

The Sacred Marriage of Venus and Mars

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Pawnee Lore

“Everywhere it seems as if popular festivals, when left to propagate themselves freely among the folk, reveal their old meaning and intention more transparently than when they have been adopted into the official religion and enshrined in a ritual. The simple thoughts of our simple forefathers are better understood by their unlettered descendents than by the majority of educated people; their rude rites are more faithfully preserved and more truly interpreted by a rude peasantry than by the priest, who wraps up their nakedness in the gorgeous pall of religious pomp, or by the philosopher, who dissolves their crudities into the thin air of allegory.”¹

The Skidi form one of the four major bands of the Pawnee and, upon immigrating to the Midwestern plains from the South, eventually settled in what is now Nebraska. They speak a Caddoan language.

¹ J. Frazer, *The Scapegoat*, p. 404.

The Skidi were inveterate sky-watchers. Indeed, it has been said that they were “obsessed with the planets”¹ and had “a sky oriented theology perhaps without parallel in human history.”²

The planet Venus was conceptualized as a Star Woman by the name of Cu-pirittaka, which translates literally as “female white star.”³ The anthropologist James Murie, himself of Skidi blood, summarized the lore surrounding this planet as follows:

“The second god Tirawahat placed in the heavens was Evening Star, known to the white people as Venus...She was a beautiful woman. By speaking and waving her hands she could perform wonders. Through this star and Morning Star all things were created. She is the mother of the Skiri.”⁴

Among the Pawnee, as amongst various other aboriginal cultures, the planet Venus was explicitly distinguished from the “Morning Star.” Indeed, the Skidi identified the mythical “Morning Star” with the planet Mars, the latter envisaged as a powerful red warrior. Murie offered the following summary of the sacred traditions surrounding the Morning Star:

“The first one he placed in the heavens was the morning star...The bed of flint is the one great source of fire whence the sun gets his light. This being was to stand on a hot bed of flint. He was to be dressed like a warrior and painted all over with red dust. He head was to be decked with soft down and he was to carry a war club. He

¹ V. del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (College Park, 1982), p. 82.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ J. Murie, “Ceremonies of the Pawnee,” *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology* 27 (Cambridge, 1981), p. 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*

was not a chief, but a warrior....He was also to be the one great power on the east side of the Milky Way. This is Mars, u-pirikucu, the really big star or the god of war.”

Like numerous other aboriginal cultures, the Skidi traced their myth of origins to events involving the respective planets. The central act of Skidi cosmogony described the Martian warrior’s pursuit and eventual conquest of the planet Venus. Creation unfolded as a direct result of their sexual union. In summarizing the events in question, Ralph Linton states simply “The Morning Star married the Evening Star.”¹

The *hieros gamos* involving Mars and Venus was ritually reenacted during various sacred celebrations. On rare occasions, or in the face of some perceived threat—the appearance of a meteor, an epidemic, or some other portent—the Pawnee offered a human sacrifice to the “Morning Star,” usually in the years when Mars appeared as a morning star.² In preparation for the ominous rite a band of warriors would accompany a man impersonating the Morning Star in raiding a neighboring campsite, where they sought to kidnap a young woman of choice. Along the way there was much singing and dancing, during which the heroic deeds of the Martian warrior were recounted and celebrated. Upon capturing a suitable victim, the warparty returned to the Skidi village where several months might elapse while the priests prepared for the sacrifice and awaited signs for the most propitious time. The culmination of the rite saw the young woman—representing the Evening Star—being painted head to toe and outfitted with a curious fan-shaped headdress (see figure

¹R. Linton, “The Sacrifice to Morning Star by the Skidi Pawnee,” Leaflet Field Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology 6 (1923), p. 5

²R. Linton, “The Origin of the Skidi Pawnee Sacrifice to the Morning Star,” *American Anthropologist* 28 (1928), p. 457. See also the detailed analysis by Von del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (College Park, 1982).

two).¹ The victim was then led to a scaffold specially erected for the occasion where, upon mounting the final rung, she was shot in the heart by an arrow from the bow of the figure impersonating the Morning Star. The priests in charge of the gruesome rite took great care to insure that the girl's blood was directed to a cavity below the scaffold. This pit was lined with white feathers and was held to represent the sacred garden of the planet-goddess: "The pit symbolized the Garden of the Evening Star from which all life originates."²

