

The Moon Watching Over the Sun and Venus: Revisiting the Attributes and Functions of Nanna/Sîn in Mesopotamia

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Moonlight drowns out all but the brightest stars
J. R. R. Tolkien

Introduction

This paper intends to explore the role of the patron god of Ur, Nanna/Sîn,² in the Mesopotamian religious system, by focusing on the relation between his numinous features and those of his divine progeny. Inanna/Ištar and Utu/Šamaš, two of the most influent deities in the “land between the rivers,” shared an astral identity with their divine father, which, in turn, led to multiple associations between them. These were visible not only in their attributes and functions, but also in iconographic depictions.³ Since family ties were a crucial devise for identity and for legitimation in ancient Mesopotamia, we believe there is a profound symbolic meaning on the construction of this triad, where the fatherly role of the Moon allowed for the rise to prominence of its offspring. Thus, it is our goal to examine the nature of their divine kinship, particularly on what concerns the third millennium BCE literary accounts, concentrating our attention in two main symbolic vectors: the luminosity and the movement of this divine cluster.

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2. Given the profound and ancient syncretism between the Sumerian and the Semitic divine figures, which makes it impossible to isolate the role of each background on the construction of Mesopotamian deities, we prefer to use the deities’ combined names.

3. Glyptic representations insist on displaying their three emblems closely together. Though it is not our purpose to analyse Mesopotamian visual arts in this paper, we suggest that this iconographic association helped to stress, among other aspects, the preponderance of family identity.



Preliminary Remarks

Addressing any aspect of the history of the Mesopotamian religious system is no easy task. Oppenheim's argumentation on the nature of the sources available and on the conceptual barriers which constrain the understanding of this complex, and rather distant religion, still echoes in one's mind (1976: 171–183). As pointed out by many, though extremely negative and somewhat dated, Oppenheim's warnings should be kept in mind, given the necessary caution one must have when examining such a matter. Veldhuis (2004: 15–16), for instance, stressed how the personal/individual religious manifestations constitute a more tangible expression of one's religion, when compared with the elaborations of the religious elite of the time. As we know, the written data concerning Mesopotamian personal religion⁴ is rather fragmentary, which prevents a balanced examination between the official and the private/individual spheres. On the other hand, Seymor (2011: 787) underlines the problems regarding the complexity of the written sources in a wide time and space spectrum of analysis, given their differences regarding dating, place of origin, plus the variances on the contents. Though these discrepancies are rich if one is to develop a comparative approach about a confined period or region, they constitute a deep barrier to achieve a general picture of the Mesopotamian religious thought. On another level, there are two central and entangled idiosyncrasies of the Mesopotamian religious system that any researcher should be alerted to: its rather profound theocentric nature, and its cumulative character. These features should always be taken into account when applying the History of Religions theoretical and methodological framework to the Mesopotamian case. Hence, some preliminary remarks on how we shaped our approach to this subject are needed.

The data pertaining to the inhabitants of the “land between the rivers” clearly show they were the very definition of *homo religiosus*.⁵ In fact, since the beginning of this civilization and throughout time, one can say that the Mesopotamians experienced the presence of a numinous element, whose fascinating but simultaneously daunting nature required a reaction. This “experience of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a confrontation with a ‘Wholly Other’ outside of normal experience and indescribable in its terms” (Jacobsen 1976: 3) was, thus, the trigger for the creation of a mythical discourse expressed both in ritual practices and in oral/written narratives. Hence, Mesopotamians fashioned a system of knowledge, which helped them to appease their anxieties regarding the *numen*'s presence but also regarding the apprehensions of their own existence. Through a “controlled and calculated imagination” (Bottéro 1998: 55) answers to their multiple doubts were provided, by the edification of a “philosophy in images” (Bottéro 2004: 55).

This system of knowledge was constructed on the premise that the natural world was impregnated by the presence of divine figures, whose existence was indisputable, and who played central roles on the phenomenological cause-effect processes. Naturally, the understanding of divine will and actions became central to the Mesopotamian *homo religiosus*, urging the elaborations on the nature, relations, behaviours, attributes, and any other aspect which concerned deities.

