

3. Creation Amongst the Skidi Pawnee

“No other primitive people has such an extensive and accurate record of its myths, tales, and legends as the North American Indian.”¹

How and when the Americas were first settled is lost in the mists of prehistory and remains a matter of controversy and rampant speculation. Whether the earliest inhabitants trekked across the Bering land-bridge which once connected Siberia with western North America, or whether they came in waves by way of rafts and canoes, will not concern us here. What is certain is that sometime after their arrival from distant continents, the ancestors of the so-called Indians quickly set about exploring and expanding into the furthest outreaches of North and South America. Some, like those who settled along the Northwest coast of Canada and North America, adopted a relatively sedentary lifestyle marked by fishing and farming. Others, like the Plains Indians, eventually pursued a more nomadic lifestyle, following the buffalo herds wherever they might lead them.

Among the tribes that Lewis and Clark encountered during their remarkable journey across the heartland of North America were the Skidi Pawnee, who had settled along the Loup river in what is now central Nebraska. The Skidi made their living hunting buffalo, raising corn, and raiding their neighbors.²

The Skidi comprise one of the four major bands of the Pawnee and are thought to have immigrated to the Mid-western plains from the South, perhaps preserving religious beliefs otherwise characteristic of the cultures of Mesoamerica and the American Southwest. They speak a Caddoan language.

At the time of their first encounter with Europeans—Spanish and French trappers—the tribe is thought to have numbered around 10,000. Within one century after the visit by

¹ S. Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians* (Bloomington, 1966), p. xvi.

² For a general overview of their history, see B. Pritzker, *A Native American Encyclopedia* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 350-352.

Lewis and Clark, the Skidi were reduced to some 600 individuals living on the brink of starvation and extinction.

The Skidi were inveterate sky-watchers. Indeed, it has been said that they were “obsessed with the planets”³ and had “a sky oriented theology perhaps without parallel in human history.”⁴

The planet Venus was conceptualized as a Star Woman by the name of *cu-piritta-ka*, which translates literally as “female white star.”⁵ 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 [Skidi]. Through her it is possible for people to increase and crops to mature.”⁶

It is to be noted that the planet Venus was explicitly distinguished from the “Morning Star.” In fact, the Skidi identified the mythical “Morning Star” with the planet Mars, the latter envisaged as a powerful warrior of irascible disposition. 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...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. His head was to be decked with soft down and he was to carry a war club. He was not a

³ V. Del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (College Park, 1982), p. 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵ J. Murie, “Ceremonies of the Pawnee,” *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology* 27 (Cambridge, 1981), p. 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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?* (literally, 'big star'), or the god of war."⁷

Like numerous other indigenous cultures, the Skidi traced their 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 itself unfolded as a direct result of their sexual union. In summarizing the events in question, Ralph Linton stated simply "The Morning Star married the Evening Star."⁸

The *hieros gamos* between Mars and Venus was ritually reenacted during especially 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.⁹ Here 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 war party 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 Venus—being painted head to toe and outfitted with a curious fan-shaped headdress.¹⁰ The victim was then led to a scaffold specially erected for the occasion whereupon, after mounting the final rung, she was shot in the heart by an arrow from the bow of the man impersonating Morning Star. The priests in charge of the gruesome rite took great care to ensure that the girl's blood was directed to a cavity below the scaffold. This pit was lined

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁸ R. Linton, "The Sacrifice to Morning Star by the Skidi Pawnee," *Leaflet Field Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology* 6 (1923), p. 5

⁹ R. 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).

¹⁰ See the photo on page 190 of E. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (New York, 1991).

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.”¹¹

In the Pawnee village, successful completion of the sacrifice was greeted with great rejoicing and a period of “ceremonial sexual license to promote fertility.”¹²

As bizarre as this rite appears to the modern reader, anthropologists are generally agreed as to its fundamental purpose—to commemorate the sacred events of Creation. Ralph Linton’s comments on the ritual 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.”¹³

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? The simplest explanation, as well as the most logical, is to trace the mythological 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.”¹⁴

¹¹ G. Welfish, *The Lost Universe* (New York, 1965), p. 112.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹³ R. Linton, “The Sacrifice to Morning Star by the Skidi Pawnee,” *Leaflet Field Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology* 6 (1923), p. 17.