In the Pawnee village, successful completion of the sacrifice was greeted with great rejoicing and a period of "ceremonial sexual license to promote fertility."³

As bizarre as this rite appears to the modern reader, anthropologists are generally agreed as to its fundamental purpose: It was to commemorate the sacred events of Creation. Ralph Linton's comments are representative in this regard:

"The sacrifice as a whole must be considered as a dramatization of the overcoming of the Evening Star by the Morning Star and their subsequent connection, from which sprang all life on earth. The girl upon the scaffold seems to have been conceived of as a personification or embodiment of the Evening Star surrounded by her powers. When she was overcome, the life of the earth was renewed, insuring universal fertility and increase."⁴

The Skidi traditions with respect to Venus and Mars raise a number of intriguing questions. How are we to explain the origin of such peculiar ideas and practices?

¹See the photo on page 190 of E. Krupp, *op. cit.* The same scene is depicted in figure 18 of von del Chamberlain, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

²G. Weltfish, *The Lost Universe* (New York, 1965), p. 112.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴ R. Linton, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

The simplest explanation, as well as the most logical, is to trace the respective traditions to objective events involving Venus and Mars. We would thus endorse the opinion expressed by the astronomer Ray Williamson: “The care with which the Pawnee observed the sky and noted the celestial events suggests that the story of Morning Star and Evening Star, in addition to serving as an explanation of the original events of the Pawnee universe, might also reflect actual celestial occurrences.”¹

It was the astronomer Von del Chamberlain who conducted the most extensive investigation into the celestial background of the Skidi traditions.² He, too, concluded that objective events involving the planets inspired the sacred traditions of the Skidi: “The conjunctions of Venus and Mars do seem to be the key to the Skidi concept of celestial parentage.”³ As to how these “conjunctions” were to be understood from an astronomical standpoint, del Chamberlain opined that they had reference to Mars’ periodic migration from the morning sky to the western evening sky whereupon it conjoined with Venus. Other astronomers have since endorsed Chamberlain’s interpretation.¹

But how are we to understand the phenomenological basis of the specific motifs surrounding the respective planets given del Chamberlain’s theory? Why was Venus represented as the prototypical female power? Why was Mars viewed as masculine in nature or identified as the “Morning Star”? Why would the periodic, relatively mundane, conjunction of these two particular planets be linked to Creation and ideas of universal fertility? Not one of these questions finds a satisfactory solution under the thesis advanced by del Chamberlain.

¹ R. Williamson, *Living the Sky* (Norman, 1984), p. 225.

² V. del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (College Park, 1982).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Perhaps the most important question facing students of ancient myth is the following: Do the Skidi myths with respect to Venus and Mars have a historical or observational basis? Said another way: Do Skidi mythological traditions represent reliable memories of cosmogony and the recent history of the solar system, or are they a product of creative storytelling and thus unique to that particular culture?

In order to determine whether the Skidi astral traditions have an observational basis and thus represent archaic conceptions regarding the various planets, it is instructive to perform a systematic cross-cultural analysis of astral lore. If the Skidi traditions have a rational foundation, they must find corroboration elsewhere. If, on the other hand, they are to be understood as fictional in nature or of relatively recent origin, it stands to reason that it would be most unlikely that cultures in the Old World would tell similar stories about the respective planets (that is, of course, unless they were directly influenced by Skidi beliefs). Yet if Old World cultures preserved myths and rites analogous to those from aboriginal North America, a *prima facie* case is thereby made for the thesis defended here, which holds that the characteristic mythological traditions surrounding Venus and Mars encode and describe observed astronomical events.

The astronomical lore from ancient Mesopotamia offers a perfect case study in this regard inasmuch as it constitutes the earliest and most extensive body of traditions about the planets.

