Coping with Trauma in Ancient Mesopotamia: Thoughts on the Religious Milieu of the "Lamentations"

by *Paola Corrente**

Abstract

In the literary tradition of ancient Mesopotamia, a distinct poetic genre, known as the "lamentations", exists. This corpus of texts explores the theme of human and divine expressions of suffering in response to dramatic events.

A particularly noteworthy category of lamentations are the city laments, composed in the aftermath of the fall of the Sumerian cities, which evoke the historical episodes surrounding the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur (late III millennium BCE). These laments, in their both private and public manifestations, bear a close resemblance to the tenets of polytheistic religion, underpinned by the concept of the universal order and the reciprocal relationship between deities and human beings.

In this contribution, I shall offer a commentary on a selection of laments, including those that pertain to the city laments, and a number of poems that are associated with the narrative of the dying gods. This will serve to illustrate the overarching theme of the emotional distress experienced by the gods. The analysis of the religious characteristics of the lamentations aims to highlight the bond between this literary genre and religion, since the lamentations echo the latter's role in achieving and safeguarding the existential harmony of men and gods in an ordered universe.

Keywords: Lamentations, Polytheism, Myth, Cities, Deities.

Introduction

The subject of trauma in ancient literature is a complex one. Categories and definitions with which we are familiar today do not always have an equivalent in the ancient classifications: for example, the concept of trauma as a turmoil of the psyche arised from the work of modern psycology. Similarly, in the literary field, autobiographies and memoirs, which provide a medium for the articulation of deeply intimate experiences were not prevalent in antiquity (the IV century BCE *Confessions* of Saint Augustine is perhaps the earliest form of autobiography in Western literature).

Regardless, it is an irrefutable fact that ancient men inhabited in a highly unpredictable and stressful enviroment and endured innumerable hardships, including warfare, illness, and a wide array of natural disasters: perpetual challenges would make their lives very precarious. One way for people to cope with such adverse living

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conditions was to seek solace in religion, which, along with philosophy, addressed the existential questions that tormented their souls.

In the past, human life was not merely individual and self-sufficient, but rather a part of a society and of a larger universe, whose very existence and prosperity was believed to be dependent on divine will. Deities, the cosmos, and humankind were perceived as integrated into a well-ordered system, with religion permeating all aspects of reality.

Within this cultural context, I shall focus on the narration of trauma in a specific genre of Mesopotamian literature, that of lamentations, and I shall conduct this analysis from the standpoint of the weeping goddess. This literary figure came to prominence in the compositions known as the city laments and was first brought to attention by the great assyriologist Samuel N. Kramer.

Lamentations have a long history in Mesopotamian poetic and cultic repertoires, and are documented in a variety of genres (Löhnert, 2011, p. 403; Bachvarova, 2008, pp. 32-3). "Lament" and "lamentation" are general terms employed to translate precise Sumerian words that indicate a variegated group of compositions, such as *šu'ila*, 'hand-lifting', *širnamšub*, 'incantation song', *eršemma*, 'tears (accompanying) the kettle drum', *balag*, 'harp or drum' (whose recitation, like the name indicates, was accompanied by instruments), and *eršahunga*, 'heart-soothing tears' (Löhnert, 2011, p. 403).

A substantial corpus of texts, covering two millennia (with the earliest dating to the end of the III millennium/beginning of the II millennium BCE), has been preserved, providing a comprehensive source of information on the lamentations. The city laments, on the other hand, were produced around the early II millennium, at the time of the First Dynasty of Ur, in relation to the fall of the Sumerian cities ruled by the III Dynasty of Ur. From the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1600 BCE) their transmission came to a halt, although their distinctive motifs were utilized in other types of lamentations (Cohen, 1981, p. 3; Dobbs-Allsopp, 1993, pp. 13-4); likewise, the weeping goddess developed in different figures and survived in other lament related genres well into the I millennium.