¹⁴ R. Williamson, *Living the Sky* (Norman, 1984), p. 225.

It was the astronomer Von Del Chamberlain who conducted the most extensive investigation into the historical basis of the Skidi traditions.¹⁵ He, too, concluded that astronomical events inspired the sacred traditions in question: “The conjunctions of Venus and Mars do seem to be the key to the Skidi concept of celestial parentage.”¹⁶ As for how these “conjunctions” were to be understood from an astronomical standpoint, Von Del Chamberlain opined that they had reference to Mars’ periodic migration from the morning sky to the western evening sky whereupon, on very rare occasions, it would conjoin with Venus. Other astronomers have since endorsed Chamberlain’s interpretation.¹⁷

Granted that “actual celestial occurrences” are encoded in the Skidi myth of Creation, it remains far from obvious how we are to understand the origin of the specific motifs surrounding the respective planets given Von Del Chamberlain’s theory. Why was Venus conceptualized as the prototypical female power? Why was Mars viewed as masculine in nature or identified as 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 explanation under the thesis advanced by Von Del Chamberlain.

Perhaps the most important question facing students of ancient myth is the following: Do the Skidi myths with respect to Venus and Mars have an historical or observational basis? Stated another way: Are the sacred traditions in question to be understood as reliable memories regarding 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 represent reliable memories regarding Venus and Mars (and of Creation), it is instructive to perform a cross-cultural analysis of astral lore. If the Skidi traditions have a rational foundation in actual

¹⁵ V. Del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (College Park, 1982).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁷ E. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (New York, 1991), pp. 189-192.

historical events, 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 from the Old World would relate 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, this finding would constitute compelling evidence for the thesis defended here, which holds that the Amerindian 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 respective planets.

4. Inanna: Queen of Heaven

“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, 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.”¹⁸

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

¹⁸ J. Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* (New Hyde Park, 1961), p. 39.

entire Near East, offerings to Inanna/Venus far outnumber those of any other deity.¹⁹ 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 oldest extant literary texts from Mesopotamia date from the Early Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1800 BCE).²⁰ It is commonly believed that such texts were preserved orally for numerous generations and thus represent archetypal traditions about the Sumerian gods. Indeed, Szarzynska holds it probable that this sacred literature includes some very ancient ideas, perhaps reflecting “archaic Sumerian tradition.”²¹

The Sacred Marriage Rite

“The Babylonian paradigm for love and marriage was the relationship between Inanna and Dumuzi.”²²

One of the most important celebrations in ancient Mesopotamia was the so-called sacred marriage rite, alleged to commemorate the sexual union of Inanna with Dumuzi.²³ Early texts confirm that the performance was believed to stimulate the growth of crops. Of untold antiquity—a vase recovered from the Protoliterate period at Uruk (ca. late 4th

¹⁹ K. Szarzynska, “Offerings for the goddess Inana,” *Revue d’assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale* 87 (1993), p. 7.

²⁰ J. Hayes, *A Manual of Sumerian Grammar and Texts* (Malibu, 2000), p. 394.

²¹ K. Szarzynska, *Sumerica* (Warsaw, 1997), p. 148.

²² W. Heimpel, “Mythologie, A. I,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie, Vol. 8* (Berlin, 1993-1997), p. 547.

²³ E. van Buren, “The Sacred Marriage in Early Times in Mesopotamia: Part I,” *Orientalia* 13 (1944), p. 1 states that “the very ancient rite of the sacred marriage was of the utmost importance, if not the essential and pivotal element of Babylonian religion.”

millennium BCE) is thought to depict the marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi²⁴—the ritual appears to have died out after the Old Babylonian period.²⁵

In the rite in question a “flowered bed” or “garden” would be prepared, whereupon the king would have intercourse with a woman representing Inanna.²⁶ Douglas 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.”²⁷

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

“I shall greet her who descends from above...I shall greet the great lady of heaven, Inana! I shall greet the holy torch who fills the heavens, the light, Inana, her who shines like the daylight, the great lady of heaven, Inana! I shall greet the Mistress, the most awesome

²⁴ H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (1954), pp. 25-27. See also G. Selz, “Five Divine Ladies,” *NIN* 1 (2000), p. 31.