4. We are applying this expression in a broader sense, without any disregard for the other categories pertaining to a more private religious behavior, such as “individual,” or “familiar.”

5. On the theoretical framework followed here, see Dumézil 1958; Otto 1966; Bouillard 1974; Eliade 1987, 1989; and Ries 1992.



Considering the transcendental character of the divine figures, which made them unintelligible, the Mesopotamians were forced to recur to their own reality, to formulate their mythical discourses. The concrete aspects were, subsequently, deeply transformed, through exercises which allowed the metamorphosis of tangible into symbolic. However, the reality and the experiences of the individuals and/or the community were, somehow, reflected in these metaphorical significances. Therefore, any mythical discourse must be understood as an account with its own logic and reason, “presenting a form of truth” (Hatab 1990: 10) deeply connected with the historical context it was produced in. Naturally, as scholars, we should question the processes undertaken to transpose the concrete aspects into the religious discourse, through a scrupulous hermeneutical process. Yet, our point is we should never address a religious system (and its discourses) as products independent of their historical processes. By doing so, and by understanding myths as elaborations *of* and *for* a given context, the danger of simplifications, another aspect Oppenheim alerted to, will surely decrease.

Thus it is imperative to integrate the Mesopotamian mythic production in its historical context, which is the goal of any study within the History of Religions field. But to do so, we should recall the cumulative nature of the religious system developed in the “land between the rivers.” The fact is we are dealing with a millenarian world, where several cultural backgrounds and religious experiences circulated, originating systematic syncretic processes.⁶ Moreover, the theocentric (and even centrifugal⁷) nature of the Mesopotamian thought, makes it impossible to discard any historic action from the religious sphere. As stressed by Lenzi (2007: 126) the economic, the political, the cultural, and the social events had strong implications on Mesopotamian religion, which led to complex and continuous accumulations. Old and new visions were, thus, embraced, by recurring to the devise of accommodation shaping a multi-layered construct, where “the sense of tradition brings legitimacy” (Odisho 2004: 3). Therefore, as in so many other contexts, change and tradition were encompassed by the Mesopotamians, so that a sense of identity and order was maintained.⁸

Given the above, we agree with Seymour’s perspective (2011: 787) that it is wiser to develop partial studies, in order to better identify and interpret the several layers of this religion. Moreover, it is our understanding that when it comes to the field of religions, or any cultural expression for that matter, an historical analysis should privilege a *longue durée* methodological approach. As a result, we believe the identification of changes within continuity and of gradations within layers can become perceptible.

6. Besides the crucial contributors of Sumerian and Semites, who were considered by Bottéro and Kramer (1989: 3) as a kind of founding fathers of this civilization, other protagonists were important in the edification of this religious building, such as the Gutians, who had a strong presence in the south, during the second half of the third millennium BCE, or the Hittites, who were central players in the Near and Middle East, during the second millennium BCE. The agency of these and other actors, combined with the Semitic and Sumerian ones, contributed for the extreme dynamism of the Mesopotamian religious system.

7. Bottéro 1998: 30.

8. Naturally, the postulates of Erik Hobsbawm on the “invention of tradition” can and should be apply to this line of thought. On this matter, see the different contributions in Hobsbawm, and Ranger 1983.

Hence, the reflections presented in this paper, regarding the relation between the symbolic meanings of the Mesopotamian divine Moon, Sun, and Venus, were guided by the following assumptions: a) mythic thought always reports to reality; b) mythological discourses are created in deep relation to its historical context; c) Mesopotamian religious system, due to its historical processes, was cumulative; d) Mesopotamian deities were the product of multiple and systematic processes of syncretism; e) changes and continuities were embraced by Mesopotamians in the edification of traditions; and finally, f) the long duration analysis is the methodological approach which better suits our present goals.