In my contribution, I shall discuss two cases of literary traumas that involve gods and goddesses. The first concerns historical occurrences, such as the destruction of the cities, and the second concerns the experience of death. My aim is to demonstrate how, in antiquity, religion provided answers to situations of inquietude, and helped to unburden intense emotions, in both the private and public sphere.

1
Death as a collective trauma: the weeping goddesses of Sumer

Since the publication of Kramer's *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* in 1940, the subjects of the city laments and the lamentations have been extensively investigated[1].

In addition to the lament for Ur, there are four city laments: *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Nippur*,

The Lamentation over the Destruction of Eridu, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Uruk*[2]. A city lament is typically structured in sections (*kirugu*) and develop the themes of destruction, which implies the abandonment by the divine patrons, and of restoration, which implies the reestablishment of royal power and the return of the deity[3]. Between the initial cataclysm and final recovery, there is the actual lamentation, entrusted to the weeping goddess[4].

«A sorrowful, tender and compassionate creation of the Sumerian poets» (Kramer, 1983, p. 70), this goddess expresses her emotions, as she finds herself powerless in the face of the unfolding catastrophe that engulfs her beloved city, which she is duty-bound to protect (Dobbs-Allsopp, 1993, p. 89), and her own life.

The goddesses featured in the city laments are Ninlil, Ningal, Inanna and Damgalnunna, the divine mistresses of Nippur, Ur, Uruk, and Eridu respectively[5]. Among them, the most successful as a literary character is Ningal, and her passionate chant for Ur's fate conveys a profound sense of anguish. Ningal is related to some of the main Mesopotamian deities[6], being the spouse of Nanna/Suen, the moon god, and the mother of Inanna/Ištar, the goddess of sex and war.

The *Lamentation over Ur* is comprised of eleven stanzas and slightly over four hundred lines, with Ningal's gloomy monologues constituting the majority of the text. However, there are brief interactions with the author and descriptive parts, such as the first two stanzas, which serve as an introduction to the situation in other cities that have lost their gods' protection, or the sections detailing the destruction of Ur.

Ningal, introduced in the third stanza, wails before and after the actual devastation. At first, she tried to help her city or to intercede with the great gods An (the sky god) and Enlil (the wind god), but in the end she is forced to flee Ur, by then in ruins. An instance of this is around the middle of the piece, when the author outlines her miserable state as a corollary to her despondent words:

> The woman tears at her hair as if it were rushes. She beats the holy *ub* drum at her chest, she cries "Alas, my city". Her eyes swell with tears, she weeps bitterly: "Woe is me, my city which no longer exists – I am not its queen. Nanna, the shrine Ur which no longer exists – I am not its owner. Woe is me, I am one whose cow-pen has been torn down, I am one whose cows have been scattered. I am Ningal on whose ewes the weapon has fallen, as in the case of an unworthy herdsman. Woe is me, I have been exiled from the city, I can find no rest. I am Ningal, I have been exiled from the house, I can find no dwelling place. I am sitting as if a stranger with head high in a strange city" (ETCLS, 2.2.2, 299-309).

The *Lamentation over the destruction of Eridu* is the other city lament in which the starring goddess, Damgalnunna (also called Damkina), the wife of Enki/Ea, the skillful god of water, emerges as an impressive character comparable to Ningal of Ur[7]. Here is her heart-wrenching outburst:

> Eridu's lady, holy Damgalnuna, the faithful cow, the compassionate one, clawed at her breast, clawed at her eyes. She uttered a frenzied cry. She held a dagger and a sword in her two hands –

they clashed together. She tore out her hair like rushes, uttering a bitter lament: "You, my city whose woman does not dwell there, whose charms do not satisfy her – where is a lament uttered bitterly for you? Eridu! You, my city whose woman does not dwell there, whose charms do not satisfy her – where are tears wept for you?" (ETCLS, 2.2.6, version from Nibru, segment B 5-15).