The Cult of Venus in Ancient Mesopotamia

“If we survey the whole of the evidence on this subject...we may conclude that a great Mother Goddess, the personification of all the reproductive energies of nature,

¹ E. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (New York, 1991), pp. 189-192.

was worshipped under different names but with a substantial similarity of myth and ritual by many peoples of Western Asia; that associated with her was a lover, or rather series of lovers, divine yet mortal, with whom she mated year by year, their commerce being deemed essential to the propagation of animals and plants, each in their several kind; and further, that the fabulous union of the divine pair was simulated and, as it were, multiplied on earth by the real, though temporary, union of the human sexes at the sanctuary of the goddess for the sake of thereby ensuring the fruitfulness of the ground and the increase of man and beast.”¹

The science of astronomy owes its origin to early skywatchers in ancient Mesopotamia, and thus the practice of observing (and worshipping) the respective planets had a long history in that region. What, then, do we know about the Mesopotamian mythological traditions surrounding Venus and Mars?

Veneration of the planet Venus, under the guise of the goddess Inanna, is ubiquitous in the earliest temples yet excavated in Mesopotamia.² At Uruk, the oldest urban site in the entire the Near East,³ offerings to Inanna/Venus far outnumber those of any other deity.⁴ In strata conventionally dated to c. 3000 BCE (Uruk IV-III), Inanna is already associated with various symbols that would become conspicuous in her later cult (the star and rosette, for example).

The Sumerian cult of Inanna, upon being assimilated with that of the Semitic goddess Ishtar, would dominate the religious landscape of Mesopotamia for over two thousand years. As our earliest historical testimony documenting the worship of the planet Venus, the literature surrounding Inanna must figure prominently in any discussion of astral myth.

¹ J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

² According to Wolfgang Heimpel, the identification of Inanna and Venus was first made in prehistoric times and is apparent “in all historical periods.” W. Heimpel, “A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities,” *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4:3 (1982), p. 12.

³ K. Szarzynska, *Sumerica* (Warsaw, 1997), p. 39.

⁴ K. Szarzynska, “Offerings for the goddess Inana,” *Revue d’assyriologie et d’archeologie orientale* 87 (1993), p. 7

Writing first developed in Sumer (during the period known as Uruk IV/III), later spreading to Egypt. Inanna's name was originally written with a pictograph transcribed as MUS₃, thought to depict a pole-like standard with reed stalks bound together in volutes (see figure one). In the earliest period (Uruk IV), the sign typically appears without the divine determinative, although exceptions do occur. In the subsequent period, the sign is usually preceded by a divine determinative, the latter closely resembling a modern asterisk. Inasmuch as the cuneiform determinative for "god" features an eight-pointed star, it stands to reason that Inanna was already identified with a celestial body during the archaic Uruk period. Szarzynska has expressed a similar view: "In the most archaic period the determinative dingir was associated with astral deities only."¹

A significant number of hymns celebrating Inanna were composed during the Akkadian dynasty of Sargon (the so-called Neo-Sumerian period, c. 2300 BCE). As scholars have pointed out, it is probable that this sacred literature includes some very ancient ideas, perhaps reflecting "archaic Sumerian tradition."²

The corpus of hymns composed by Enheduanna, a daughter of Sargon himself, is representative of this period and literary genre. The hymn *nin-me-sar-ra*, generally known as "The Exaltation of Inanna," rarely mentions the goddess by name; rather, Inanna is invoked through a series of epithets such as "great queen of queens"³ or "hierodule of An."⁴ As the planet Venus, Inanna is celebrated as "senior queen of the

¹Personal communication, March 22, 1997. It is Szarzynska's opinion that the veneration of astral deities reaches back to the proto-Sumerian period, perhaps earlier.

²K. Szarzynska, *Sumerica* (Warsaw, 1997), p. 148.

³ See W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 23. As the authors point out, p. 53, this epithet parallels a common epithet of Inanna/Ishtar in Akkadian times (*belit beleti*).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

heavenly foundations and zenith.”¹ It is as a planet that Inanna appears as the “beloved bride” of Dumuzi.²

Inanna’s prowess as a warrior is a recurring point of emphasis in the Sumerian texts. The hymn *in-nin me-hus-a*, generally known as *Inanna and Ebih*, celebrates the goddess as follows:

“Great queen Inanna, expert at fomenting wars, destroyer of the enemy country...like a lion you have filled heaven and earth with your roaring, and you have made the people quake.”³

Inanna’s warrior-aspect forms a prominent theme in the hymn known as *in-nin sa-gur-ra*, also by *Enheduanna*: There Inanna is described as a terrifying warrior “clothed in awe-inspiring radiance,” whose wrath unleashes a powerful flood which brings widespread destruction.⁴ Indeed, the goddess’ path of destruction is said to extend “from the sunrise to the sunset.”⁵ A recurring epithet of the planet-goddess in these early texts—an *al-dúb-ba ki sig-ga*, “[she] who shakes the sky and makes the earth tremble”⁶—emphasizes her destructive nature.