Moon, Sun, and Venus: A Celestial Divine Triad

Throughout time, when looking at the sky, *homo religiosus* quickly perceived the influence and importance of three main celestial bodies in their daily life: the Moon, the Sun, and the planet/star Venus. These entities, easily observed by the naked eye, acquired a profound role within most religious systems,⁹ the Mesopotamian one being no exception. By the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates, these celestial bodies were understood as a triad, forming a household, where Nanna/Sîn, the Moon god, was the father of the twins Utu/Samaš, the Sun god, and Inanna/Ištar, the “morning/evening star.” Though the three deities were worshiped since the dawn of Mesopotamian history, and they all occupied a relevant position within the pantheon, diachronically, when one focus on the mythological narratives, the Moon god seems to be overshadowed by his progeny. Inanna/Ištar was probably one of the main protagonists of Mesopotamian literature, assuring remarkable roles, no matter what, no matter when. As for Utu/Samaš, though his cult only became well established at the beginning of the second millennium BCE, he was always granted a decisive role, whether as the epitome of justice or as the radiant light who brought prosperity. Despite the seemingly moderated role of Nanna/Sîn, when compared to those of this progeny, the affiliation between them endured. It is our belief that the numinous character of Nanna/Sîn, as envisioned by the Mesopotamian *homo religiosus*, made this possible.

To explore this hypothesis, we should start out by asking ourselves one crucial question: why did the Mesopotamians feel the need to bind these deities by family ties? A closer look into the third millennium BCE mythical narratives can help to pinpoint the motives for this kinship, given that it seems it was sometime during this long period that those ties were consolidated. On one hand, the hymns attributed to Enheduanna¹⁰ identify Inanna/Ištar as offspring of Nanna/Sîn,¹¹ discarding other divine fatherly figures of the powerful patron goddess of Uruk (such as her Urukian companion An/Anu, or even her friendly rival Enki/Ea¹²). On the other hand, the

9. For instance, in the Maya religious system, the Sun and the Moon were regarded as divine lovers, whereas Venus and the Sun were divine brothers. It is important to note that these deities' gender identity changed from one religious context to another. For an introduction to the Maya religious manifestations, see Thompson 1970.

10. On the discussion regarding Enheduanna's authorship, see Civil 1980.

11. “Impetuous wild cow, great daughter of Suen” (ETCSL 4.07.2), “the great daughter of Suen, exalted among the Great Princes” (ETCSL 4.07.2).

12. On the local or precedent traditions, which ascribed An/Anu or Enki/Ea as fathers of the goddess, see Westenholz 1998 and Almeida 2015.

Third Dynasty of Ur literary accounts establish a close connection between the Moon and the Sun gods.¹³ Given the political context in which the above-mentioned narratives were produced, it is possible to identify political motivations in the way the family ties of the triad were established.

As it is well known, in Mesopotamia, kingship was a sacred mission, whereas deities delegated the right to rule the land on the royal *persona*. Despite being considered human,¹⁴ a subjective affiliation between the Mesopotamian monarch and the patron god or goddess of the dynasty was fashioned. In this sense, each ruling power felt the need to crystalize the symbolic genealogical bounds with the divine figures, to legitimate their city's rise to prominence. That was the case of the Akkadian Dynasty and of the Third Dynasty of Ur.

During the Akkadian unification, it seems that Ištar-Annunītum¹⁵ was envisioned as the patron goddess of the Akkadian rulers. Given the importance of Sumerian deities, at that time, it was important to straighten the ties between the Akkadian ruling family and the gods and goddesses of Sumer. Hence, it seems the Akkadian rulers took advantage of the profound syncretism between the Semitic Ištar and the Sumerian Inanna, already under construction, emphasizing the confusion between the two feminine divine figures. Simultaneously, Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon and aunt of Narām-Sîn, was placed at the service of Nanna/Sîn, at his temple in Ur (Winter 1987: 200). There, she took the role of high priestess and of dam,¹⁶ that is, the symbolic wife of the Moon god.¹⁷ Through this metaphorical marital liaison, Enheduanna helped to further legitimate the Akkadian Dynasty, given that she was in close contact to no other than the divine father of Inanna/Ištar. This intricate process of legitimation, whereas divine and human genealogies were entangled, had to have an impact in the consolidation of their father-daughter relationship. Thus, we believe the emphasis on their kinship displayed by the compositions attributed to the daughter of Sargon expressed, amongst other aspects, these political motivations.

