

The Queen of Heaven

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

Veneration of the planet Venus under the guise of the goddess Inanna is ubiquitous in the earliest temples yet excavated in Mesopotamia. At Uruk, the oldest urban site in the entire Near East, offerings to Inanna/Venus far outnumber those of any other deity.¹ In strata conventionally dated to ca. 3000 BCE (Uruk IV-III), Inanna is already associated with various symbols that would become conspicuous in her later cult (the eight-pointed 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 and Ishtar must figure prominently in any discussion of astral myth.

The earliest literary texts from Mesopotamia date from the Early Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1800 BCE).² The corpus of hymns allegedly composed by Enheduanna, a daughter of Sargon (ca. 2300 BCE) himself, is representative of this period and literary genre. The hymn *nin-me-šar-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 heavenly foundations and zenith.”⁵

¹ K. Szarzynska, “Offerings for the goddess Inana,” *Revue d’assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale* 87 (1993), p. 7.

² J. Hayes, *A Manual of Sumerian Grammar and Texts* (Malibu, 2000), p. 394.

³ See W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 23.

Inanna's prowess as a warrior is a recurring point of emphasis in the Sumerian literary texts. The hymn *in-nin me-ĥuš-a*, otherwise 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."⁶

Inanna's warrior-prowess forms a prominent theme in the hymn known as *in-nin ša-gur₄-ra*, also attributed to Enheduanna. There Inanna is described as a terrifying warrior "clothed in awe-inspiring radiance," whose wrath unleashes a powerful flood which brings widespread destruction.⁷ In fact, the goddess's path of destruction is said to extend "from the sunrise to the sunset."⁸ 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"⁹—emphasizes her destructive nature.

In another passage from the same hymn the warrior-goddess is represented as threatening the gods in heaven:

"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."¹⁰

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ Lines 5-9 in J. Black et al., "Inana and Ebih," *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>) (Oxford, 1998-), hereafter *ETCSL*.

⁷ Å. Sjöberg, "in-nin ša-gur₄-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna..." *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 65 (1976), p. 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Elsewhere in the same hymn 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.”¹¹

The hymn of Išme-Dagan paints a classic picture of Inanna as war-goddess. There, too, she is said to shake heaven while in the midst of her raging: “Holy Inana was endowed by Enlil and Ninlil with the capacity to make the heavens shake, to make the earth tremble...to shout with wide open mouth in battle and combat and to wreak carnage (?).”¹²

As can be seen from this brief summary, Inanna/Venus is depicted as an awe-inspiring numinous power, to be feared as well as propitiated. The following passage is representative in this regard: “Agitation, terror, fear, splendour, awe-inspiring sheen are yours, Inanna.”¹³

While reading the Sumerian literary descriptions of Inanna/Venus an obvious question presents itself: To what extent does the mythological imagery associated with Inanna accurately reflect the natural history and visual appearance of the planet Venus as experienced by the skywatchers and scribes of ancient Mesopotamia?

Great Light or Great Storm?

One of the most important sources for reconstructing how the ancient Mesopotamians conceptualized the planet Venus is the so-called marriage hymn of Iddin-Dagan, the third king of the First Dynasty of Isin (ca. 1974-1954 BCE). The hymn in question opens by likening Inanna/Venus to a heaven-spanning “torch”: “To the holy torch who fills the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189. Italics in the original translation by Å. Sjöberg.

¹² Lines 7-8 of “Inana and Išme-Dagan (Išme-Dagan K),” *ETCSL*.

¹³ Line 161, Å. Sjöberg, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

heaven” (izi-gar-ku an-e si-a-ra).¹⁴ Immediately thereafter the planet-goddess is invoked in equally grandiose terms: “To the light, Inanna, to her who shines like daylight” (su-du-ag ^dinanna-ra u₄-gim zalag-ga-ra).¹⁵ According to Daniel Reisman, the two clauses in this particular line represent parallel units and thus Inanna’s “light” (su-du-ag) was either equated with or compared to u₄, here translated as “daylight.” In these two successive and mutually complementary lines, therefore, Inanna is likened to a gigantic torch that “fills heaven” and shines like the daylight, images that are extremely difficult to reconcile with Venus’s present modest luster.

Iddin-Dagan’s marriage hymn subsequently describes Inanna/Venus with the epithet u₄-gal, conventionally translated as “great light”¹⁶ or “huge brilliance”¹⁷ (the adjective gal signifies “large” or great). In one passage the “great light” of the planet-goddess is said to fill the sky: “At evening, the radiant star, [the Venus-star], the great light which [fills] the heaven” (an-usa_x^{an}-na mul dal[la e-a^{mul} dili?-bad] u₄-gal an-ku-[ge? si?-a].¹⁸

How are we to understand such seemingly hyperbolic language, wherein Inanna/Venus is described as a gigantic light dominating the sky? In what sense can the distant speck that is Venus be said to fill all of heaven?

Ideally, a perfectly literal translation of the Sumerian texts would eliminate any ambiguity or need for interpretation. That said, the polyvalent nature of the Sumerian script renders this ideal little more than wishful thinking. The difficulties presented by the logogram u₄ (also written ud)—alternately translated as “sun,” “light,” “daylight,” and “storm,” depending on context—offer an instructive case in point.¹⁹ Faced with such

¹⁴ Line 4 as translated in D. Reisman, *Two New-Sumerian Hymns* (1970), p. 166. Note: This was a dissertation presented to the University of Pennsylvania.

¹⁵ Line 5.

¹⁶ J. Black et al, “A hymn to Inana as Ninegala (Inana D),” *ETCSL*. See also H. Behrens, *Die Ninegalla-Hymne* (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 29 who translates the term as “Grosses Licht.”

¹⁷ J. Black et al, “A *šir-namursaga* to Ninsiana for Iddin-Dagan (Iddin-Dagan A),” *ETCSL*.

¹⁸ Line 87 as translated in D. Reisman, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ J. Halloran, *Sumerian Lexicon* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 293.

polyvalence, scholars must deduce the meaning of a particular word or phrase from its use within a phrase or sentence.²⁰

Far from being an isolated or arbitrary metaphor, the epithet u_4 (or u_4 -gal) occurs repeatedly in literary descriptions of Inanna/Venus. It appears in the opening line of “A hymn to Inana as Ninegala,” for example, thereby attesting to its central importance in the sacred terminology surrounding the planet-goddess.²¹ The same epithet occurs in “A *šir-namšub* to Inanna,” wherein the planet-goddess introduces herself as follows: “When I go into the hub of the battle, I go as one who brings forth its brightest light (?)” (u_4 zalag-zalag).²²

In texts celebrating Inanna as a raging warrior-goddess the epithet u_4 often takes on a more ominous aspect. Such is the case in “A Hymn to the Goddess Inana,” wherein the planet-goddess is likened to a “furious stormwind” (ud $\dot{h}u\dot{s}$):

“She stirs confusion and chaos against those who are disobedient to her, speeding carnage and inciting the devastating flood, clothed in terrifying radiance...Clothed (?) in a furious storm, a whirlwind, she...”²³

Needless to say, it is difficult to understand such language by reference to the familiar planet Venus. In what sense does Venus present the appearance of a furious storm? And by what stretch of the imagination does the planet Venus engage in battle or stir confusion and chaos? The simple fact of the matter is that Venus *never* resembles a “furious” storm, much less a raging warrior inciting destruction and confusion—hence

²⁰ J. Hayes, *A Manual of Sumerian Grammar and Texts* (Malibu, 2000), p. 17.

²¹ H. Behrens, *Die Ninegalla-Hymne* (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 29.

²² Lines 23-24 in “A *šir-namšub* to Inana, (Inana G),” *ETCSL*.

²³ Lines 18-20 in “A Hymn to Inana (Inana C),” *ETCSL*. Å. Sjöberg, *op. cit.*, p. 181, translated the passage as follows: “She is clothed in awe-inspiring radiance [su-lim- $\dot{h}u\dot{s}$], Her (!?) joy (is) the fight, to...battle...A furious stormwind (?), prepared for battle, ...a whirlwind (?).”

the glaring incongruity presented by these early and remarkably detailed descriptions, descriptions that find striking parallels across cultures.²⁴

It is significant to note that, in the previous passage, Inanna/Venus is specifically identified as a “whirlwind.” The word in question here is *dalḥamun₂*—a word which also signifies a “tornado.”²⁵ Significantly, the related word *dalḥamun₄* means “confusion, disorder.”²⁶

Similar conceptions are evident elsewhere as well. Thus, in an early *balbale* the planet-goddess describes her divinely ordained role as follows:

“He [Enlil] gave me battles and he gave me fighting. He gave me the stormwind [mar-uru₅] and he gave me the dust cloud [dal²-ḥa-mun].”²⁷

A survey of Sumerian literature reveals that Inanna’s manifestation as a raging storm is central to her original character. A passage from “The Exaltation of Inanna” describing the planet-goddess is especially relevant here: “In the guise of a charging storm you charge” (*u₄-du₇-du₇-gim i-du₇-du₇-de*).²⁸ Although the phrase *du₇-du₇* can signify “charge,” a more appropriate translation here, given the explicit meteorological/celestial context and Inanna’s epithet *dalḥamun₂* (i.e., “whirlwind, tornado”) would be “to whirl”²⁹ or “to dance, circle around, and to rotate”³⁰—a reference, perhaps, to a whirling tornado-like phenomenon. In fact, the planet Venus was commonly conceptualized as whirling dancer, particularly in her role as a storming warrior-goddess. Thus an Akkadian text

²⁴ See the discussion in E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 91-151.

²⁵ J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁷ Lines 8-9 in “A *balbale* (?) to Inana (Inana F),” *ETCSL*.

²⁸ W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 19.

²⁹ This is the definition given for *du₇-du₇* by the online Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary. See <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/index.html>.

³⁰ J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

describes Ishtar/Venus as she “who whirls [i-su-ur-ru] like a dust storm in the midst of the fray.”³¹

Analogous ideas are evident in “The Great Prayer to Ishtar,” wherein Inanna/Ishtar is described as follows:

“Planet for the war cry...Gushea, whose mail is combat, clothed in chilling fear...Shining Torch of heaven and earth, brilliance of all the inhabited lands, Furious in irresistible onslaught, hero to the fight, Fiery glow that blazes against the enemy, who wreaks destruction on the fierce, Dancing One, Ishtar.”³²

Here Inanna/Ishtar is invoked by the epithet Gushea (also spelled Agushaya), understood as “whirling dancer” by Akkadian scribes.³³ Ishtar/Venus is equipped with the same epithet in the so-called “The Agushaya Poem,” wherein the warrior-goddess is described as a “whirling dancer” enveloped in lightning:

“Her celebration is the melee, staging the dance of battle...Frenzy in battle, pas[sion] in strife, Were shown forth as [her] portion...He [Anu] gave her bravery, fame, and might, He surrounded her in abundance with lightning bolts flashing. Once again he added to her uncanny frightfulness, He had made her wear awesome radiance, ghastliness, valor.”³⁴

The same Poem contains an apparent reference to a ritual celebration featuring whirling dances, the latter allegedly designed to emulate the war-like gait of the planet-goddess herself: “Let a whirling dance be established among the feast days of the year.”³⁵ In his notes to this passage, Benjamin Foster writes: “The whirling dance (*guštu*) or mock

³¹ *The Assyrian Dictionary, Vol. 15* (Chicago, 1984), p. 190, citing YOS 1 42:3.