Another passage from the same hymn describes the warrior-goddess as threatening the gods in heaven:

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ *Ebih* 5-9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁶ *Ibid.*

“She is a huge neckstock clamping down on the gods of the land, Her radiance covers the great mountain, silences the road, The gods of the land are panic-stricken by her heavy roar, At her uproar the Anunna-gods tremble like a solitary reed, At her shrieking they hide all together.”¹

Significantly, the warrior-goddess is said to come “from the sky”:

“Inanna, your triumph is terrible...[break in text] The Anunna-gods bow down their nose, they hurl themselves to the ground...you come *from* heaven.”²

Apparent in these early hymns is the image of a planet-goddess of awe-inspiring numinous power, to be feared as well as propitiated. The following passage is typical in this regard: “To provoke shivers of fright, panic, trembling, and terror before the halo of your fearsome splendor, that is in your nature, oh Inanna!”³

The Sacred Marriage Rite

One of the most important celebrations in ancient Mesopotamia was the so-called sacred marriage rite, designed to commemorate the primeval sexual union of Inanna with Dumuzi. Early texts confirm that the performance was believed to stimulate the growth of crops. Of untold antiquity—a vase recovered from the Protoliterate period

¹ A. Sjöberg, “in-nin sa-gur-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 65 (1976), p. 179.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189. Italics in the original translation by Sjöberg.

³F. Bruschweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

at Uruk (c. late 4th millennium BCE) is thought to depict the marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi¹—the ritual appears to have died out after the Old Babylonian period.²

In the rite in question a “holy bed” or “garden” would be prepared, after which the king would impersonate Dumuzi and have intercourse with a woman representing Inanna.³ Frayne offered the following summary of the rite:

“It is clear that the central purpose of the Sacred Marriage Rite was to promote fertility in the land. The rationale of the ceremony was that by a kind of sympathetic act involving the sexual union of the king, playing the role of the *en* [typically personifying Dumuzi] with a woman, generally referred to simply as Inanna, the crops would come up abundantly and both the animal and human populations would have the desire and fertility to ensure that they would multiply.”¹

Our most important source describing the rite is the marriage hymn of Iddin-Dagan, the third king of the First Dynasty of Isin (c. 1974-1954 BCE). The text begins by invoking Inanna as the planet Venus. Excerpts from the hymn follow:

“To the great [lady] of heaven, Inanna, I would say: ‘Hail!’ To the holy torch who fills the heaven, to the light, Inanna, to her who shines like daylight...Of the holy torch who fills the heaven, of her stance in heaven, like the moon and the sun...In heaven she surely stands, the good wild cow of An...With An she takes her seat upon

¹H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (1954), pp. 25-27. See also T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 209.

²R. Kutscher, “The Cult of Dumuzi/Tammuz,” in J. Klein ed., *Studies in Assyriologie* (1990), p. 41. Although references to a sacred marriage rite are to be found in the letters of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, human beings no longer take an active role in consummating the marriage of the goddess and her consort. See here the discussion of D. Frayne, *op. cit.*, cols. 11, 22.

³ See here the discussion in D. Frayne, “Notes on The Sacred Marriage Rite,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 42:1/2 (1985), col. 14, 21.

the great throne...Upon them [the people, described as ‘black heads’] my lady looks in a friendly way from the midst of heaven...At evening, the radiant star, [the Venus star], the great light which fills the heaven...She comes forth like the moon at night. She comes forth like bright daylight in the heat of noon...The lady, the amazement of the land, the solitary star, the Venus-star...”²

Here, as so often in Sumerian literature, Inanna is said to stand alongside Utu and Sin, two other celestial bodies conventionally identified with the sun and moon.