When the historical context that originated the city laments changed, the hymnology, while drawing inspiration from them, fails to produce content as impressive. The weeping goddess of the lamentations does not have neither the personality or the dramatic pathos she evinces in the city laments, but her portrays become more fixed. Equally, liturgies and litanies become stereotypical, treating the city lament's motifs in a formulaic and repetitive fashion (Kramer, 1983, p. 71; Cooper, 2006, p. 43).

The weeping goddess is a product of poetic inspiration, yet she pertains also to the long tradition of the cultic lamentations, which have strong connections with the funerary rituals[8]. The two most salient features of the cultic lamentations are the language used and the manner in which they were enacted during the cult. They were recited in *emesal*, a variant of Sumerian spoken only by women, and were performed by professional lamenters, the *gala* (Akkadian *kalû*), who exhibited a peculiar feature: they were men who adopted a feminine comportment.

These hymns share numerous elements but have also specific purposes, and do not exclusively belong to the funerary sphere, given that they were sung in a variety of situations, such as New Year festival (Lönhert, 2011, p. 413). Consequently, in addition to their primary function of accompanying the grieving processes, they also fulfil role of soothing and pacifying[9].

In the repertoire in which she appears, the weeping goddess occasionally speaks in *emesal* (Bacharova, 2008, p. 21), and acts in a manner consistent with that of a *gala*, bemoaning over the destruction of her city and trying to placate the angry god who caused it (Samet, 2014, p. 27).

These duties were assigned to her because qualities such as mediation, care, helpfulness and calmness were considered feminine, whereas authority, power and destructive force were attributed to the masculine[10]. The city laments, indeed, whilst displaying their historic and cultic connections, possess a significant symbolic dimension, in that the downfall is attributed to divine will, specifically to Enlil and An, and in particular to the former. Therefore, the city laments also incorporate narrative motifs found in myth, the most symbolic form of narrative[11].

The myth where more evident is this dynamic between a god and a goddess is probably *Atrahasīs*[12], a fascinating story about deities, people and their interaction in the universal scheme of things, which contains the accounts of the creation of humankind and of the Flood[13]. In particular, Enlil decides to send the deluge in order to get rid of the human beings, driven by their incessant commotion that disturbed his slumber[14].

The narrative depicts the gods' torment as they witness the horror caused by the ravaging waters and the cruel scene of the drowning humans, with the goddess Nintu (also called Mami) voicing her profound distress. As a suffering mother, she wails for

the humans, who are her children, having earlier in the story fashioned them with Ea's help. When confronted with the ghastly effects of the deluge, she grasps the atrocious fate looming over humankind and is left with no choice but mourning, while her creatures die as flies: «"I have seen, and wept over them. I have ended my lamentation for them"», she says afflicted[15].

Nintu is in despair for the end of the world she knew after a god instigated the fatal catastrophe, a moment that, in the city laments, is frequently characterized by the abandonment of the cult or the sack of the goddess' shrine[16]. Also in *Atrahasīs* the annihilation of human race leads to the neglect of the cult, with the gods suffering, thirsty and hungry, because there is no one –only Atrahasīs has survived- to offer sacrifices on their behalf.

The late (maybe VIII century) Akkadian poem *Erra and Išum* expands on this thematic[17]. One of the protagonists, the violent war god Erra, persuades the reigning god Marduk to leave his temple in order to get his damaged statue repaired, thereby making him to abdicate. Erra then proceeds to assume his place of command, unleash his rage against the world and ravage it with war.

As with the city lament, it could be a historical reference in this myth (Kvanvig, 2011, pp. 165-7), even if the city's wreckage can also be a literary topos harking back to the imagery of lamentations (Dalley, 2005, p. 280). In *Erra and Išum*, we find the familiar themes of ruin and revival, meanwhile the third protagonist, the thoughtful guardian god Išum, tries constantly to appease and restrain the bloodthirsty Erra.

A final noteworthy instance from mythology concerns Inanna/Ištar. In her most renowned myth, the *Descent to the netherworld*[18], upon her departure from the sky, she plays a role analogous to that of the deities who desert their cities and determine their calamitous end.