³² B. Foster, *Before the Muses* (Bethesda, 2005), pp. 601-603.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

combat the people perform is a memorial to Agushaya (=Ishtar), here etymologized by the poet as ‘the whirling dancer.’”³⁶

“The Agushaya Poem” is notable for its archaic language.³⁷ Indeed, there is much reason to believe that it preserves very old traditions about the planet-goddess Ishtar/Venus. The idea that lightning enveloped Venus finds a remarkable parallel in “A Hymn to Inana as Ninegala,” wherein Inanna/Venus is addressed as follows: “in heaven you are lightning” (gir₂).³⁸

Evident in “The Agushaya Poem” is the archaic belief—emphasized repeatedly in Sumerian literary texts—that battle was the “dance” of Inanna/Venus.³⁹ Thus a hymn describes Inanna as follows: “the heroic lady, fit for battle, who, as the heroine of the battleground, makes the troops dance the dance of Inanna.”⁴⁰ The phrase in question here is ešemen ^dInana, wherein the Sumerian word ešemen translates as “dance.” The word ešemen, in turn, derives from eše₂, “rope,” and properly means “rope” or “skipping rope.”⁴¹

How or why Venus came to be associated with war or dancing has yet to be satisfactorily explained. Why should one particular planet, rather than another, be associated with the “dance” of battle?

A decisive clue comes from the fact that the “battle” of Inanna/Venus is elsewhere likened to a twirling rope. Witness the following passage: “O Ishtar, the battle and the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105. See also B. Foster, “Ea and Saltu,” M. de Jong Ellis ed., *Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of J. J. Finkelstein* (New Haven, 1977), p. 84: “Once a year people would dance madly about the streets, their uproar a reminder of the warlike aspect of the goddess: Agušaja.” See in addition B. Groneberg, *Lob der Ištar* (Groningen, 1997), pp. 65-66.

³⁷ J. Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Winona Lake, 1997), p. 26.

³⁸ Line 45.

³⁹ See Lines 135-137 in “Ninurta’s exploits: a šir-sud (?) to Ninurta,” *ETCSL*, for example.

⁴⁰ Lines 288-289 from “Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta,” *ETCSL*.

⁴¹ J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

fight twist around like a skipping rope” (^dinanna ti-sùḫ giš-lá ešemen-gim ù-mi-ni-ib-sar-sar =^d*ištar ananti u tuqumta kîma keppê šutakpima*.)⁴² Such imagery is not easily explained by reference to the familiar Venus. Yet once consider the possibility that Venus formerly presented the appearance of a great tornado-like storm, whirling about while displaying a rope-like appendage, and the Sumerian imagery describing the “battle” of Inanna/Venus is explained at one stroke and in a perfectly logical manner.

To recap our findings to this point: the epithet characterizing Inanna/Venus as “Great Storm” must be interpreted in conjunction with the aforementioned epithet characterizing the planet-goddess as u₄-gal—“Great Light.” It is our opinion that such watered-down translations hardly do justice to the terrifying meteorological phenomenon being described—a “gigantic” and destructive “storm” centered on (or emanating from) Venus. Faced with such literary descriptions of Inanna/Venus, modern scholars display an almost knee-jerk tendency to (mis)interpret the Sumerian terminology as figurative in nature. It is our opinion, in contrast, that the Sumerian epithets in question have relatively little to do with figurative language—that, in fact, the language employed by the ancient scribes accurately describes the planet-goddess Inanna/Venus as actually observed and experienced (albeit from a pre-scientific perspective). If we are to believe the ancient skywatchers, the original natural-historical reference for the Sumerian imagery was a towering celestial form in the throes of an extraordinary and awe-inspiring meteorological outburst, wherein the Venus-star was enveloped in lightning and displayed a tornado-like “tail,” the latter appendage being likened to a menacing skipping “rope” or whirling “battle.” A systematic analysis of the various terms used to describe the terrifying sights and sounds associated with Inanna/Venus reveals a wealth of evidence supporting this hypothesis.

⁴² Å. Sjöberg, *op. cit.*, p. 212. See also the discussion in B. Hruška, “Das spätbabylonische Leergedicht ‘Inanna’s Erhöhung’,” *Archiv Orientalni* 37 (1969), p. 488; and B. Landsberger, “Einige unerkant gebliebene oder verkannte Nomina des Akkadischen,” *WZKM* 56 (1960), p. 121.

The Roar Heard Across the Heavens

In perfect keeping with her function as a raging storm-goddess, numerous literary passages celebrate Inanna/Venus as a prodigious roarer. Thus, the opening lines of “Inanna and Ebih” invoke the planet-goddess as follows:

“Goddess of the fearsome divine powers, clad in terror, riding on the great divine powers, Inana...drenched in blood, rushing around in great battles...covered in storm [ud] and flood [mar-ur₅]...you destroy mighty lands...In heaven and on earth you roar [šeg₁₁] like a lion.”⁴³

The same meteorological imagery is evident in a later passage from the same hymn, wherein Inanna is described as follows: “She roared like thunder.”⁴⁴ The word translated as “thunder” here is gu₃-an-ne₂-si, literally “the word [noise, sound, voice⁴⁵] which fills the sky.”⁴⁶ This particular phrase has long troubled commentators on the Sumerian texts, for what could it mean that the planet Venus roared like thunder? In his translation of a comparable passage from the hymn in-nin šà-gur₄-ra, Åke Sjöberg left the phrase untranslated: “When you howl like a ...[KA.AN.NI.SI-gin_x] in your anger (you are) like a beating storm [u₄].”⁴⁷ The online *ETCSL* translation, similarly, ignores any reference to the thunderous “roaring” of the planet-goddess: “Shattering it in your anger, as desired, you smashed it like a storm.”

The word gu₃-an-ne₂-si occurs only three times in the *ETCSL* corpus, twice in connection with Inanna/Venus. It would appear likely that the thunder-like phenomenon characterized as gu₃-an-ne₂-si is central to the terrifying theophany of the planet-goddess.

⁴³ Lines 1-7 from “Inana and Ebih,” *ETCSL*.

⁴⁴ Line 143.

⁴⁵ J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁴⁶ Å. Sjöberg, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁴⁷ Line 112 from Å. Sjöberg, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

A thunderous “roaring” is also inherent to the Sumerian concept of u_4 , “storm.” Thus, in his commentary on the terms u_4 and u_4 -gal, Sjöberg observed that both are often “connected with verbs with [meaning] ‘to howl’, ‘to roar’.”⁴⁸ At the same time, however, Sjöberg points out that the original reference for u_4 -gal was “great light”: “The refs. quoted above point, however, to a meaning such as ‘storm’ (cf. u_4 -gal=*me \dot{h} u* SL 381, 333a), but this translation does not cover the meaning of the word; originally u_4 does not mean ‘storm’ but ‘light’...”⁴⁹

If it is difficult to conceive how a word meaning “great light” eventually came to mean “great storm,” or why such terms came to be applied to a distant planet like Venus, it is even more difficult to understand why that particular planet would be described as a tempestuous thunderer and source of lightning. In order for sound emanating from Venus to be heard on Earth, it would seem to be required that Inanna’s planet was formerly closer than at present—either that or the interplanetary medium was formerly more conducive to transmitting sound waves.

Inanna’s Terrifying Radiance

The Sumerian texts are remarkably consistent in describing Inanna/Venus as a terrifying celestial specter. Thus, in the first line of “A *balbale* to Inana” me - lem_4 is used to qualify the epithet u_4 -gal, yet me - lem_4 itself properly denotes the terrifying radiance associated with Inanna/Venus and other celestial bodies.⁵⁰ J. Black et al translate the line in question— $ud\ \dot{h}u\dot{s}\ gal\ me$ -/ lem_4 —as follows: “Great fierce storm...radiance!”⁵¹ The same word recurs in the second line of the hymn as well, wherein the raging warrior

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁰ According to J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 172, me - lem_4 means “terrifying glance, splendor, radiance, awesome nimbus, halo, aura, light.”

⁵¹ Line 1 in “A *balbale* to Inana (Inana A),” *ETCSL*.

Inanna/Venus is described as ^dinanna me₃-a ni₂ me-lem₄ gur₃-ru: “Inana, emitting fearsomeness and radiance in battle!”⁵²

Other texts suggest that the noun me-lem₄ had reference to the terrifying “light” or “fire” emitted by the celestial storm. This idea is apparent in the following inscription from the reign of Shulgi—ud-gal an-ta šu-ba-ra-gin₇ me-lem₄ sud-sud-me-en₃—translated as follows by *ETCSL*: “I am a great storm let loose from heaven, sending its splendour [me-lem₄] far and wide!”⁵³

The various adjectives used to qualify me-lem₄ likewise emphasize its terrifying and decidedly extraordinary nature. Thus the me-lem₄ is alternately characterized as huš, “red/angry,” and as maḥ, “gigantic, impressive.” Significantly, the me-lem₄ is also likened to the terrifying “roar” or “tumult” of a god—za-pa-ag₂—and said to possess an unbearable brilliance (su-lim tuk-a).⁵⁴ Whatever the Sumerian author of “A *balbale* to Inana” meant to convey by describing Inanna/Venus with the phrase ud huš gal me-/lem₄, it is safe to say that it was not a simple reference to the twinkling of the familiar Venus, as per the bland translation offered by Jeremy Black et al in the first line of “A *balbale* to Inana,” wherein me-lem₄ is translated as “radiance.”

Another term that features prominently in the Sumerian literature celebrating the raging Inanna/Venus is ni₂ (Halloran’s *Lexicon* defines ni₂ as “fear; respect; fearsomeness; awe.”⁵⁵) Thus the very first line of “Inanna and Ebih” describes the planet-goddess “as clad in terror” (ni₂ gur₃-ru).⁵⁶ Inanna-Venus is subsequently described as wearing

⁵² Note: The word gur₃-ru properly means “clothed in” or “imbued with” and thus I would translate this passage as follows: “Inanna, imbued with fearsomeness and radiance in battle.”

⁵³ See line 3 from “A Praise Poem of Shulgi, (Shulgi C),” *ETCSL*. W. Römer, “Beitrage zum Lexikon des Sumerischen,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* XXXII: 5/6 (1975), p. 147, translates the phrase as “Wie ein grosses Wetter, das vom Himmel losgelassen ist, lasse ich Schreckenglanz flimmern.”

⁵⁴ F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna la déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 119.

⁵⁵ J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

⁵⁶ Line 1 from “Inana and Ebih,” *ETCSL*.