In the ensuing lines of the hymn, various offerings are given to Inanna. After the goddess bathes herself, a bed is set up for her and the king to share. Properly prepared, the king—identified with Dumuzi—approaches the bed:

“On New Year’s day, the day of ritual, They set up a bed for my lady. They cleanse rushes with sweet-smelling cedar oil, They arrange them (the rushes) for my lady, for their (Inanna and the king) bed...My lady bathes (her) pure lap, She bathes for the lap of the king...The king approaches (her) pure lap proudly, Ama’usumgalanna lies down beside her, He caresses her pure lap...She makes love with him on her bed, (She says) to Iddin-Dagan: ‘You are surely my beloved.’...The palace is festive, the king is joyous, The people spend the day in plenty. Ama’usumgalanna stands in great joy. May he spend long life on the radiant throne!”³

Ama’usumgalanna here is simply an epithet of Dumuzi, the mortal paramour of the planet-goddess Inanna.

¹ D. Frayne, *op. cit.*, col. 6.

² D. Reisman, “Iddin-Dagan’s Sacred Marriage Hymn,” *JCS* 25 (1973), pp. 186-191.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

In ancient Mesopotamia, as elsewhere, the ritual *hieros gamos* formed a prominent feature of New Year's celebrations. By all accounts it was a particularly joyous occasion. Upon consummation of the royal marriage, a period of feasting and revelry ensued:

“The glad news of the successful accomplishment of the long rite having been communicated to the people who had been waiting in anxious expectation to learn the issue, there was an outburst of exultation and thanksgiving, followed by a great feast of which all partook, the newly-wedded pair, the visiting divinities, the whole multitude who, in gratitude for the fertility which was now assured, raised jubilant hymns to the sound of the lyre, flutes and drums.”¹

Even from this brief summary it must be admitted that the Sumerian literary traditions surrounding Inanna/Venus offer striking parallels to the Skidi oral traditions describing Venus. Not only does the planet embody the female principle, it is assigned a central role in a sacred *hieros gamos* thought to promote the fertility of the land.

The concordance between the Sumerian and Skidi traditions extends to the finest details. Even the life-giving garden associated with the Pawnee planet-goddess finds a symbolic counterpart in Sumerian tradition, where Venus' garden was intimately associated with the sacred marriage rite:

¹ E. van Buren, “The Sacred Marriage in Early Times in Mesopotamia,” *Orientalia* 13 (1944), p. 34.

“A garden of the goddess (kiri₆-nin-ku₃-nun-na) is attested in the oldest extant ritual text...According to lines 9-11 of this ritual the king is to bathe in the garden on the night of the fourth day of the ritual.”¹

The king impersonating Dumuzi, in accordance with this symbolism, was compared to a “gardener”:

“Deified kings who enacted the role of the bridegroom were said to be placed ‘in the holy garden’. By analogous symbolism the divine bride was compared to a green garden.”²

As the Skidi believed that “all life” originated in from Venus’ sacred garden so, too, was Inanna/Venus regarded as the “divine source of all life.”³

The most comprehensive study of the sacred marriage rite in ancient Mesopotamia is that by Pirjo Lapinkivi. There the author poses the following question:

“The language of most of the sacred marriage texts is so explicitly sexual that it seems beyond question that they describe a sexual union between the king and the goddess Inanna, the consummation of their marriage. The crucial question, however, is, *why*? Why did this union take place, and why was it performed ritually...?”⁴

¹ M. Hall, op. cit., pp. 751-752.

² E. van Buren, “The Sacred Marriage in Early Times in Mesopotamia,” p. 31.

³ F. Bruschweiler, op. cit., p. 112.

⁴ P. Lapinkivi, op. cit., p. 14.

Lapinkivi then proceeds to answer his own question—the historical origin and fundamental purpose of the sacred marriage rite remains unknown:

“Despite all the various suggestions reviewed above, no scholarly consensus has been reached regarding this basic question. While the importance of the sacred marriage for the Sumerians is obvious, it has remained enigmatic to the modern scholars.”¹

There is a simple reason for the failure of scholars to discern the original significance of the sacred marriage rite: They have all but ignored the role of planets in the genesis of ancient myth and religion. Thus it is that the central role of the planet Venus in the sacred marriage rite has been essentially overlooked. The fact that most scholars have eschewed a comparative approach has also proven myopic and thus prevented them from discovering the fact that analogous traditions surround the planet Venus in other cultures.