²⁵ R. Kutscher, “The Cult of Dumuzi/Tammuz,” in J. Klein ed., *Bar-Ilan Studies in Assyriology* (New York, 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 also D. Frayne, “Notes on The Sacred Marriage Rite,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 42:1/2 (1985), cols. 11, 22.

²⁶ See here the discussion in D. Frayne, *op. cit.*, cols. 14, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, col. 6.

lady among the Anuna gods; the respected one who fills heaven and earth with her huge brilliance...Her descending is that of a warrior.”²⁸

In the ensuing lines of the hymn there are allusions to various offerings given to Inanna. After the goddess bathes herself, a bed is set up for her and the king to share. Properly prepared, the king—in the guise of 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’ušumgalanna 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’ušumgalanna stands in great joy. May he spend long life on the radiant throne!”²⁹

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

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

“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

²⁸ Lines 1-18 as quoted from “A *šir-namursaga* to Inana for Iddin-Dagan,” in J. Black et al., *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford, 2004), p. 263. See also D. Reisman, “Iddin-Dagan’s Sacred Marriage Hymn,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 25 (1973), pp. 186-191.

²⁹ D. Reisman, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-191.

who, in gratitude for the fertility which was now assured, raised jubilant hymns to the sound of the lyre, flutes and drums.”³⁰

Even from this brief summary it must be admitted that the Sumerian beliefs surrounding Inanna/Venus offer striking parallels to the Skidi traditions regarding Venus. In addition to embodying the female principle, the planet is assigned a central role in a sacred *hieros gamos* believed to promote fertility throughout the land.

The life-giving garden associated with the Skidi planet-goddess also finds a symbolic counterpart in Sumerian tradition. Thus a garden of Inanna/Venus is mentioned in conjunction with the sacred marriage rite:

“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.”³¹

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

“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.”³²

As the Skidi held that “all life” originated from Venus’s sacred garden so, too, did the Sumerians deem the planet Venus to be the “divine source of all life.”³³ This is but one

³⁰ E. van Buren, “The Sacred Marriage in Early Times in Mesopotamia,” *Orientalia* 13 (1944), p. 34.

³¹ M. Hall, *A Study of the Sumerian Moon-God, Nanna/Suen* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 750-751. This is a dissertation submitted to the University of Pennsylvania.

³² E. van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

³³ F. Bruschweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 112. See also the discussion in B. Hruška, “Das spätbabylonische Leergedicht ‘Inanna’s Erhöhung’,” *Archiv Orientalni* 37 (1969), p. 482: “In der sumerischen Zeile wird ^dištar-kakkabi mit dem Namen ti-mú-a ‘Leben erzeugende’ wiedergegeben.”

of dozens of archetypal motifs associated with Venus that will never be explained by reference to the planet familiar to modern astronomers.

The most comprehensive study of the sacred marriage rite in ancient Mesopotamia is that by Pirjo Lapinkivi. She 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...?”³⁴

Lapinkivi then proceeds to answer her own question—the historical origins and fundamental purpose of the sacred marriage rite remain 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.”³⁵

There is an obvious reason why scholars have failed to discern the original significance of the sacred marriage rite: They have all but ignored the decisive role played by planets in the genesis of ancient myth and religion. Thus it is that the all-important 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 prevented them from discovering that analogous traditions surround Venus in other cultures. Modern prejudices notwithstanding, *the very fact that the Skidi Pawnee likewise associated the planet Venus with a sacred marriage associated with Creation* should prompt Sumerologists to consider the possibility that the sacred marriage rite has celestial determinants.

³⁴ P. Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage* (Helsinki, 2004), p. 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.