In what concerns the Third Dynasty of Ur, we identify a paralleled process. In this case, it was Nanna/Sîn, the patron god of the new capital of the land, who underwent a rearrangement. His tie with the traditional leader of the Mesopotamian pantheon of the time, Enlil, was highlighted, given that this affiliation would help to promote him into a higher position within the divine universe. Consequently, the Ur III king's claims over the land of Sumer and Akkad would gain other vigour. At the time, Utu/Šamaš was also being promoted amongst the divine hierarchy. Though his role as judge of the dead was only fully developed during the Old Babylonian period (Katz 2003: 28–29), the Sun god was assigned with the function of being “the judge who searches out verdicts for the gods” (ETCSL 1.1.3) during the Ur III

13. For instance, in *Enki and the World Order*, a composition which concerns the Third Dynasty of Ur, Utu/Šamaš is identified as son of Ningal, who was the traditional spouse of the Moon god. See the composition in ETCSL 1.1.3.

14. On the human or divine character of the Mesopotamian monarch, see the different contributions in Brisch 2008.

15. One of Narām-Sîn's epithets was “warrior of Aštar-annunītum,” which points to this goddess's role as a patron deity of the Akkadian dynasty. On Ištar-Annunītum, see Selz 2000.

16. “Spouse” (ePSD). On the role of Enheduanna as symbolic spouse of Nanna/Sîn, see Westenholz 1989.

17. For the multiple interpretations on the Mesopotamian sacred marriage ritual, see the different contributions in Nissinen, and Uro 2010.

period. On another level, some Akkadian accounts depict Utu/Šamaš as the son of Enlil (or even An/Anu) (Black and Green 1992: 182–184). As we know, the Third Dynasty of Ur was a time where Sumerian traditions were revitalized, probably to draw a line between the new power and the Akkadian one. So, it is fair to speculate that the reaffirmation of Nanna/Sîn as father of the Sun god helped to reinforce this Sumerian tradition, and at the same time, it allowed to control the rising power of Utu/Šamaš, given that he was no longer son of higher deities, but offspring of the patron god of the land.

However, one must recall that the political motivations always had to consider the previous traditions,¹⁸ or else it would be difficult for these changes to become widely accepted. As stated above, the cumulative nature of this religious system worked upon the premise that new and old notions should be accommodated in the logic of continuity. As Jean Bottéro argued, “il n’est pas facile de changer de dieux” (1998: 73). Hence, we should look beyond the political context, in order to understand why this celestial triad was envisioned as a family.

Because mythical discourse finds its roots within reality, Mesopotamians seem to have transposed their own social organization, which was grounded in family clusters, to the divine universe. One can easily imagine the pantheon as a macro-family, where every deity belonged to a household, which in turn was connected with the rest of the divine clan. Just like in the human world, each member of a divine cluster reinforced its position by sharing and continuing a common identity. To some extent, each deity was thus a reflection of his own ancestors.¹⁹ So, it is fair to say that for the Mesopotamians the sharing of functions and/or attributes was *the* main vector that influenced the construction process of this or any other divine family, in the first place. In what concerns the divine triad under analysis, it is our understanding that the ties expressed by their luminosity, and by their movement in the skies, was *the* motive that led to their affiliation. In this perspective, Nanna/Sîn was not overshadowed by his progeny; instead we argue he was perceived as a respectable patriarch, who passed on his own numinous features into the next generation, and, like any other progenitor, continuously watched over them.

There Shall Be Light!

Let us start with the significance of light which we find in Mesopotamian mythological literature. As expressed in *Atra-Hasis*, complete darkness was a characteristic pertaining to the diluvium chaos, a cosmic event that brought turmoil and that destroyed life.²⁰ This connection of darkness with death is emphasized in the descriptions of the Netherworld, as “...the house where those who entered are deprived of life...they see no light, they dwelt in darkness” (Dalley 2000: 155). In opposition, the divine heavenly domains and the fertile terrestrial world were

18. Klein (2001: 289, 292) states that Enlil as a father of Nanna/Sîn is an older tradition, given the reference “impetuous calf of Enlil” which appears on Eannatum’s Stele of the Vultures.