“fearsome terror” (ni₂ huš).⁵⁷ Later still she is invoked as follows: “She decked her forehead with terror and fearsome radiance” (ni₂ me-lem₄ huš-a).⁵⁸

In “The Exaltation of Inanna,” the planet-goddess is said to “have made awesome terror weigh upon the Land” (kalam-ma ni₂ mi-ni-ri).⁵⁹ The same basic image is evident in “A Hymn to Inana”: “Her great awesomeness covers the great mountain and levels the roads” (ni₂ gal-a-ni hur-sag gal dul-lu kaskal mu-un-sig₉-sig₉-ge).⁶⁰ Indeed, the planet-goddess herself could be addressed simply as “great awesomeness” (ni₂-gal).⁶¹ Sumerologists who believe such language has reference to the familiar Venus peacefully shining on the “land” while occupying a distant orbit are operating under a severe misconception, it would appear. The planetary power being described, if we are to believe the plain testimony of the Sumerian scribes, is nothing less than a towering planet-goddess hanging ominously over the land like a storm-bearing sword of Damocles.

Another term used to describe the terrifying “brilliance” of Inanna/Venus is su-lim, translated as “terrifying appearance; awesome radiance; splendor.”⁶² In the aforementioned passage from “A Hymn to Inana” the planet-goddess was described as a raging warrior, stirring confusion and chaos while enveloped in the terrifying su-lim: “She stirs confusion and chaos against those who are disobedient to her, speeding carnage and inciting the devastating flood, clothed in terrifying radiance” (su-lim huš gu₂ e₃).⁶³

The same term is used to qualify the “torch-star” Inanna in “The Exaltation of Inanna”: “May your torch, which spreads terror abroad, flare up in the middle of heaven.”⁶⁴ Significantly, the terrifying splendor (*su-lim*) of Inanna’s torch is said to have become

⁵⁷ Line 13 from “Inana and Ebih,” *ETCSL*.

⁵⁸ Line 55 from “Inana and Ebih,” *ETCSL*.

⁵⁹ Line 18 from “The Exaltation of Inana (Inana B),” *ETCSL*.

⁶⁰ Line 10 from “A Hymn to Inana (Inana C),” *ETCSL*.

⁶¹ Line 186 from “A Hymn to Inana (Inana C),” *ETCSL*.

⁶² J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

⁶³ Lines 18 and 19 from “A Hymn to Inana (Inana C),” *ETCSL*.

⁶⁴ B. Hruška, “Das spätbabylonische Lehrgedicht ‘Inanna’s Erhöhung’,” *Archiv Orientalni* 37 (1969), p. 492.

“loosened,” “untied,” or otherwise spread out (*búr-búr*). This point was emphasized by Bruschweiler in her commentary on the passage in question: “We must therefore infer that *šitpû* expresses the way in which the fire is burning, either that the flames are rising...or that they are untied, spreading (*BÚR BÚR*).”⁶⁵

How, then, are we to understand the reference to the “loosening” or spreading of Venus’s fire? Would anyone use such language to describe the familiar Venus?

To return to the passage celebrating the terror-spreading torch-star that is Inanna/Venus: It is instructive to note that Akkadian scribes translated the Sumerian word *su-lim* as *ša-lum-mat*, “terrifying radiance.”⁶⁶ The latter word, in turn, was expressly likened to the awe-inspiring radiance of a comet:

“If a UL (comet) that has a crest in front and a tail in back is seen and lights up the sky like a *šallummu*...A *šallummu* equals an awesome radiance [*ša-lum-ma-tu*], An awesome radiance (a comet) equals an awesome radiance [*me-lam-mu*].”⁶⁷

The question arises as to why Inanna/Venus would be described in terms otherwise characteristic of comets. Did the Sumerian skywatchers recognize a structural resemblance between Venus and comets, or was the shared terminology simply a reflection of the fact that Inanna’s planet, like comets, was regarded as a malevolent agent of terror, war, and destruction?

Lamashtu

It has long been known that Inanna shares a fundamental affinity with the Sumerian demoness Lamashtu, although scholars have been hard-pressed to account for the fact.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ F. Bruschweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 112 translates *búr búr* as “untied or unbound.”

⁶⁶ H. Behrens, *op. cit.*, p. 73, citing lines 69-70 from “Inanna’s Exaltation.”

⁶⁷ R. Chadwick, “Identifying Comets and Meteors in Celestial Observation Literature,” in H. Galter ed., *Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens* (Graz, 1993), pp. 173-174, citing K. 350 in CT XXVI 40.

Jan van Dijk confessed his inability to explain the connection: “Viel schwieriger ist es zu erklären, wie sie [Inanna] mit den gefürchteten Lamaštu-Dämoninnen gleichgestellt wurde.”⁶⁹

A witch-like goddess of terrifying appearance and ogre-like appetites, Lamashtu was said to have the head of a lion:

“Great is the daughter of Anu...She is cruel, raging, wrathful, rapacious...Her head is the head of a lion.”⁷⁰

The raging demon was renowned for having disheveled hair. The following passage, wherein Lamashtu’s fall from heaven is recounted, is representative in this regard:

“She is a haunt, she is malicious, Offspring of a god, daughter of Anu. For her malevolent will, her base counsel, Anu her father dashed her down from heaven to earth, For her malevolent will, her inflammatory counsel. Her hair is askew, her loincloth is torn away.”⁷¹

The image of Inanna/Lamashtu being hurled from heaven with disheveled hair once again calls to mind cometary imagery, comets having long been compared to women with disheveled or streaming hair.⁷²

Over the course of untold centuries, Lamashtu eventually became demonized to a point at which her original identification with Inanna/Venus was all but forgotten. The transformation of the warrior-goddess into a witch was complete:

⁶⁸ W. Fauth, “Ištar als Löwengöttin und die löwenköpfige Lamaštu,” *Die Welt des Orients* 12 (1981), pp. 21-36.

⁶⁹ J. van Dijk, “Inanna raubt den ‘grossen Himmel’: Ein Mythos,” In S. Maul ed., *Festschrift für Rykle Borger* (Groningen, 1994), p. 9.

⁷⁰ B. Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 982.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁷² C. Sagan, *Comet* (New York, 1985), p. 14 notes that “a comet suggests flowing tresses.”

“Among all the devils and fiends of which the Mesopotamians lived in terror, the one that seems to have been the most dreaded was [Lamashtu], a she-devil, and the daughter of the great god Anu...The goddess Lamashtu was a violent, raging devil of terrifying aspect...With her hair tossed about wildly, and her breasts uncovered she burst out of the cane brakes like a whirlwind...”⁷³

It is telling that Lamashtu’s attributes find close parallels in the mythological traditions involving Inanna/Venus. As Lamashtu was said to have the head of a lion so, too, was Inanna/Venus invoked as the lion of heaven (pirig-an-na).⁷⁴ Thus the very first line of “A hymn to Inana as Ninegala” invokes the planet-goddess as follows: “Great Light, Lion of Heaven” (u₄-gal pirig-an-na).

Amazingly, the ancient scribes compared Lamashtu to a whirlwind, thereby recalling the description of Inanna/Venus as dalḥamun₂. The disheveled hair of the witch-goddess, similarly, finds an intriguing parallel in a description of Ishtar’s doppelgänger (Saltu) from “The Agushaya Poem”: “Let her be fierce, Let her hair [be ex]traordinary, More [luxu]riant than an orchard.”⁷⁵ In his commentary on this passage, Foster writes: “Exceptional hairiness was considered a sign of primitive strength.”⁷⁶ At this point an obvious question presents itself: Why would the planet Venus be conceptualized as exceptionally hairy?

The fact that the raging warrior-goddess with disheveled hair can be found in the New World as well as the Old is compelling *prima facie* evidence that the imagery in question originated as a direct result of common experience—most likely a particularly

⁷³ E. Budge, *Amulets and Talismans* (New York, 1968), pp. 104-109. See also W. Fauth, *op. cit.*, p. 31, who cites the same passage.

⁷⁴ See line 1 of “A hymn to Inana as Ninegala (Inana D),” *ETCSL*.

⁷⁵ B. Foster, “Ea and Saltu,” *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 19 (1977), p. 99.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

memorable comet-like apparition.⁷⁷ Yet as the example provided by Inanna-Lamashtu attests, there is also an indissoluble connection with the planet Venus.

Inanna's Mane

A Sumerian hymn celebrates the “glossy” mane of Inanna/Venus. Thus, the opening line of “A Song of Inana and Dumuzid” invokes the planet-goddess as follows: “Maiden, glossy mane.”⁷⁸ The phrase in question here is [^{lu2}ki-sikil kun-sig₃]/mul\mul-la, wherein ki-sikil is translated as “maiden” and kun-sig₃ as “mane.” As is often the case with archaic epithets, their underlying etymologies reveal a great deal of valuable information with regards to archaic conceptions of Inanna/Venus.

According to Halloran's *Sumerian Lexicon*, the word kun-sig₃ breaks down as kun, “tail,” and sig₃, “to shake rhythmically.”⁷⁹ Reduplicated, the latter word means “whirlwind.”⁸⁰ In short, it is possible to recognize in the phrase “maiden, glossy mane” a not-so-veiled allusion to a hairy (or tailed) “star.”

The same conclusion is suggested by the fact that the adjective mul\mul is used to describe Inanna's mane: this word is simply the reduplicated word for “star”—mul—used here in the sense of “shining” or “radiating” or “spreading out.”⁸¹ Indeed, the very same adjective is employed elsewhere to describe the celestial lioness Inanna/Venus—pirig an-na mul-mul-lu—thereby confirming the celestial (and luminous) nature of Inanna's “mane” in the passage before us.⁸²

⁷⁷ E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 113-144.

⁷⁸ “A Song of Inana and Dumuzid (Dumuzid-Inana R),” *ETCSL*.

⁷⁹ J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁸² Line 3 of “An *adab* to Inana for Ur-Ninurta, (Ur-Ninurta D),” *ETCSL*. P. Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage* (Helsinki, 2004), p. 40, likewise recognized a stellar context in this particular passage.

Inanna's Terrible Eye

A number of Sumerian literary hymns emphasize the awe-inspiring and terrible nature of Inanna's eye(s). In "The Exaltation of Inanna," for example, the planet-goddess is celebrated as follows:

"That your glance is terrible—be it known! That you lift your terrible glance—be it known! That your glance is flashing—be it known."⁸³

The expression translated as "terrible glance" in lines 128 and 129 is *igi-huš*, literally "red or furious eye." The expression translated as "glance is flashing" is *igi-gun-gun*. Elsewhere in the same hymn the planet-goddess is described as leading the battle-charge in the form of a roaring storm. The passage in question is as follows:

"In the van of battle, everything is struck down by you. Oh my lady, (propelled) on your own wings, you peck away (at the land). In the guise of a charging storm, you charge. With a roaring storm you roar. With Thunder you continually thunder. With all the evil winds you snort."⁸⁴

The expression translated "in the van of battle" by Hallo and van Dijk is Sumerian *igi me*, literally "eye of battle." Viewed in the general context of the hymn's imagery, which describes Inanna/Venus as a roaring, whirling storm, a translation "eye" for *igi* would seem more fitting than the otherwise nondescript "in the van of battle." To this day, after all, meteorologists speak of the "eye" of a tornado or hurricane. The fact that Venus was conceptualized as a stellar "eye" around the globe is also relevant here.⁸⁵

⁸³ W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.

