of children?

– No

Does the text require self-sacrifice (suicide)?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of property/valuable items?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of time (e.g. attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.)?

– I don't know

Does the text require physical risk taking?

– No

Does the text require accepting ethical precepts?

– No

Does the text require marginalization by out-group members?

– No

Does the text require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household)?

– No

Does the text require participation in large-scale rituals?

– No

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present as indicated in the text?

– I don't know

Does the text employ fictive kinship terminology?

– No

Does the text include elements that are intended to be entertaining?

– Yes

↳ Drama?

– Yes

↳ Comedy?

– Field doesn't know

Notes: In my opinion, yes. But not sure the field support this.

↳ Tragedy?

– Yes

- ↳ Epic entertainment?
 - Yes

Does the text specify sacrifices, offerings, and maintenance of a sacred space?

– Yes

- ↳ Are sacrifices specified by the text?
 - No

- ↳ Are there self-sacrifices specified by the text?
 - Yes

- ↳ Suicide?
 - No

- ↳ Bloodletting?
 - No

- ↳ Mutilation?
 - Yes

- ↳ Is self-sacrifice common and/or expected of elites?
 - I don't know

- ↳ Are there material offerings present?
 - No

- ↳ Is attendance to worship/sacrifice mandatory?
 - No

Notes: But there are consequences to those who don't abide.

- ↳ Is the maintenance of the place regulated by the text?
 - No

Institutions & Production Environment of Text

Society & Institutions

Society of religious group that produced the text is best characterized as:

– Other

Are there specific elements of society that have controlled the reproduction of the text?

– Other

Are there specific elements of society involved with the destruction of the text?

– Other

Welfare

Does the text specify institutionalized famine relief?

– No

Does the text specify institutionalized poverty relief?

– No

Does the text specify institutionalized care for elderly & infirm?

– No

Other forms of welfare?

– No

Education

Are there formal educational institutions available for teaching the text?

– Yes

Does the text make provisions for non-religious education?

– No

Does the text restrict education to religious professionals?

– No

Does the text restrict education among religious professionals?

– No

Is education gendered according to the text?

— No

Is education gendered with respect to this text and larger textual tradition?

— Field doesn't know

Does the text specify teaching relationships or ratios? (i.e.: 1:20; 1:1)

— No

Are there specific relationships to teachers that are advocated by the text?

— No

Are there worldly rewards/benefits to education according to the text specified by the text itself?

— No

Bureaucracy

Is bureaucracy regulated by this text?

— No

Public Works

Does the text detail interaction with public works?

— No

Taxation

Does the text specify forms of taxation?

— No

Warfare

Does the text mention warfare?

— No

Food Production

Does the text mentioned food production/disbursement?

– No

Bibliography

General References

Reference: Inana's descent to the nether world, Sladek, William. "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld". PhD Dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University , 1974.

Reference: Inana's descent to the nether world, Katz, Dina. The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources. Bethesda: CDL Press, 2003.

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