19. “Ever since the gods acquired their anthropomorphic character, the theologians have engaged in grouping them into generations and families, whereby the rank and function of a given god was determined by his genetic relationship to another god in the pantheon” (Klein 2001: 279).

20. “No one could see anyone else, they could not be recognized in the catastrophe. The Flood roared like a bull, like a wild ass screaming the winds [howled], the darkness was total, there was no sun” (Dalley 2000: 31).

conceived as overflowed by brightness. Since luminosity and existence were obviously linked to a sense of order, it is fair to say that in the symbolic Mesopotamian framework, these terms were equated. Hence, deities intrinsically connected with light, such as Nanna/Sîn, were naturally associated with life and order.

One of the obvious functions of the Moon god was to shed light into the night.²¹ Diachronically, night-time was always considered a moment of anxiety, since the lack of light opened the possibility of one's intimate fears to become real. In what concerns the Mesopotamians, whether recalling the diluvium darkness or the obscurity of the Netherworld, night-time was associated with barrenness, and therefore considered a dreadful moment. Nanna/Sîn's brightness secured the possibility of definition within night, thus appeasing the worries of the Mesopotamians. Consequently, the Moon god received other functions related with his role within night skies, whose symbolic meanings lead us to think he was envisioned as having a wider spectrum of action.

The *Nanna F* hymn, for instance, depicts Nanna/Sîn as overseeing the stars, which were considered his herd.²² This task conveys profound significances, given that as a cowherd the Moon god was considered the ruler of celestial bodies.²³ Simultaneously, this deity was understood as impregnating the stars.²⁴ In fact, as Mark Glenn Hall (1985: 593–594) already stated, the renewal that came along with the moon's cycle, allowed the fertility of the cattle. Moreover, Mesopotamian early understanding on the impact the full moon had on the tide of the rivers (Ornan 2001: 3), plus the relation established between the moon and the women's cycle, reinforced the god's fertile nature. Consequently, his disappearance during the new moon was understood as a period where Nanna/Sîn was conceived as sleeping in the Netherworld, a place where the god could not shine, and accordingly, could not act as a fertility patron (ETCSL 5.5.2). The god's return from the realm of the dead was thus conceived as a time full of opportunities for life to flourish.

On another level, the well-known relation between the Moon god and the bull, underlines his celestial power: the crescent, which was the traditional emblem of the "Divine 30," was equated with the bull's horns, a symbolic motive identifiable, since the Neolithic period,²⁵ as connected with governance and, of course, fertility. More than *just* shining through the night, Nanna/Sîn's light bestowed him sexual and ruling dimensions. Thus, the multiple significances of luminosity allow us to argue that the starry night was envisioned as a promise of abundance, controlled and protected by Nanna/Sîn's numinous features.

Given the above, we argue that the Mesopotamian *homo religiosus* was naturally impelled to envision the divine Moon as the father of the divine Sun and Venus, who were both conceived as connected with governance and prosperity.

21. "The lord has burnished the heavens, he has embellished the night" (ETCSL 4.13.06).

22. "The cows are driven together in herds for him. His various types of cow number 39600. His young cows and calves ... number 108000. His young bulls number 126000. The sparkling-eyed cows number 50400. The white cows number 126000. The cows for the evening meal are in four groups of five each. Such are the various types of cow of father Nanna" (ibid.).

23. It must be recalled that the metaphor of the shepherd was applied to the Mesopotamian ruler. See, for instance, Westenholz 2004.

24. "He is ever able to increase the butter of abundance in the holy animal pens of (...) and goats" (ETCSL 4.13.06).

25. On the Near and Middle Eastern Neolithic repertoire, see the different contributions in Bolger and Maguire 2010, especially Stuart Campbell's reflections on its symbolic significances (2010: 147–155).