⁸⁵ E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 156-158.

A curious passage in “A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna” credits the planet-goddess with the power to make the midday light turn to darkness. The passage in question reads as follows:

“When you are angrily staring that which is bright gets dark, you turn midday light to darkness.”⁸⁶

Such imagery is extremely difficult to explain by reference to the familiar Venus, needless to say. That said, it is consistent with the planet’s role in ancient astronomical omens which, for some reason, point to an intimate connection between Venus and the sudden onset of darkness: “As clearly stated in the omen texts, the responsibility for such feats [i.e., the darkening of the daylight] is Ištar’s.”⁸⁷ What, then, is the point of reference for the phrase “angry glare”? The phrase in question is *igi-suh*, literally “eye torn out or extracted.”⁸⁸ What does it mean to say that Venus, or its “eye,” is angry or torn out?⁸⁹ It is the catastrophic context of the mythological imagery in question that explains its likely celestial reference. Earlier in the same hymn, it will be remembered, the raging warrior-goddess was said to “stir confusion and chaos.” The latter phrase is *suh₃ igi suh₃-suh₃-suh₃*, wherein *suh₃* signifies “confusion, disorder, and chaos.”⁹⁰ In a subsequent passage Inanna/Venus is described as inciting rebellion (*igi-suh₃-[suh₃]*): “Quarrel, rebellion, struggle, battle and massacre are yours, Inanna.”⁹¹ Taken literally, such passages imply that the planet Venus itself was responsible for inciting the confusion/rebellion (*suh₃*) in question. This, in fact, is precisely our claim: It was the raging celestial Eye (Inanna/Venus) that brought cosmic disorder and confusion. Not surprisingly, the Sumerian language would appear to have preserved a direct link between the “angry

⁸⁶ Line 177 in Å. Sjöberg, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁸⁷ J. Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Winona Lake, 1997), p. 69.

⁸⁸ See the Pennsylvania Dictionary Online. J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 123, translates *suh* as “popped out.”

⁸⁹ It will be noted that the Pyramid Texts (1463) speak of the Eye of Horus being “gouged out.”

⁹⁰ Line 18 in Å. Sjöberg. For the definition of *suh*, see J. Halloran, *op. cit.*, p. 239

⁹¹ Line 164 in Å. Sjöberg, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

glare” of the raging planet-goddess—igi-suh—and the “confusion and disorder” wrought by her—suh₃ igi suh₃-suh₃-suh₃—hitherto overlooked.

It is instructive to note that the Sumerian imagery surrounding the raging Inanna/Venus finds a precise parallel in ancient Egypt. Thus it is that a recurring theme in Egyptian mythological tradition finds a raging warrior-goddess taking the form of a fire-spewing Eye and threatening to destroy the world with her terrifying rampages. In a passage rich in significance, the Coffin Texts speak of the “hair” raised from the Eye during its “raging.”⁹² A gloss from the Papyrus of Ani explains the reference to the raging Eye as follows: “I raise up the hair at the time of storms in the sky...It is the right Eye of Ra in its raging against him after he hath made it to depart.”⁹³

In light of such striking parallels the question arises as to whether the Egyptian Eye-goddess has any relationship to the planet Venus? According to Rolf Krauss, author of the most comprehensive analysis of Egyptian star-religion to date, the Eye of Ra/Horus is to be identified with the planet Venus.⁹⁴ That said, how are we to understand the cataclysmic context of the Eye’s rampages—i.e., its bizarre capacity for raining fire and destruction on mankind? Why would the raging of the Venusian “Eye” be linked to “upraised” hair or “storms”? On these all-important questions Krauss had nothing substantive to offer, noting simply: “It remains unclear how the observer understood raging and peacefulness.”⁹⁵

Inanna’s Tangled Threads

The final paragraphs of the Sumerian hymn “Enki and the world order” find Enki attempting to appease an angry Inanna by recounting all the powers that he has granted

⁹² CT IV: 238: “I raised the hair from the Sacred Eye at its time of wrath.”

⁹³ R. Faulkner, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (San Francisco, 1994), plate 8. See also E. Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London, 1901), pp. 36-37.

⁹⁴ R. Krauss, “The Eye of Horus and the Planet Venus: Astronomical and Mythological References,” in J. Steele & A. Imhausen eds., *Under One Sky* (Münster, 2002), pp. 193-208.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

her. War, as usual, is presented as Inanna's special purview. A curious passage finds Enki announcing to the planet-goddess that he made her "tangle straight threads" while in the hurly-burly of battle.⁹⁶ The Sumerian word translated as "tangle" here is *suḥ₃*—the very word which, when reduplicated, signifies the confusion/disorder promoted by Inanna/Venus. Significantly, the phrase *suḥ₃-suḥ₃* also denotes the frenzied mêlée of battle⁹⁷ and the darkening of heaven.⁹⁸ This overlap in terminology suggests that the "confusion/disorder" incited by Inanna/Venus was somehow connected to "tangled" threads, however the latter are to be conceptualized. The fact that the same word—i.e., *suḥ₃*—is elsewhere⁹⁹ employed to describe the tangled or disordered hair of Inanna/Venus enables us to deduce the answer: It was the disheveled "hair" of the planet Venus that signaled the onset of cosmic confusion and disorder.

Venusian Iconography

If indeed the planet Venus formerly presented the appearance of a whirling storm or long-haired celestial body, it stands to reason that this history must be reflected in the pictographic record associated with that star.¹⁰⁰ The most common symbol for the planet Venus in Mesopotamian art depicts an eight-rayed star (see figure one).¹⁰¹ This symbol traces to the dawn of history and thus must be deemed prehistoric in nature.

⁹⁶ Line 440-441.

⁹⁷ The word is translated as "mêlée" in line 25 of "A *tigi* for Inana (Inana E)," *ETCSL* for example.

⁹⁸ See line 82 of "The lament for Sumer and Urim," *ETCSL*.

⁹⁹ Line 13 of "A *balbale* to Inana (Dumuzid-Inana C)," *ETCSL*.

¹⁰⁰ See the discussion in E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 113-127.

¹⁰¹ Adapted from O. Keel & C. Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God* (Minneapolis, 1998), figure 287.



Figure one



Figure two

On rare occasions, however, the star of Ishtar/Venus is depicted as a pinwheel-like form, with multiple streamers radiating out from the central hub, as in figure two.¹⁰² As I have documented elsewhere, analogous images denote the planet Venus around the globe, compelling evidence that the whirling-stars in question accurately reflect the ancient appearance of Venus. Figure three, for example, shows a picture of Venus from a Teleut shaman's drum (the Teleuts hail from Southern Siberia).¹⁰³ Figure four shows a picture of Venus from a shaman's drum in Chile.¹⁰⁴ It will be noted that in both of these images Venus appears to be radiating whirling streamers from its core. Figure five, finally, is a seventeenth century depiction of the Venus-star from Incan Peru.¹⁰⁵ Significantly, the Inca knew Venus as Chasca, which translates as "star (*coyllur*) with tangled or disheveled

¹⁰² Adapted from *ibid.*, figure 317b.

¹⁰³ Adapted from E. Krupp, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁴ Adapted from E. Krupp, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ Adapted from E. Krupp, "Phases of Venus," *Griffith Observer* 56:12 (1992), p. 14.

Note: Venus/Chasca is the second object in the upper left, just below the Sun.

hair.”¹⁰⁶ Such testimony is in striking accord with the testimony from ancient Mesopotamia surrounding Inanna/Venus.



Figure three



Figure four

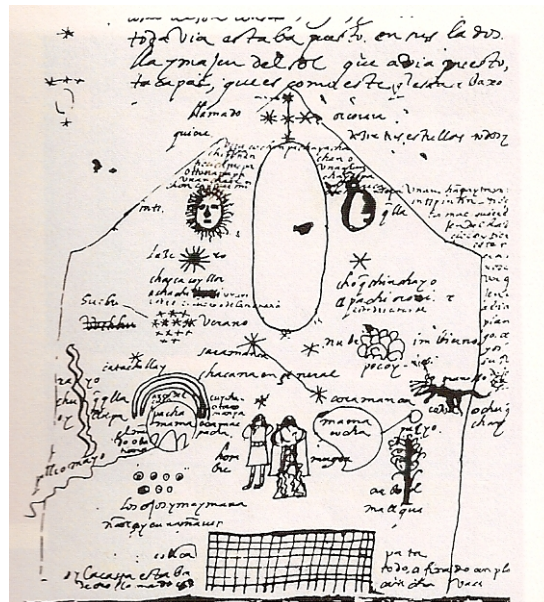


Figure five

¹⁰⁶ W. Sullivan, *The Secret of the Incas* (New York, 1996), p. 87, citing Diego Holquin's *Vocabulario de la lengua general de todo el Peru llamada lengua Quichua o del Inca*.

Conclusion

Ancient Mesopotamia is renowned as the birthplace of scientific astronomy and, as such, it experienced a long history of skywatching marked by careful observation of the respective celestial bodies. This being the case it is disconcerting to discover that Sumerian descriptions of the planet Venus often fail to accord with astronomical reality as currently understood. Conceptualized as a raging warrior whose fiery rampages threatened the world with destruction, Venus was described as an enormous celestial form whose terrifying “radiance” filled all of heaven and rivaled “daylight.” Thus it is that Venus was commonly denoted by the epithet u_4 -gal, a phrase translated as “great or big light.” Yet the very same phrase is elsewhere translated as “great storm,” a startling extension of meaning. Whatever the historical explanation for this peculiar conflation of meteorological imagery, the fact remains that Venus is repeatedly described as a furious storm (*ud huš*) and raging warrior.

Properly understood, the raging warrior-goddess that is Inanna/Venus—explicitly identified with the whirling dancer Agushaya—is inseparable from the raging, whirling storm denoted as u_4 -gal or *dalhamun*₂. The comparison of Inanna/Venus to a “furious storm” or whirling tornado—while wildly incongruous as a description of the familiar Venus—is a perfectly apt description of a lightning-laden celestial body whose comet-like “hair” became unloosed and appeared to whirl about it like a great tornado-like rope. A Sumerian hymn celebrating the mourning goddess Geshtinanna captures this image perfectly: “My hair will whirl around in the air [literally heaven, *an-na*] like a hurricane for you.”¹⁰⁷ If such mythological traditions have an origin in historical/astronomical events—and it is impossible to explain the imagery surrounding Inanna/Venus apart from a tempestuous and stupendously turbulent celestial prototype—it is possible to deduce that it was the whirling “hair” of the planet Venus that darkened the prehistoric skies, thereby ushering in a period of cosmic disorder marked by “war,” terrifying storms, and “confusion.” The extraordinary storms in question, if we are to believe the ancient

¹⁰⁷ Line 67 in “Dumuzid’s Dream,” *ETCSL*. See also B. Alster, *Dumuzi’s Dream* (Copenhagen, 1972), p. 61.

Sumerian scribes, were awe-inspiring and apocalyptic, shaking the heavens and threatening the world with destruction.