In her case, though, the consequences are more significant, since the very existence of the universe is at stake: as Inanna/Ištar is also the goddess of sex, she exercises a certain degree of control over the reproductive cycles of humans, animals and plants. The Akkadian version of the *Descent* contains a scene[19], absent from the Sumerian, describing the suspension of life on earth while she remains under the earth, presumed dead[20]. Moreover, the context of the story developing on earth while Inanna/Ištar is detained in the netherworld, is of a funerary nature. Her loyal vizier, Ninšubur (a female divinity), in the Sumerian text, and Papsukkal (a male divinity), in the Akkadian, are grief-stricken, and in the Sumerian version also the gods Šara of Umma and Latarak of Bad-tibira lament her demise[21].

2
Death as a personal trauma: the dying gods

In the city laments the weeping goddess' emotional story becomes the grim story of the repercussions of war on people and places. When shedding tears for her city's

populace, she underscores a profoundly distressing ramification of war: the disruption of familial bonds. She identifies with the broken families and describes herself as a mother who loses her child, employing the metaphor of the cow and its calf, or as a worthless shepherdess who loses her flock[22].

A large body of lamentations explore the aspects of family relationships, a motif linked to the mythological and cultic complex of the "dying god". This is a well-known, albeit discredited, definition of a divine type: the young vegetation god dies and, in some cases, resurrects[23]. In the liturgical lamentations, this young god becomes the doomed offspring of a distraught mother goddess, the anguished brother of a devoted sister, and the hapless husband of a soon-to-be widowed spouse[24].

The most famed of the Mesopotamian dying god is Dumuzi, a shepherd god and Inanna's husband[25]. However, the gods Damu and Ningišzida[26] bear a strong resemblance to Dumuzi and identify with him. In the capacity of the mourning mother goddesses one might cite Lisin, Ninisinna and Duttur (Dumuzi's mother), whereas Geštinanna (Dumuzi's sister) and Amašilama (Ningišzida's sister), on the one hand, and Inanna, on the other, are the classical example of the woeful sister and wife respectively.

The laments for the young dying gods elaborate the themes of the abduction of the god by infernal demons, the *galla*, as an innocent victim in his prime, and of the quest the grieving mother and sister embark on to find him.

As in the city laments, on occasions we hear the voice of the god, aware of his imminent death, like Dumuzi in *Dumuzi's dream*, or Damu:

> I am the lord, *arali* is the terrible place of my casting away,
> I am the lad, to the distant, the netherworld, I was going/lead.
> Enough!
> (*Lament for Damu*, 36-7)[27]

An instance of the mother goddess in pain is Ninhursaga:

> The cow, her calf was lost (to her).
> A for the birth-giving mother, her beautiful one was lost (to her).
> The water carried off the delightful one.
> As for the birth-mother, inquiring and searching the foot of the mountain gets closer,
> Inquiring and searching the foot of the mountain gets closer,
> Like a ewe whose lamb was torn away she should not be detained.
> Like a (she) goat whose kid was torn away she would not be detained.
> The foot of the mountain gets closer; the peak of the mountain gets closer.
> And she, she lift *numun*-rushes in front of her, she lift *sumun*-rushes,
> The mother of the lad lift *šušu*-reeds.
> The mother of the lord sheds tears in the reed thicket.
> (*Eršemma of Ninhursaga*, 2-12)[28]

The sister is a particularly courageous character, willing to make extreme sacrifices for her brother. In the mythological composition *Ningišzida's journey to the underworld*, for instance, Ningišzida is being carried away on a boat, and his sister demands to sail with him: «She was crying a lament to him: "Let me sail away with you, my brother, let me sail away with you"» (ETCSL, 1.7.3, 13-14).

Geštinanna is unquestionably the most devoted literary sister. In the text *Dumuzi and Geštinanna* she endures torture on behalf of Dumuzi (ETCSL, 1.4.1.1, 60-63) and even decides to share his death: in the *Descent*, she offers to alternate every six months with Dumuzi between the earth and the underworld (ETCSL, 1.4.1, 404-410)[29].