Their celestial father, who ruled the skies, could have been envisioned as transferring his governance feature into his progeny, which in turn developed their own role as divine sovereigns. Utu/Šamaš frequently appears handing over “the rod and the ring” emblem to the Mesopotamian king, which were the symbols for the equity of kingship; and Inanna/Ištar, the “Queen of Heaven and Earth,” played a central role on the renewal of the king’s right to rule, namely in what concerns the hierogamy symbolic ritual. Combined, the divine twins stood for the Mesopotamian sovereignty principles, which they bestowed upon the human “shepherd of the land” improving his father ruling role, as it was expected by the new generations.

In what concerns fertility, in his fatherly role, Nanna/Sîn appears giving instructions to the rising sun for him to bring the necessary warmth, which allowed crops to grow.²⁶ Together, father and son had a complementary role regarding cosmic fertility, a trait transposed into visual arts. As exposed by Collon (1992: 28–29) and by Braun-Holzinger (1993) some glyptic exemplars of the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods, presents an anthropomorphic Nanna/Sîn with rays of light rising from his shoulders, which parallels the traditional iconographic depiction of Utu/Šamaš. As for Inanna/Ištar, we can identify an equivalent symbolic meaning regarding the father and daughter disappearance from the celestial domains. When Venus was not observed in the skies, Mesopotamians envisioned that this celestial body was in the Netherworld, just like Nanna/Sîn, during the new moon. Both disappearances, though at different levels and with different impacts, had consequences on the fertility of the land.²⁷

We can, thus, establish that luminosity, with all its underlying symbolic significances, was a vector shared by the celestial triad. This identification by the Mesopotamian *homo religiosus* helped to shape the close connection between Moon, Sun, and Venus, whereas their radiance was conceived as a “family trade.”

The Movement Across the Universe

The central role ascribed to deities, combined with the belief that the divine figures painted nature with signs that bore their will, encouraged Mesopotamians to thoroughly observe the natural world, promoting the development of divination techniques very early in time.²⁸ Naturally, the movement of the celestial bodies was object of a profound examination, which helped to further develop symbolic meanings regarding the deities that crossed the skies. So, it comes with no surprise that every member of the triad under analysis displays a voyager nature. Just like

26. “Father Nanna gives the direction for the rising Utu” (ETCSL 1.8.2.1).

27. The symbolic significances conveyed in the Sumerian and Semitic narratives which describe Inanna/Ištar’s descent to the Netherworld deeply surpass the concrete event of Venus’ disappearance from the sky. Thus, we are not, by any means, reducing those rich accounts to just an explanation of a natural phenomenon. Moreover, we are aware of the significant differences between Nanna/Sîn’s presence in the realm of the dead—conceived as asleep—and of Inanna/Ištar’s one—held captive as a consequence of her defiance of the cosmic rules. Nevertheless, given the polysemy nature of the mythological discourse, we believe this parallel can be established, stressing its non-exclusive character.

28. According to Seth Richardson (2010), the first known Mesopotamian references regarding the divination techniques appear in the professions’ list discovered in Tell Fara, ancient Šuruppak, and are dated to ca. 2600 BCE. In the introduction of this book, however, Amar Annus points to the strong possibility that divination was older than the written records which attest it, being known and transmitted by a previous oral tradition.

luminosity, there are several significances pertaining to this feature, the liminal one being extremely important.

If we consider the geographic disposition of the “land between the rivers,” we identify the Zagros mountain range as enclosing Mesopotamia from eastern neighbours. The distant lands within the Iranian plateau, from which, now and then, threats emerged, ascribed a liminal character to the mountains: it was the place where the *other* dwelt. Nanna/Sîn had to have an obvious presence in this geographic accident, given the path the moon follows during its cycle, which was certainly observed by the Mesopotamians. In this natural observation can reside the earlier motive for the association between Nanna/Sîn’s disappearance, during new moon, and his voyage to the Netherworld. During the third millennium BCE, there was still an association between the mountains (Sumerian: *kur*) and the realm of the dead, probably a legacy of older times, as Katz (2003: 45) pointed out. Whether geographical or cosmic, the symbolic notions associated with mountain stood for alterity, which in turn bestowed to Nanna/Sîn a liminal character. The Moon god crossed borders between the civilized and the wild, between life and death, between order and chaos.