Inanna's Earliest Symbol

“While it is certain that the volute-like structure represents a symbol of Inanna, its meaning remains a mystery.”¹⁰⁸

“To some extent, of course, the form given to numinous encounter may adjust to the content revealed in it. It may be abbreviated to a single salient feature, as when Inanna, the numinous power in the storehouse, assumes the form of the characteristic gatepost emblem of the storehouse, rather than the storehouse as a whole.”¹⁰⁹

The earliest Sumerian script, like those of Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica, was primarily pictographic in nature.¹¹⁰ Thus the signs employed to represent individual words and concepts were frequently simply pictorial representations of those words; i.e., “grain” was signified by a sheaf of grain; “bird” by the picture of a bird; “to stand” by a picture of a foot, etc. As the script evolved the range of words was expanded significantly by means of so-called parasemantic shifts wherein the same sign was employed to signify different concepts according to context.¹¹¹

In the most archaic texts from Uruk—conventionally attributed to roughly 3300 BCE¹¹²—Inanna's name was written with a sign known as MUŠ₃, commonly interpreted as a gatepost with streamer (see figure one).¹¹³ Elizabeth Van Buren observed that a single gatepost with streamer “is always used on pictographic tablets to symbolize the goddess,” and that it frequently appears together with the star-sign.¹¹⁴ Although most examples of this

¹⁰⁸ P. Steinkeller, “Inanna's Archaic Symbol,” in J. Braun et al eds., *Written on Clay and Stone* (Warsaw, 1998), p. 89.

¹⁰⁹ T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 7.

¹¹⁰ M. Thomsen, *The Sumerian Language* (Copenhagen, 1984), p. 20.

¹¹¹ N. Postgate, T. Wang & T. Wilkinson, “The evidence for early writing...,” *Antiquity* 69 (1995), p. 451.

¹¹² J. Glassner, *The Invention of Cuneiform* (Baltimore, 2003), p. 45.

¹¹³ C. Wilcke, “Inanna/Ishtar,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 5 (Berlin, 1976-1980), pp. 74-75. For the various examples of this sign in archaic texts, see M. Green & H. Nissen, *Zeichenliste der archaischen Texte aus Uruk* (Berlin, 1987), p. 248.

¹¹⁴ E. Van Buren, *Symbols of the Gods in Mesopotamian Art* (Rome, 1945), p. 43.

sign have been found at the archaic E-anna precinct at Uruk, it also occurs elsewhere in Mesopotamia during the same period.¹¹⁵



Figure one

An obvious question presents itself: If the MUŠ₃-sign is to be regarded as a pictograph denoting Inanna, to what natural object might it refer? Walter Andrae proposed that the spiraling image depicted a pole-like reed-bundle adorning the sacred sheepfold,¹¹⁶ an interpretation that has since found acceptance with many scholars in the field (see figure two). Thorkild Jacobsen, who viewed Inanna as originally embodying the numen of the date-storehouse, had this to say: “Her emblem—that is to say, her preanthropomorphic form—confirms this, for it is, as Andrae has shown, a gatepost with rolled up mat to serve as a door, a distinguishing mark of the storehouse.”¹¹⁷

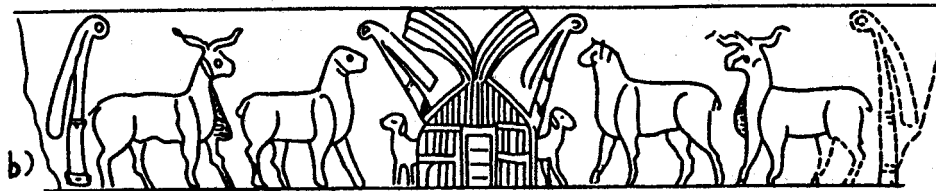


Figure two

Samuel Kramer also endorsed Andrae’s interpretation of Inanna’s symbol. At the same time, he suggested that the MUŠ₃-sign’s peculiar form was patterned after the female body:

¹¹⁵ K. Szarzynska, “Some of the Oldest Cult Symbols in Archaic Uruk,” *Jaarbericht ex Oriente Lux* 30 (1987-88), p. 10.

¹¹⁶ W. Andrae, *Die Ionische Säule* (Berlin, 1933), pp. 20-67.

¹¹⁷ T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), pp. 36, 135.

“These polelike objects are the gatepost emblems of Inanna and appear as her symbol in both the art and the earliest pictographic script from her city, Uruk. They most frequently appear as a pair and are thought to designate the entrance to her temple...On the basis of the ring and streamer at its summit, this emblem’s architectural function has been suggested to be that of a doorpost...The role of the doorpost as a kind of ‘sentry’ guarding the vulnerable entrance to the temple rendered it an important apotropaic, protective emblem in later art. Certainly, this tall emblem with its long streamer surmounted by a round ring is evocative of the female form, and is perhaps a sort of ‘totem’ of the goddess Inanna.”¹¹⁸

Recently, however, the conventional interpretation of the MUŠ₃-sign has come under question. In a review of the evidence pertaining to Inanna’s early symbol, Piotr Steinkeller criticized Andrae’s interpretation by pointing out that the so-called reed-bundles are purely decorative in function and thus could hardly serve as “an organic part of the pen.”¹¹⁹ Steinkeller noted that the symbol’s original significance continues to elude scholars,¹²⁰ leading many to doubt whether the symbol ever had a concrete reference in the natural world:

“But, beyond Andrae’s suggestion, no one has ever attempted to assign to the volute-like structure any specific meaning. The prevailing opinion is that the symbol is devoid of any representational content. Thus, scholars have been content to refer to it purely descriptively, by using such designations as ‘Schilfringbündel,’ ‘a shaft with a banner,’ ‘la hampe à banderole,’ ‘ring-headed post, usually with streamers,’ or ‘roller-blind reed pylon.’”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ D. Wolkstein & S. Kramer, *Inanna* (New York, 1983), p. 188.

¹¹⁹ P. Steinkeller, “Inanna’s Archaic Symbol,” in J. Braun et al eds., *Written on Clay and Stone* (Warsaw, 1998), p. 89.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*: “While it is certain that the volute-like structure represents a symbol of Inanna, its meaning remains a mystery.”

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Rather than a reed-bundle, Steinkeller proposed that the object represented in the MUŠ₃-sign was a head-band or scarf. Steinkeller concluded his article as follows:

“To summarize our conclusions, in the ED passage in question the emblem (urin) of Inanna (=Inanna’s volute-like symbol) is described as a lapis lazuli scarf (bar-si). That scarf was not unlike the ‘diadem’ (suh), which is one of the meanings of MUŠ/MUŠ (a drawing of Inanna’s volute-like symbol). It would seem, therefore, that the archaic symbol of Inanna depicts a scarf or head-band.”¹²²

It is our opinion that Steinkeller’s hypothesis represents an important contribution to the debate. That said, it is not clear why a head-band, crown, or scarf would be chosen to denote Sumer’s greatest goddess.

With Jacobsen, most scholars have sought to understand Inanna by reference to her connection with sacred storehouses and fertility.¹²³ Yet it is well known that Inanna was identified with the planet Venus already at the dawn of the historical period.¹²⁴ Hence the question arises: If the MUŠ₃-sign is to be interpreted with reference to Inanna’s fertility functions, how and why did the goddess come to be associated with the planet Venus? Helgard Balz-Cochois aptly summarized the situation as follows:

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹²³ For Joan Westenholz, “Goddesses of the Ancient Near East 3000-1000 BC,” in L. Goodison & C. Morris eds., *Ancient Goddesses* (London, 1998), p. 73 Inanna represents “the numen of the city’s central storehouse.” G. Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology* (London, 1991), p. 87 writes: “Inanna represented the force of sexual reproduction.” On p. 88 she writes: “She represents the force of fertility rather than the process of birth itself.” P. Steinkeller, “On Rulers, Priests and Sacred Marriage,” in K. Watanabe ed., *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East* (Tokyo, 1996), p. 113, likewise, identifies Inanna as “the goddess of sex drive.”

¹²⁴ W. Heimpel, “A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities,” *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4 (1982), pp. 10-11: “It is, of course, a well-known fact that Inanna was identified with the planet Venus. Astronomical and astrological texts provide clear identifications...When and how the link between the planet was made cannot now be ascertained. It is prehistorical...[It] was already complete when Inanna met Ishtar.”

“The earliest history of Sumer has two symbols at hand by which can be established a reconstruction of the numinous ancient experience: Reed-ring bundle and evening star. How could they be connected with the erotic-aggressive nature of a female goddess?”¹²⁵

Hitherto it has always been assumed that there is no inherent connection between the MUŠ₃-sign and the Venus-star. Indeed, the prevailing view appears to be that Inanna was originally associated with fertility—and thus, by association, with the sacred storehouse and reed-ring bundle—and only later became identified with the planet Venus. We would challenge this view based upon the fact that there is no discernible historical period in which Inanna is not identified with the planet Venus.¹²⁶ Especially relevant is the following fact, overlooked entirely by all Sumerologists: *the planet Venus is associated with fertility by indigenous cultures around the globe.*¹²⁷

In seeking to offer a unifying theory of Inanna’s origins we would start from first principles—the goddess’s identification with the planet Venus—and proceed from the known to the unknown. In the earliest period for which we have written evidence (Uruk IV), the MUŠ₃-sign typically appears without the divine determinative, although exceptions do occur. In the subsequent Uruk III period, the sign is usually accompanied by a divine determinative.¹²⁸ Inasmuch as the cuneiform determinative for “god” features an eight-pointed star, it stands to reason that Inanna was identified with a celestial body during this period. Indeed, the world’s foremost expert on the archaic Uruk script—Krystyna Szarzynska—suggests that in the earliest period the divine determinative seems to have been reserved for astral deities: “In the most archaic period the determinative

¹²⁵ H. Balz-Cochois, *Inanna* (Gütersloh, 1992), p. 46.

¹²⁶ G. Selz, “Five Divine Ladies,” *NIN* 1 (2000), pp. 29-30 writes: “It should be regarded as certain that from proto-historical times Inana(k) was conceived of as a female Venus deity. This is put beyond any reasonable doubt by the interpretation of her name as ‘Lady of Heaven or ‘Queen of Heaven.’...In her research on the textual materials from the Uruk IV-III periods, K. Szarzynska has argued convincingly that the goddess Inana(k) was identified with the planet Venus as early as Uruk IV/III.”

¹²⁷ E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 25-34; 83-87.

¹²⁸ K. Szarzynska, “Cult of the Goddess Inana in Archaic Uruk,” in *Sumerica* (Warsaw, 1997), p. 142.

dingir was associated with astral deities only.”¹²⁹ According to Szarzynska, the cult of astral deities reaches back to the proto-Sumerian period, perhaps earlier.¹³⁰

If the identification of Inanna and Venus was prehistoric in nature—and the evidence certainly supports Szarzynska on this point¹³¹—it stands to reason that the MUŠ₃-sign might also have had some reference to the planet. Certainly this possibility cannot be ruled out based upon the extant evidence. How, then, are we to understand this particular pictograph by reference to Venus?