And while Inanna is sometimes an active agent in Dumuzi's demise, in the majority of the cult and literary texts she is portrayed as the paradigm of the young spouse in mourning. In this excerpt from the myth *Inanna and Bilulu*, she wails for Dumuzi:

"O Dumuzid of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind eyes", she sobs tearfully, "O you of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind eyes", she sobs tearfully. "Lad, husband, lord, sweet as the date... O Dumuzid!" she sobs, she sobs tearfully.
(ETCSL, 1.4.4., 27-30)

3
Conclusive remarks

As it is evident from this concise presentation, the weeping goddess is a compelling literary persona to analyse from both a religious and stylistic perspective.

Regarding the latter, the first-person narrator is very effective: the goddess (and the dying god) narrate her trauma firsthand, rendering the account more authentic and engaging. Furthermore, the incorporation of the viewpoints also of the persecuted deity's entourage, and of the author himself, serves to enhance the dramatic effect of the narrative.

The lamentations function as a lyric outlet through which the weeping goddess may release her stress and calm her most intense emotional states, as this *Atrahasīs* passage about Nintu indicates: «she wept and eased her feelings/Nintu wailed and spent her emotion»[30]. Simultaneously, they demonstrate that divine nature is not immune to unhappiness and mortality. This is an idea that is seldom contemplated, since, accustomed to the monotheistic presupposition of God as an immortal and perfect entity, we rarely consider alternative religious systems (Corrente, 2021, pp. 90-2).

The concept of a "traumatised god" is predicated on the notion of anthropomorphism[31], which is a hallmark of polytheism[32]. Polytheistic deities, who resemble human beings in appearance and temperament, are susceptible to human emotions (particularly, love) and, consequently, they experiment with woes (even death), as well as the concomitant traumas[33].

The deity's inner experience of anguish is connected with the communal sense of disgrace, as revealed by the weeping goddess's role in protecting cities. The origin of this

relationship can be traced back to the conception Mesopotamians have of kingship, which is, in turn, rooted in polytheism. In accordance with polytheistic theoretical basis, the universe exists on a delicate balance between order and disorder, and the human and divine realms are indissolubly intertwined. Human society is able to exist as a result of divine intervention to ensure the proper functioning of the universe, often achieved through a struggle with the forces of chaos; once these forces have been defeated, gods stand guard to uphold the cosmic order. Kingship, in its divine and terrestrial aspects, is therefore pivotal in maintaining the established order.

Accordingly, in Mesopotamian beliefs, royalty was believed to have descended from heavens to earth. The king was regarded as an intermediary between the divine and human worlds, with his administration exerting influence on the entire cosmos (Pryke, 2017, pp. 112-4). Hence, compositions addressing these themes frequently utilise natural metaphors, as evidenced in the case of Ningal[34].

Mythology often explores cosmological themes, particularly those related to kingship, as this is closely tied to the governance of the universe. For instance, in the myths under review, *Erra and Išum*, a story on the devastation of war, deals with the consequences of an absent and weak chief unable to govern, and the *Descent*'s framework is essentially cosmological, because Inanna/Ištar intends to take domain of the underworld. The success of her endeavour would have resulted in the destabilisation of the upper world, consequent to her neglecting her functions, and the subversion of the underworld by removing the power from its rightful holder, her sister Ereškigal[35]. Despite the ostensible nature of the dying gods' stories as private family dramas, there is a discernible cosmological dimension to them, particularly in the case of Dumuzi[36].

Lastly, also the cult lamentations emphasise the correspondence between natural and social circumstances. As we have seen, they were recited during periods deemed to be hazardous, such as specific natural occurrences (eclipses, the changing of the seasons) or the absence of a deity (for example, when the statue was being bathed). Because these situations marked a change, they were regarded as a potential threat to the life of a systematic universe, and thus felt to be symbolically charged; this is the reason why the laments were also enacted with an apotropaic purpose (Bachvarova, 2008, p. 21).