On another angle, the voyage through the skies allowed Nanna/Sîn to control every aspect of the world beneath. For this reason, he could easily foresee the future and grant prosperity to the land. His link with divination, once and again, was more than natural. This control of the world beneath, through movement, enclosed yet another meaning: the possibility to divide time in several segments. Again, Nanna/Sîn was prone to act upon it: the rise and the set of the moon differentiated day and night; its several phases (new moon, waxing, full moon, and waning) differentiated units within its natural cycle; and its full cycle allowed the yearly calendar to be defined. Therefore, Nanna/Sîn’s movement was a feature that ascribed him the role of time regulator.

Again, it was only natural that the deity bound to these features was conceived as begetting children who not only shared but also enhanced them. Given that the sun’s movement divided the days, once and again, father and son displayed a complementary role as time regulators. The divine Sun’s daily crossing path through the skies also secured the possibility for him to know everything that happened beneath, just as his father did during the night. Moreover, in his voyage through the cosmos, Utu/Šamaš arose from the mountains, which made him a regular presence in the liminal *kur*, manifesting, therefore, a liminal character. Hence, Utu/Šamaš had the necessary requirements to excel as a judge, both in life and in death, a combined function the Sun god received, as we have seen, from the Old Babylonian period on. Inanna/Ištar, on her side, had a profound liminal character which was intrinsic to her astral form. As we have mentioned, the goddess travelled to the Netherworld, and in her warrior function was described as charging against the mountains (ETCSL 1.3.2), features that stressed her connection with the liminal *kur*.²⁹ On another level, the presence of the “morning and evening star” at the dawn of day, and at the beginning of the night, could be envisioned as Venus accompanying her divine brother and father in their functions as time regulators. Inanna/

29. Amongst the data pertaining to Uruk IV, a rather mysterious epithet for the goddess appears: “Inanna-kur.” As discussed elsewhere (Almeida 2015), the several symbolic significances of *kur* and of this goddess’s itinerant character, point to the definition of her liminal character very early in time.

Ištar's itinerant character through the skies also secured the possibility to control the world beneath, and therefore to predict the "yet to come" events, which was manifested in the development of her prophetic nature.

Combined, the features pertaining to the symbolic meanings of movement across the skies granted Nanna/Sîn and his progeny a relevant role within the Mesopotamian religious framework, and can help us to understand how the family bounds between the triad were shaped by the Mesopotamians.

Conclusions

When we first started to think about this paper, one question was always present: in the long duration, was Nanna/Sîn overshadowed by his children? We concluded that he was not. As stated at the beginning, the Mesopotamian social order envisioned family ties as a device to maintain and legitimate the sense of identity, throughout generations. It was expected that progeny continued their parents' paths, developing and perfecting what was already achieved. Given that myth finds its roots on the mundane experiences, Nanna/Sîn's relation with his offspring was guided by the very same logic Mesopotamians had regarding their own relations between old and new generations. Moreover, an identical logic is also displayed in the theogonic process, where each new divine generation was more defined and powerful than the previous one. Therefore, Nanna/Sîn seems to have been understood as an honourable patriarch, who by transferring his features onto his progeny, allowed for them to surpass him. Utu/Samaš and Inanna/Ištar extraordinary protagonism within mythical accounts, regarding the domains of abundance, justice, royal power, and so on, was only possible because of their close relation with their father. The construction of these genealogical bounds, we argue, finds its roots on the identification by the Mesopotamian *homo religiosus* of luminosity and movement as shared traits of this divine triad.

Recognizing the difficulties related to the search for older layers underneath the (re)construction processes of divine figures, as well as the deficiencies on fully understanding past actors' religious feelings and motivations, we hope the reflections presented above can contribute to further discussions about the patron deity of Ur and, in a broader sense, to the Mesopotamian religious system, from a History of Religions perspective.

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