It must be admitted that it is difficult to reconcile the spiraling volute-form of the MUŠ₃-sign with the familiar appearance of Venus. Indeed, the MUŠ₃-sign would seem more representative of a comet than a planet. With respect to the twelve principal variants of this symbol depicted in Adam Falkenstein’s *Archaische Texte aus Uruk*, Lynn Rose noted that “every one of them looks like a comet.”¹³² Peter Huber—a noted authority on ancient Near Eastern astronomical traditions—acknowledged the resemblance: “The Inanna symbol sometimes looks like a comet.”¹³³ Is it possible, then, that a comet-like object served as the natural prototype for the archaic pictograph of Inanna?¹³⁴

If the MUŠ₃-sign originally had reference to a comet-like object—one somehow connected to the planet Venus—it stands to reason that cometary symbolism should be

¹²⁹ K. Szarzynska, “Some of the Oldest Cult Symbols in Archaic Uruk,” *Jaarbericht ex Oriente Lux* 30 (1987-88), p. 11.

¹³⁰ Personal communication, March 22, 1997, with reference to the article “Cult of the Goddess Inana in Archaic Uruk.”

¹³¹ P. Beaulieu, *The Pantheon of Uruk During Neo-Babylonian Period* (Leiden, 2003), p. 104 writes: “This [the evidence collected by Szarzynska] clearly indicates that the astral identity of Inanna was not the result of late, learned speculations, but indeed a very old and fundamental aspect of the goddess, with roots going back to prehistoric times.”

¹³² L. Rose, “A Critique of Peter Huber,” in L. Greenberg & W. Sizemore, eds., *Velikovsky and Establishment Science* (Glassboro, 1977), p. 108.

¹³³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹³⁴ This possibility, in turn, recalls Immanuel Velikovsky’s controversial thesis that the planet Venus formerly presented a comet-like form. See *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1950). See also E. Cochrane & D. Talbott, “When Venus was a Comet,” *Kronos* 12:1 (1987), pp. 2-24.

evident in early literary descriptions of the Sumerian goddess. And this is certainly the case, as we have documented (see chapter five).¹³⁵ Again and again in the Sumerian texts Inanna is described as raining fire and destruction from the sky. In *The Exaltation of Inanna*, for example, the planet-goddess is described as “Raining the fanned fire down upon the nation.”¹³⁶ The same idea is apparent in a bilingual hymn to Inanna: “I was the blazing, the brilliant (?), fire, I was the blazing fire which became alight in the mountainland; I was the fire whose flame and sparks (?) rained down upon the Rebel land.”¹³⁷

Essential to a proper understanding of Inanna’s numinous nature is the cataclysmic context of her incendiary theophany, explicit in the passages cited above and emphasized repeatedly in the Sumerian literature describing the planet-goddess. Far from being unique to Mesopotamia, the image of a fire-spewing Venus-goddess flying about the skies and threatening the world with destruction is attested around the globe.¹³⁸

Analogous language is evident in literary accounts of the Semitic goddess Ishtar, explicitly identified with the planet Venus:

“I rain battle down like flames in the fighting, I make heaven and earth shake (?) with my cries...I constantly traverse heaven, then (?) I trample the earth. I destroy what remains of the inhabited world.”¹³⁹

The following hymn to Ishtar/Venus is of similar import:

“Planet for the warcry...*Gushea* [an epithet of Ishtar], whose mail is combat, clothed in chilling fear...At the thought of your name, heaven and the netherworld quake...Shining

¹³⁵ E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 99-127.

¹³⁶ W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 17.

¹³⁷ ASKT, 129, lines 11-16 as quoted in J. Wilson, *The Rebel Lands* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 18.

¹³⁸ E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 113-165.

¹³⁹ B. Foster, *Before the Muses* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 74.

torch of heaven...Fiery glow that blazes against the enemy, who wreaks destruction on the fierce, Dancing One, Ishtar..."¹⁴⁰

Here, as in the Sumerian hymns describing Inanna, *it is the planet Venus* that is raining fire and destruction from the sky. The celestial context of the imagery in question could hardly be more evident or explicitly stated.

It will be noted, moreover, that Inanna's manifestation as the raging fire (Sumerian *izi*) is fundamentally indistinguishable from her appearance as a stellar "torch" (Sumerian *izi-gar*). Thus, if one hymn invokes Inanna as a terrifying fire—"When in heaven, Inana, you diffuse awesomeness [*ni₂*] like fire [*i-zi-gim*]"¹⁴¹—another invokes her as a terrifying torch-star: "May your torch, which spreads terror abroad, flare up in the middle of heaven."¹⁴² Yet "torch-star" was a common name for "comet" around the globe.¹⁴³

Equally telling is the fact that the planet-goddess was elsewhere likened to a terrifying dragon moving across the sky. It was in that form, according to *The Exaltation of Inanna*, that the war-mongering planet-goddess rained fire from heaven:

"Like a dragon you have deposited venom on the land, When you roar at the earth like Thunder, no vegetation can stand up to you. A flood descending from its mountain, Oh foremost one, you are the Inanna of heaven and earth! Raining the fanned fire down upon the nation...When mankind comes before you In fear and trembling at your tempestuous radiance."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 510-512.

¹⁴¹ Line 120 from "A Hymn to Inana as Ninegala (Inana D)," *ETCSL*.

¹⁴² B. Hruška, "Das spätbabylonische Lehrgedicht 'Inannas Erhöhung'," *Archiv Orientalni* 37 (1969), p. 492. The original translation is as follows: "Deine Fackel, die Schrecken verbreitet, möge inmitten des Himmels entzündet werden!" See also W. Römer, "Beiträge zum Lexikon des Sumerischen," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* XXXII: 5/6 (1975), p. 297, who offers a virtually identical translation.

¹⁴³ U. Dall'Olmo, "Latin Terminology Relating to Aurorae, Comets, Meteors, and Novae," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 11 (1980), pp. 16-20.

¹⁴⁴ W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), pp. 15-17.

Far from being atypical or exceptional, such cataclysmic imagery abounds in the earliest hymns invoking Inanna.

The disaster-bringing Inanna-dragon represents a Gordian knot—one that must be confronted and unraveled if we are to ever understand the awe-inspiring celestial power that is Inanna/Venus. Hitherto Sumerologists have always taken it for granted that Inanna’s serpentine form has nothing whatsoever to do with the planet Venus, preferring instead to explain the cataclysmic imagery associated with the ophidian Inanna as a product of figurative language and metaphor. Yet this set of assumptions is at odds with the evidence at hand. An early temple-hymn translated by Sjöberg and Bergmann confirms that Inanna—as the planet Venus—was indeed conceptualized as a dragon:

“Your queen (is) Inanna...the great dragon...Through her the firmament is made beautiful in the evening.”¹⁴⁵

The same idea is evident in another Neo-Sumerian temple hymn wherein Inanna/Venus is described as the “dragon of the niginar.”¹⁴⁶ There, too, the goddess is explicitly identified with the planet Venus:

“Your queen (is) Inanna,.the great dragon of the niginar, The great queen of heaven and earth, Inanna.”¹⁴⁷

As the Queen of Heaven, the planet Venus was venerated throughout the ancient Near East.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Å. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), p. 36.

¹⁴⁶ See line 206 in “The temple hymns,” *ETCSL*. There Black points out that niginar denotes a shrine dedicated to Inanna.

¹⁴⁷ Å. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁴⁸ C. Houtman, “Queen of Heaven,” in K. van der Toorn et al eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, 1995), cols. 1278-1283. See also T. Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once...* (New Haven, 1987), p. 16.

Inanna's serpentine-form is difficult to reconcile with the current appearance and behavior of Venus, needless to say, for at no time does the planet ever present the image of a serpent or dragon, much less one rampaging about heaven while raining fire and destruction. Yet if Venus presented a comet-like form during the late prehistoric period the Sumerian descriptions of Inanna would be explained at one stroke and in a perfectly logical manner, insofar as comets have been compared to "dragon-stars" since time immemorial.¹⁴⁹

The fact that skywatchers far removed from Mesopotamia likewise ascribed ophidian features to Venus confirms that there was indeed something about the appearance of the planet that led it to be conceptualized as a serpent. Various cultures in Mesoamerica, otherwise renowned for their veneration of Venus and the development of sophisticated astronomical calendars centered around that planet's synodic period, compared it to a great dragon or serpent. Thus, the natives of Yucatán knew Venus as the "plumed serpent star."¹⁵⁰ Venus was ascribed a serpentine form by indigenous cultures from Africa and South America as well, as I have documented.¹⁵¹ The Karanga of South Africa, for example, said of the planet Venus that it "could also transform herself into a serpent."¹⁵²

Granted that Inanna/Venus was conceptualized as a serpent-like form—and Ishtar herself was known as the "terrifying dragon of the gods"¹⁵³—what, if anything, does this datum have to do with the spiraling form depicted in the MUŠ₃-sign? Certainly it is relevant to find that Inanna/Venus was described by the Sumerian word muš, signifying "serpent."¹⁵⁴ Thus, in the Late Babylonian version of "The Exaltation of Inanna" the planet-goddess is

¹⁴⁹ E. Cochrane, *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001), pp. 113-144.

¹⁵⁰ B. Tedlock, "Maya Astronomy: What We Know and How We Know It," *Archaeoastronomy* 18 (1999), p. 55.

¹⁵¹ E. Cochrane, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-124.

¹⁵² H. von Sicard, "Karanga Stars," *NADA* 19 (1943), p. 50.

¹⁵³ B. Foster, *Before the Muses* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 240.

¹⁵⁴ J. Halloran, *Sumerian Lexicon* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 182.

said to approach the earth like a muš-serpent.¹⁵⁵ The same basic idea is evident in the Sumerian epic *Inanna and Ebiḫ*, wherein the planet-goddess compares herself to the serpentine *muš-sag-kal*: “Like the FIRST SNAKE I come out of the mountains.”¹⁵⁶ The monster in question, according to Betty Meador and Daniel Foxvog, represented “the first or primary or archetypal snake.”¹⁵⁷ The muš-serpent, in turn, recalls the *mušḫuššu* dragon, “the red (or fierce) dragon,” a notorious monster in Mesopotamian lore (see figure three).¹⁵⁸



Figure three

In light of the fact that Inanna/Venus was expressly likened to a muš-serpent, the question arises as to whether there was some sort of relationship between this particular serpent-dragon and the MUŠ₃-sign used to denote Inanna/Venus. Mesopotamian iconography provides some support for this possibility. Recalling the fact that the MUŠ₃-poles were frequently placed alongside entrances or doors, often in pairs, it is relevant to note that muš-dragons performed a similar function in ancient cult, serving as apotropaic guardians at the entrances to sacred structures.¹⁵⁹ Thus an inscription of

¹⁵⁵ See line 9 from Tablet 4. B. Hruška, “Das spätbabylonische Lehrgedicht ‘Inannas Erhöhung’,” *Archiv Orientalni* 37 (1969), p. 492.

¹⁵⁶ B. Meador, *Inanna: Lady of the Largest Heart* (Austin, 2000), p. 96.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna la déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 23, translates this phrase as “chief of serpents.”