Surveying the sacred lore surrounding Inanna prompts a host of questions: To what extent does it reflect ancient conceptions involving the planet Venus? Why would the early kings of Mesopotamia seek legitimization for their rule through a symbolic marriage with the planet Venus, the latter personified by Inanna? How are we to understand the curious belief that the king’s sexual union with Inanna/Venus would guarantee fertility and abundance throughout the land? Why is the planet Venus involved in a “sacred marriage” at all, much less one with a supposedly mortal king like Dumuzi? And if Inanna is to be identified with the planet Venus, how are we to understand her mortal paramour Dumuzi? Was he, too, originally a celestial body and, if so, which one? Although such questions cry out for explanation, it must

¹ Ibid., p. 14.

be said that few scholars have sought to address them in any sort of systematic fashion.

Dumuzi in the Sky with Diamonds

One of the most perplexing questions facing students of ancient myth is who, or what, was Dumuzi? Bendt Alster underscored the mystery surrounding the god: “A considerable number of attempts have been made to define the character of the god, but the results so far have failed to carry conviction.”¹

According to conventional opinion, Dumuzi was an early Sumerian king whose singular accomplishments inspired the creation of the mythological character whose tragic fate was eulogized and lamented throughout the ancient Near East. Such is the view defended by Adam Falkenstein², Samuel Kramer, Otto Gurney³, and Jeffrey Tigay, among other notable authorities.

It is our judgment that such opinions represent the height of folly and serve to illustrate the scholarly myopia induced by the modern penchant for ever-increasing specialization. Archetypal myths, of which Dumuzi’s marriage with Inanna is a classic example, *never* have reference to mere mortals of flesh and blood. Rather, such myths typically have reference to divine (i.e., celestial) agents and dramatic astronomical events witnessed at a particular point in time.

¹ B. Alster, *Dumuzi’s Dream*, p. 9.

² A. Falkenstein, “Tammuz,” *CRRA* 3 (1954), pp. 41-65.

³ O. Gurney, “Tammuz Reconsidered,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 7 (1962), p. 150, writes “There is strong evidence that Dumuzi was originally a man, a king of Erech.”

It was Bendt Alster who came the closest to solving the puzzle of Dumuzi's origins. With specific reference to the god's role in the sacred marriage rite, Alster suggested that a celestial prototype had most likely inspired the myth of Inanna's lover: "The conclusion would be that that ruler on earth who represents Dumuzi in the sacred marriage also receives his paradigmatic function from a celestial body."¹ Alster went on to speculate that the star in question was to be identified with either Sirius or Orion.²

Lapinkivi likewise looked to the stars in order to explain Dumuzi's role in the sacred marriage rite. Logically enough, Lapinkivi deduced that Dumuzi's union with Inanna implied an ascent to heaven, a conclusion otherwise supported by his proverbial role as the "gatekeeper" of heaven:

"To sum up, according to seasonal cycle theory and the Tammuz cult, Dumuzi died every year, but was also released from his death every year. To be exact, however, both versions of the *Descent* promise that Dumuzi will be released; neither of the texts says that he has to go into the Netherworld *again*. In the love song DI Y, Inanna is responsible for imprisonment of her lover, but since he is now released, Inanna welcomes him to her house to be married to her. Since Inanna was a heavenly goddess, her marriage was most likely conceived as occurring in heaven. If the wedding took place in heaven, Dumuzi must have returned there. This is also indicated in those Dumuzi-Inanna songs where Dumuzi is described as standing at Ningal's gate (DI H, the *Manchester Tammuz*), obviously pointing at Inanna's home in heaven. The same view is confirmed in *Adapa and the South Wind*."³

¹ B. Alster, "The Paradigmatic Character of Mesopotamian Heroes," RA 68 (1974), p. 54.

² Of the astral interpretation of Dumuzi favored by such earlier scholars as Thureau-Dangin, Alster, *op. cit.*, p. 54. wrote: "This very justified conception of Dumuzi, which fits also with the earliest Sumerian sources, was later totally abandoned by scholars, who instead viewed him as an originally 'historical person', the 'power in the date palm', the 'power in grain and beer', or the 'power in milk'."