¹⁵⁸ See the discussion in F. Wiggermann, “Mischwesen,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 8 (Berlin, 1993-1997), pp. 222-245.

¹⁵⁹ F. Wiggermann, “*mušḫuššu*,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 8 (Berlin, 1993-1997), p. 460 stated: “From the late third millennium onwards m.’s [*mušḫuššu*-dragons] guarding doorways are inscriptionally attested.”

Nebuchanezzar II speaks of the terrifying figures adorning the famous Ishtar Gate of Babylon: “At the sides of its gates I set up fierce bronze bulls and savage *mušḫuššu*.”¹⁶⁰

As W. G. Lambert documented, this artistic motif can be traced throughout much of Mesopotamian history. As early as Gudea’s reign (ca. 2150 BCE) artistic scenes and inscriptions represent *mušḫuššu*-like dragons as gate-keepers.¹⁶¹ A year-date of Naram-Sin of Eshnunna speaks of decorating a gate with *mušḫuššu*-dragons.¹⁶² Obviously puzzled by the fact that early Sumerian temple hymns likewise mention *muš*-serpents in conjunction with temple-gates, Åke Sjöberg noted that the *muš*-serpent “seems to represent the embellishment and decoration at the gate of the temple.”¹⁶³

This striking convergence in iconographical function provides a measure of support for the hypothesis that the spiraling volute-like structure commemorated in the MUŠ₃-sign is conceptually analogous to that ascribed to the *muš*-serpent. That the Sumerian scribes themselves recognized the connection is evidenced by an early hymn to the temple Ekishnugal, wherein it is written: “House, your MUŠ₃ is a giant snake (*muš*).”¹⁶⁴

In order to gain additional clarity on the celestial context of Inanna’s serpentine attributes, it is instructive to compare the Sumerian testimony with that from other cultures. The sacred traditions from ancient Egypt are especially relevant here, being roughly contemporaneous in date. What we are looking for, ideally, is a stellar goddess who makes a habit of assuming the form of a fire-spewing serpent. Should such a

¹⁶⁰ W. Lambert, “The History of the *muš-ḫuš* in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in U. Seidl ed., *l’animal, l’homme, le dieu dans le proche-orient ancien* (Leuven, 1985), p. 87.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93. There Lambert writes: “The combination of these two animals to guard entrances thus attested in Gudea and Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon is a striking testimony to continuity in ancient Mesopotamia of the use of these creatures.”

¹⁶² J. Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Winona Lake, 1997), p. 189.

¹⁶³ See line 418 of “The temple hymns,” *ETCSL*: “On your awesome and radiant gate a decoration displays a horned viper and a *mušḫuš* embracing.” See also Å. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), p. 69.

¹⁶⁴ Å. Sjöberg, *Der Mondgott Nanna-Suen* (Stockholm, 1980), p. 124: “Haus, dein *mùš* ist eine Riesenschlange...” The original wording here is *é mùš-zu muš-gal SUG-muš-a*. See also line 112 in “The temple hymns,” *ETCSL* where the translation is “Your platform is a great snake, a marsh of snakes.”

goddess be found—and we won't have far to look—it will be important to determine if she bears any relationship to spiraling forms similar to that represented in the Sumerian MUŠ₃-graph.

The Uraeus-Goddess

“Whoever wishes to understand ancient Egyptian culture, and especially its religion and way of thinking, must learn the language of images.”¹⁶⁵

In ancient Egypt we are confronted with the only advanced civilization that has a written tradition comparable in antiquity to that of Mesopotamia. Unified under a common king as early as 3000 BCE, Egyptian culture was characterized by its conservative nature and remained essentially unchanged for the better part of three thousand years until the arrival of Alexander the Great.¹⁶⁶ This antiquity, coupled with an extensive corpus of religious texts dating to as early as 2350 BCE, makes Egypt a perfect testing ground to determine whether the disaster-bringing serpentine-goddess was unique to Mesopotamia.

Known by numerous different names and epithets—Hathor, Isis, Sakhmet, Wadjet, Wepset, among others—the Egyptian mother goddess is everywhere represented as a fire-spewing uraeus-serpent. It is Hathor, perhaps, who offers the most striking parallel to the Sumerian Inanna. Again and again Hathor is described as a raging warrior whose terrifying rampages threaten to destroy the world. A text known as the *Destruction of Mankind* finds Hathor being dispatched by Re to rain fire and destruction upon mankind:

“Let go forth thine Eye, let it destroy for thee those who blaspheme with wickedness, not an eye can precede it in resistance...when it goeth forth in the form of Hathor. Went forth then this goddess, she slew mankind on the mountain.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ E. Hornung, “Ancient Egyptian Religious Iconography,” in J. Sasson ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, Vols. 3/4 (Farmington Hills, 1995), p. 1729.

¹⁶⁶ J. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 19 writes: “The unchanging fundamentals of its symbolic meaning-world extend across a period of three and a half thousand years, from 3200 B.C.E. to 300 C.E. This unbroken unity and sense of unchanging collective identity is surely without parallel.”

¹⁶⁷ E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol. I (New York, 1969), p. 392.

Although this text is relatively late in date,¹⁶⁸ the same basic theme recurs throughout the three thousand years of Egyptian history. The raging mother-goddess is alluded to in numerous spells from the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, for example. Spell 316 from the Coffin Texts invokes the raging goddess as the “Eye of Horus”: “I am the fiery Eye of Horus, which went forth terrible, Lady of slaughter, greatly awesome...I am indeed she who shoots.”¹⁶⁹ In another spell fire and devastation are said to accompany the Eye’s rampage: “The fire will go up, the flame will go up...the fiery one will be against them as the Eye of Rê.”¹⁷⁰ Elsewhere it is said of the warring Eye-goddess: “Its flame is to the sky.”¹⁷¹ Other passages speak of the hair raised from the raging Eye: “I raised up the hair from the Sacred Eye at the time of its wrath.”¹⁷² In a text from Unis’s pyramid, the flame from the Eye is likened to a raging storm: “I will put flame in my eye, and it will encompass you and set storm among the doers of (evil) deeds.”¹⁷³

In the so-called hymns to the royal crown from the Middle Kingdom (ca. 1600 BCE) the uraeus-goddess features prominently. The goddess’s epithets emphasize her incendiary nature:

“Exalted is your power, O Burning One, O Sated One, O Mighty One, Powerful, Skilful of Flames, Lady of the Sky, Mistress of the Two Lands O Eye of Horus, and his guide...Lady of Eternity, Fiery One, O Red One, whose Flame burns, Serpent Uraeus,

¹⁶⁸ It dates to the time of King Tut. See S. Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London, 1992), p. 164.

¹⁶⁹ CT IV: 98. R. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts, Vol. 1* (Warminster, 1973-1978), p. 238.

¹⁷⁰ CT V: 264.

¹⁷¹ CT III:343.

¹⁷² CT IV: 232. In the *Papyrus of Ani*, similarly, it is written: “I raise up the hair at the time of storms in the sky...It is the right Eye of Ra in its raging against him after he hath made it to depart.” See E. Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London, 1901), pp. 36-37.

¹⁷³ PT 298-299.

who guides the people, O Lady of Fire, O Searing One, O Devourer, O Scorching One...”¹⁷⁴

The goddess Sakhmet is described in similar terms and is for all practical purposes interchangeable with Hathor. In the Bremner-Rhind papyrus, it is Sakhmet who protects the king and wards off his enemies as the raging Eye:

“Thou art (condemned) to this fire of the Eye of Re; it sends forth (?) its fiery blast against thee in this its name of Wadjet; it consumes thee in this its name of ‘Devouring Flame’; it has power over thee in this its name of Sakhmet; it is fiery against thee in this its name of ‘Glorious Serpent’.”¹⁷⁵

The image of Sakhmet as a raging goddess is also attested among the texts discovered at Philae. Here, as elsewhere, Sakhmet is identified as the “Eye of Horus”:

“Sakhmet, the strong one (*wsrt*), is in Bigeh in her form as the Eye of Horus, the living [eye...] while [spreading fire (?)] with the flame when she goes round, while scorching the rebels with the heat of her mouth. She is the primeval snake (*krht*).”¹⁷⁶

In the texts from Edfu, Sakhmet is once again compared to a flame-throwing serpent and celebrated for her protective powers. The following passage is representative in this regard:

“O Sekhmet, Eye of Re, great of flame, Lady of protection who envelops her creator...O Sekhmet who fills the ways with blood, Who slaughters to the limits of all she sees,

¹⁷⁴ A. Erman, *Hymnen an das Diadem der Pharaonen* (Berlin, 1911), p. 28. Translation by A. Roberts, *Hathor Rising* (Devon, 1995), p. 8.

¹⁷⁵ R. Faulkner, “The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus — IV,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 24 (1938), p. 45.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted from J. F. Borghouts, “The Evil Eye of Apophis,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 59 (1973), p. 136.

Come towards the living image, the living Hawk, Protect him, and preserve him from all evil.”¹⁷⁷

Even from this cursory survey of the rich and multifaceted Egyptian traditions it is evident that the Eye-Goddess and Inanna/Venus share numerous mythological attributes in common. In both cultures, the mother goddess is conceptualized as a raging serpentine monster, raining fire and destruction from the sky. As Sakhmet was invoked as the primeval snake—*krḥt*—so too was Inanna invoked as *muš-sag-gal*, the first or archetypal snake.¹⁷⁸ And as Sakhmet “fills the ways with blood,” so too was it said of Inanna: “She filled the wells of the nation with blood.”¹⁷⁹

In light of such striking parallels the question arises as to whether the Egyptian Eye-goddess has any relationship to the planet Venus? According to Rolf Krauss, the Eye of Ra/Horus is to be identified with the planet Venus.¹⁸⁰ If Krauss’s identification can be confirmed—and Talbott and I offered the same identification a decade before him¹⁸¹—this would support the hypothesis that the mythological imagery surrounding Inanna and Hathor/Sakhmet likely traces to ancient conceptions involving Venus.

The Uraeus-crown

For Jan Assmann, the uraeus-crown was “the most distinctive symbol of kingship.”¹⁸² Why this should be the case is not addressed nor, for that matter, is it evident why a fire-spewing serpent should come to serve as the pharaoh’s royal head-band. Yet Assmann’s

¹⁷⁷ Quoted from A. Roberts, *Hathor Rising* (Devon, 1995), p. 13.

¹⁷⁸ B. Meader, *Inanna: Lady of the Largest Heart* (Austin, 2000), p. 203.

¹⁷⁹ Line 131 from “Inana and Šu-kale-tuda,” *ETCSL*.

¹⁸⁰ R. Krauss, “The Eye of Horus and the Planet Venus: Astronomical and Mythological References,” in J. Steele & A. Imhausen eds., *Under One Sky* (Münster, 2002), pp. 193-208.

¹⁸¹ E. Cochrane & D. Talbott, “When Venus was a Comet,” *Kronos* XII:1 (1987), pp. 14-16.

¹⁸² J. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 323.

claim can hardly be denied. Carol Andrews offered a similar opinion in her analysis of Egyptian symbolism:

“From the earliest dynasties the upreared cobra, the uraeus, was the emblem of royalty, worn on pharaoh’s forehead to signify his kingship and divinity. As a goddess she was the eye of the sun, spitting fire at the king’s enemies. Called in Egyptian *irt* (iaret) or *mhn* (mehen), ‘the Coiled One’, the uraeus was among the amulets depicted in both the MacGregor Papyrus and the Osiris complex at Dendera.”¹⁸³

The central importance of the uraeus-serpent in Egyptian royal ideology is especially conspicuous in coronation rites. As strange as it must appear to the modern mind, the king’s coronation was not considered ratified or “effective” until the uraeus-serpent had been placed on his head as a crown. Barbara Lesko summarized these curious rites as follows:

“Certainly the king’s coronation was not complete until the uraeus was placed on his brow. Both King Horemheb of the Eighteenth Dynasty and Ramses III of the Twentieth mention this rite in their inscriptions.”¹⁸⁴

It is important to underscore the fact that it was the mother goddess herself who, as the fire-spitting uraeus, formed the crown of kingship. T. Rundle Clark, among others, has emphasized the archetypal significance of the uraeus-serpent in this regard:

“The cobra was the protector of the crown and is shown attached to the front, just above the king’s forehead. Hence we get the fundamental symbol equation of Egyptian religion: Eye=Flame=Destructive Goddess=Cobra=Crown. This holds true from the Pyramid Texts to the end of the civilization.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ C. Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt* (Austin, 1994), pp. 75-76.

¹⁸⁴ B. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (Norman, 1999), p. 75.

¹⁸⁵ R. T. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1959), p. 220.

Clark's conclusion warrants close scrutiny. Unquestionably correct, it begs the question: Why would a dragon-like goddess be identified with the crown of kingship? A satisfactory answer to this question will revolutionize our understanding of the archaic cult of the mother goddess—and with it the recent history of the solar system.

If we are to judge by the Egyptian testimony on the matter, the symbolism attached to the uraeus-serpent as the Eye and/or crown of kingship would appear to find its divine prototype—and probable historical origin—in the singular events associated with the crowning of Horus, the proverbial King of the Gods. As delineated in the Pyramid Texts, the uraeus-serpent came to adorn the forehead of Horus as the crown of kingship during the decidedly catastrophic events attending Creation. A Pyramid Text devoted to the red crown (*Nt*-crown), wherein the uraeus-serpent is addressed as Ikhet, is instructive here:

“He has come to you, O *Nt*-crown; he has come to you, O Fiery Serpent; he has come to you, O Great One; he has come to you, O Great of Magic, being pure for you and fearing you...He has come to you, O Great of Magic, for he is Horus encircled with the protection of his Eye, O Great of Magic...Ho, Crown great of magic! Ho Fiery Serpent! Grant that the dread of me be like the dread of you; Grant that the fear of me be like the fear of you...If Ikhet the Great has borne you, Ikhet the Serpent has adorned you; If Ikhet the Serpent has borne you, Ikhet the Great has adorned you, Because you are Horus encircled with the protection of his Eye.”¹⁸⁶

Evident here is a central tenet of archaic Egyptian religion: The dread-inspiring mother goddess, alternately identified as “Fiery Serpent” and “Eye,” once encircled Horus and thereby provided him with the crown of kingship. Thus it is that the word *i/akhet*—in addition to identifying the serpent-goddess—could also signify a crown or diadem.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ *PT* 194-198.

¹⁸⁷ S. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts in Translation and Commentary, Vol. II* (New York, 1952), p. 184.



Figure four

Figure four shows the predynastic ruler Narmer wearing the Red Crown as ruler of Egypt. In addition to being among the most familiar symbols from ancient Egypt, the Red Crown is also among the most enigmatic. Attested in rock art from the fourth millennium BCE (see figure five), the Red Crown is distinguished by the curious “coil” spiraling upwards from the crown:

“It is the oldest hieroglyph known, appearing on a pot dating from the middle of the fourth millennium; but it is hard to say whether it already had a value as a code or whether it was simply a drawing of the object.”¹⁸⁸



Figure five

¹⁸⁸ M. Betrò, *Hieroglyphics* (New York, 1996), p. 194.

Egyptologists readily concede their inability to explain either the origins or symbolic significance of the Red Crown. Witness the observation of Toby Wilkinson:

“There is, as yet, no satisfactory explanation for the origin of the two principal crowns, the red and white...A sherd from a large black-topped red-ware vessel of late Naqada I date, from the site of Naqada itself, bears a representation of the red crown in relief...The shape of the crown is quite distinctive, but again its symbolic meaning is unknown...There is an obscure passage in the Pyramid Texts of Unas which may refer to the curly part of the red crown, but it remains poorly understood.”¹⁸⁹

A decisive clue to the symbolism in question is offered by the fact that, on a label of King Serpent (Djer) found at Sakkara, the uraeus-serpent substitutes for the Red Crown. As Alan Gardiner observed, this substitution of hieroglyphs hints at a fundamental affinity or synonymy between the two hieroglyphs.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, it is our view that the spiraling curl adorning the Red Crown is simply the uraeus-serpent in its angry or “rearing” phase.

Comparing the Egyptian symbolism with that from Mesopotamia, it is evident that the spiraling volute presented by the red crown’s rearing uraeus-serpent bears a marked resemblance to the spiraling volute depicted in the MUŠ₃-sign associated with Inanna/Venus. It is our opinion, in fact, that the two symbols represent analogous structural forms and commemorate a common celestial prototype—specifically, a spectacular comet-like phase in the recent history of the planet Venus.

In light of the intimate relationship between the uraeus-serpent and the crown of kingship in ancient Egypt, the question arises as to whether the MUŠ₃ graph was associated with the royal crown in ancient Mesopotamia? Here we would call attention to the Sumerian word MUŠ₃=suḫ₁₀, signifying a luminous crown or headdress of some sort.¹⁹¹ According to “Ninurta’s Journey to Eridug,” the MUŠ₃-crown served as a proverbial sign of

¹⁸⁹ T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 2001), pp. 192-193.

¹⁹⁰ A. Gardiner, “The Personal Name of King Serpent,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 44 (1958), p. 38.

¹⁹¹ J. Halloran, *Sumerian Lexicon* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 239.

sovereignty: “[Ninurta] put on a crown as a sign of kingship, tied on a lapis suh as a sign of enship.”¹⁹²

A connection between the MUŠ₃-crown and sovereignty is also evident in “Enki and the World Order”: “To bring about the birth of a king, to tie (onto him) the legitimate [MUŠ₃-crown], to bring about the birth of an en-priest(ess) to set a crown (upon his/her head), it is in her (Nintu’s) power.”¹⁹³ As is obvious from Nintu’s function here, there was thought to be an intimate connection between the mother goddess and the crown of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia. Thus it is that Nintu, as the “Lady of the diadem,” placed the crown on the king in Old Babylonian investiture rituals.¹⁹⁴

That the MUŠ₃-crown in question had a celestial prototype is certain. Thus, in an early temple hymn the sun-god Utu is said to tie “the mùš-crown (around his head).”¹⁹⁵ Utu is also described as adorned with a lapis-lazuli diadem (MUŠ₃= suh₁₀) in the early hymn “Gilgamesh and Huwawa.”¹⁹⁶

Yet the MUŠ₃-crown in question is elsewhere mentioned in conjunction with Inanna as the planet Venus. Witness the following temple hymn, portions of which were quoted earlier:

“Your queen (is) Inanna, .(She carries) the..mùš-crown (lustrous as) lapis lazuli, the great dragon of the nigingar, The great queen of heaven and earth, Inanna.”¹⁹⁷

To summarize: The natural object referenced by the MUŠ₃-sign employed to denote the Sumerian goddess Inanna has long eluded scholars. Steinkeller’s suggestion that the

¹⁹² P. Steinkeller, “Inanna’s Archaic Symbol,” in J. Braun et al eds., *Written on Clay and Stone* (Warsaw, 1998), p. 94. See lines 10-12 (Segment B) of “Ninurta’s journey to Eridug,” *ETCSL*.

¹⁹³ Lines 197-198 as quoted in P. Steinkeller, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁹⁴ T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 109.

¹⁹⁵ Å. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), p. 46. See line 490 in “The temple hymns,” *ETCSL*.

¹⁹⁶ Line 29 in “Gilgamesh and Huwawa (Version B),” *ETCSL*.

¹⁹⁷ Å. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

MUŠ₃-sign has some reference to a “crown-like” object represents a step in the right direction. Yet this interpretation will never explain the terrifying numen that was Inanna, who, from the very outset of her appearance in Sumerian literature, was described as an awe-inspiring celestial power, raining fire and destruction from above. The fact that Inanna was early on identified with the planet Venus and explicitly likened to a fire-spewing dragon or muš-serpent is prerequisite to a proper interpretation of the MUŠ₃-sign. As we have documented, the muš-serpent and the MUŠ₃-pole share an analogous function in sacred iconography as numen-laden guardians of sacred structures or entrances. This striking convergence in iconographical function—precisely paralleled in the sacred iconography associated with the Egyptian uraeus-serpent, which likewise stood alongside temple doors to ward off intruders¹⁹⁸—provides compelling support for the hypothesis that the natural form commemorated in the MUŠ₃-sign was conceptualized as a muš-dragon, among other things. Indeed, the evidence presented here is consistent with the hypothesis that the Inanna-symbol, like Inanna herself, traces to a celestial prototype—most likely some sort of comet-like apparition associated with the planet Venus, however that apparition is to be explained from an astronomical standpoint.

The thesis put forward here will also resolve one of the most perplexing problems with respect to Inanna’s early symbol—namely, the fact that it disappeared very early in Sumerian history.¹⁹⁹ Thus Steinkeller reports that “since no certain depictions of it are extant from later periods, the active life of this symbol in cult apparently did not extend beyond Uruk times.”²⁰⁰ Yet why should this be if, as we are asked to believe, the symbol represented a simple crown or head-band? Did crowns or head-bands suddenly go out of

¹⁹⁸ S. Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London, 1992), p. 116.

¹⁹⁹ A. Green, “Ancient Mesopotamian Religious Iconography,” in J. Sasson ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vols. 3/4* (Farmington Hills, 1995), p. 1840 makes it disappear with the Early Dynastic period. E. C. L. During Caspers, “The Gate-Post in Mesopotamian Art...,” *Jaarbericht ex Oriente Lux* (1971/2), p. 219 writes: “Thus it would appear that towards the close of the third millennium B.C. the gate-post symbol, except for a few isolated cases..., had gone out of fashion, no longer representing a religious concept which it had symbolized for almost a millennium.”

²⁰⁰ P. Steinkeller, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

fashion in Sumerian cult? Hardly. Rather, the answer to this conundrum would appear to be as follows: The natural form referenced by the MUŠ₃-sign—i.e., the spiraling comet-like apparition presented by the planet Venus—disappeared from the ancient skies at some point between prehistoric times and the end of the Early Dynastic period. As the planet Venus settled into a more stable orbit, its heaven-spanning tail disappeared together with its terrifying aspect. At that decisive juncture in history new symbols were devised to describe Sumer's greatest goddess.