³ P. Lapinkivi, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

That Dumuzi represented a celestial body is well attested, although this evidence has consistently been downplayed in scholarly analyses of his role in ancient religion.¹ Kramer himself published an early hymn (BM 88318) in which Dumuzi was translated to heaven at the behest of Inanna, after which he appeared as a star or planet.² In that text a strange illness overtakes Dumuzi after having intercourse with Inanna in his garden, at which point Inanna offers a plea to Ninegal, the queen of the netherworld:

“Oh Ninegal, let not the sick one die. The wild ox has directed the boat, the possessions-(loaded) boat, The wild ox Dumuzi (has directed the boat)...Oh Maid, station him for me at the sky, Station for me at the sky the greatest of wild oxen, Station Dumuzi for me at the sky.”³

In his commentary on this short and admittedly obscure text, Kramer speculated as to the antiquity and theological significance of Dumuzi’s catasterization: “Since, as is well-known, the king of Sumer, as the husband of Inanna, was identified with Amausumgalanna, it may be, to judge from this hymn, that there was current in Sumer a theological tenet that the king upon his death was turned into a heavenly star situated close to the Venus-star Inanna.”⁴

As we will discover in the chapters to follow, there are good grounds for believing that Kramer’s speculation was right on the money.

¹ Thus Kramer “BM 88318: The Ascension of Dumuzi to Heaven,” *Recueil de travaux et communications de l’Association des Études du Proche-Orient Ancien* 2 (1984), p. 8 remarks: “That Dumuzi...was a luminary in the sky, has been known for a long time.”

² *Ibid.*, pp. 5-9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴ Quoted in D. Foxvog, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

In addition to the text translated by Kramer, an Old Babylonian hymn known as SAGH 10 also serves to confirm the celestial context of the sacred marriage rite. There Dumuzi appears as a sort of champion of the gods—a veritable Sumerian Heracles—sallying forth to wage war against the terrifying Kur, the latter personifying the rebellious forces of chaos associated with the Cosmic Mountain:

“Oh Inanna, a husband worthy of your splendor has been granted to you...You, oh mistress, you have handed over to him your power as is due to a king, and Ama-ušumgal-anna causes a radiant brilliance to burst out for you; oh Inanna, you have handed over to him your power as is due to a king and Ama-ušumgal-anna causes a radiant brilliance to burst out for you; when he goes forth against the rebel, the far-away kur he spends his time in destructive whirlwinds; when Ama-ušumgal-anna goes forth against the far-away kur, he spends his time in destructive whirlwinds, like Utu when he comes out of the kur of the perfumed cedars, (shining) with good grease, he takes on enormous proportions, like Utu when he comes out of the kur of the perfumed cedars, Ama-ušumgal-anna (shining) with good grease, he takes on enormous proportions!”¹

In this passage Dumuzi, as Ama-ušumgal-anna, is described as a celestial power, as a brilliantly shining “star” akin to the ancient sun-god Utu.² The translators of the hymn in question—Adam Falkenstein and Wolfram von Soden, deemed Dumuzi a “kriegerische Gestirns-gottheit.”³

¹ F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna* (Leuven, 1988), p. 110.

² It is to be noted that the name Amaušumgalanna itself suggests a celestial power. According to B. Alster, “Tammuz,” in K. van der Toorn et al, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, 1995), col. 1572 the name means “The Lord (is a) Great Dragon of Heaven.” Alster also notes the god’s variant name Ama-ushum-an, “Ama-ushum of Heaven.”

³ A. Falkenstein & W. von Soden, *Sumerische und Akkadische Hymnen und Gebete* (Stuttgart, 1953), p. 364.

As for which celestial body served as the historical prototype for Dumuzi the evidence of comparative mythology leaves little room for doubt. It was the planet Mars, as Nergal, that was identified as the “warrior-star” in Babylonian astronomical lore.¹ And it was the red planet that served as the masculine agent in the *hieros gamos*, as we have seen in our analysis of the Skidi Pawnee traditions. The same planet was also identified as the “gatekeeper” of heaven (see Chapter X).² In fact, everything we know about the Sumerian god is consistent with this identification.

The image of Dumuzi as warrior-star raging against the rebel lands finds a striking parallel in the sacred traditions surrounding Nergal. Like Dumuzi, Nergal is celebrated for waging combat against the powers of chaos:

“As you rise up in frightening sheen, ...with your kingship you inspire terrifying fear. Hero with your magnificent strength...you pile up the rebel lands in heaps.”³

As a weapon Nergal is said to have wielded the brilliantly shining Sita-mace. Witness the following hymn:

“Nergal, hoher Herr, der Kraft und Schrecken hat, der zur schrecklichen Sita(-Waffe) gegriffen hat.”⁴

¹ M. Jastrow, *Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice in Babylonia and Assyria* (New York, 1910), p. 108.

² Lines 49 and 56 of Adapa. On Dumuzi’s status as gatekeeper of Anu, see S. Izre’el, “New Readings in the Amarna Versions of Adapa and Nergal and Ereskigal,” p. 55.

³ Lines 53ff in J. Black et al, “A tigi to Nergal (Nergal C),” *ETCSL*.

⁴ E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

Significantly, in the aforementioned Old Babylonian hymn Dumuzi is said to wield this very weapon in defense of Inanna: “For you Ama-usumgal-ana, the mighty hero, kills everyone with his shining sita mace.”¹

Most telling, perhaps, is the fact that Dumuzi is said to have swollen to enormous proportions during his war against the rebel lands. The Sumerian expression in question is *pes-pes*, signifying a prodigious “enlargement” of form.² According to Bruschweiler, the comparison is intended to illustrate Dumuzi’s larger-than-life form as he warred against the Kur.³ Yet as we have documented elsewhere, the swelling of the Martian warrior constitutes an archetypal mythological motif and is best interpreted as having reference to the primeval appearance of the Martian orb, which once swelled to a terrifyingly massive form.⁴ Nergal himself is described with the epithet *pes-gal*, formed from the same verb as that chosen to describe Dumuzi’s swelling, the suffix *gal* (“great”) serving to emphasize the extraordinary nature of the swelling in question.⁵ (Another epithet of Nergal’s—*Da ud-du(ē)*, Akkadian *rabu*—signifying “to become huge,” is analogous in meaning.⁶)

It is instructive, perhaps, to contrast the thesis defended here with that of Thorkild Jacobsen, the recently deceased dean of Sumerian studies, who consistently ignored the explicit celestial contexts of the mythology surrounding Dumuzi and Inanna while seeking an explanation of their relationship in the mundane aspects of daily life in ancient Mesopotamia. Jacobsen would understand Inanna as originally signifying the numen of the date storehouse.⁷ Dumuzi-Amaushumgalanna he regards as “the power

¹ Line 33 as translated by J. Black et al, “A tigi to Inana (Inana E),” ETCSL.

² F. Bruschweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997), pp. 149-158.

⁵ E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁶ J. Böllenrücher, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

in the date palm to produce new fruit.”¹ Jacobsen summarized Dumuzi’s original character as follows:

“The bridegroom, Amaushumgalanna, represents what is to be stored in the storehouse...He is the personified power in the one enormous bud which the date palm sprouts each year, and from which issue the new leaves, flowers, and fruits. Dumuzi-Amaushumgalanna is thus a personification of the power behind the yearly burgeoning of the palm and its producing its yield of dates; he is, in fact, the power in and behind the date harvest. That these two powers are wed means that the power for fertility and yield has been captured by the numen of the storehouse—and so by the community—and has become its trusty provider for all time.”²

The sacred marriage between Dumuzi and Inanna, according to Jacobsen, is to be understood as reflecting the date harvest’s placement in the storehouse. Hence the rationale behind Jacobsen’s understanding of the ritual’s symbolism: “For the success of their union means that Inanna, the storehouse, can ‘take care of the life of all lands.’”³

I’ll leave it for readers to decide which interpretation, that of Jacobsen or that offered here, best accounts for the endlessly recurring mythological themes associated with the sacred marriage rite. Does an enormous bud, or an enormous planet, best describe the luminous power known as Dumuzi? Does a crop of dates sitting peacefully within its storehouse, or a spectacular conjunction of planets in the midst of cosmic upheaval, best explain the multifaceted symbolism surrounding the *hieros gamos* of Dumuzi and Inanna?

¹ T. Jacobsen, op. cit., p. 26.

² Ibid. p, 36.

³ Ibid., p. 39.