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The discussion surrounding the weeping goddess and the lamentations has enabled us to comprehend the unique relationship between this literary genre and religion. This relationship encompasses both theoretical aspects, such as the conveyance of beliefs, and the practical aspect of the cult[37]. Furthermore, it highlights the significance and influence of religion in the ancient world.

Lamentations could be performed in private and in public, and due to the particular set of ideas at the basis of polytheism, for ancient religion the individual and the collective good coincide. The tragic events of people's life resonated throughout the wider community, the cosmos at large and, ultimately, the divine world.

Religion offered a secure framework for individuals to navigate the most perilous moments in life, and in so doing, it had the capacity to stabilise society and protect the reciprocal bond between deities and humankind.

Notes

1. The bibliography is copious, since it encompasses the many critical aspects of a comprehensive investigation. For translation, edition and commentary of the city laments, cf. among others, the works of Kramer (1983, pp. 69-80); Green (1978, pp. 127-67; 1984, pp. 253-74); Michalowski (1989); Tinney (1996); Samet (2014); Peled (2015, pp. 39-43); and Gabbay, Samet (2022, pp. 57-67). For studies on the lamentations and on their broader cultural themes, also from a comparative perspective, cf., among others, De Martino (1975², pp. 260-1); Dobbs-Allsopp (1993; 2000, pp. 625-30); Fleming (2003, pp. 5-18), Cooper (2006, pp. 39-47); Bachvarova (2008, pp. 18-52); Lönhert (2011, pp. 403-17); Bachvarova, Dutsch, Suter (2016); and Yang (2017, pp. 541-57). Also cf. n. 24.

2. The texts can be found on the ETCSL website, collected under the heading "Compositions with a historical background-City laments", and numbered 2.2.2 to 2.2.6: https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=c.2.2*#.

3. Green (1984, p. 253) talks of « five major themes: destruction, assignment of responsibility, abandonment, restoration, and return ».

4. On the distinctive traits of each city laments, cf. Kramer (1983, pp. 72-3) and Green (1984, pp. 253-4).

5. The *Lamentation over Sumer and Ur* (ETCSL, 2.2.3, 119-286) allude to the fallen cities of Sumer and their goddesses.

6. Mesopotamian religion was distinguished by the coexistence of Sumerian and Akkadian elements. For this reason, deities typically bear dual names, the first Sumerian and the second Akkadian, although sometimes the deity would retain the Sumerian name in Akkadian. In this paper I shall refer to several deities, and it would be impossible to give a comprehensive bibliography for all of them. For a general overview, cf. the website of the AMGG project (https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/amgg/index.html).

7. As Kramer (1983, pp. 72-3) points out, in the Nippur lament, Ninlil appears more as a mother goddess and the wife of the city's patron, Enlil, while in the Uruk Lament Inanna is celebrated in her astral aspect and as a recipient of a prayer (cf. n. 22).

8. Cooper (2006, pp. 39-47) and Dobbs-Allsopp (2000, pp. 625-30) concentrate on the genre, exploring issues such intertextuality and the genetic relationship between the ritual tradition and the city lamentations.

9. In mythology, divine anger is associated with disappearance, and a lament is necessary to calm the deities and encourage their return. Notable examples include the Hittite Telipinu and the Greek Demeter, who become enraged and hide, precipitating a natural catastrophe. Gabbay (2014; 2015) examines the soothing function of the "heart pacification unity" in the first millennium Emesal prayer.

10. It should be noted, however, that there were exceptions, and some goddesses, such as Athena, Anat and Inanna/Ištar herself, had a strong martial character, and others, like Hera, Isis and Cybele, showed a propensity for political affairs.

11. Considered their historical background, it is inevitable to see a political propaganda in the city laments, in that they celebrate the kings of the Isin Dynasty for the resurgence of Sumer, particularly Išme-Dagan in the Ur and Sumer and Ur laments. However, Kramer (1983, p. 70) draws attention to the poetic nature of the city laments, and Katz (2003, pp. 74, n. 19, and 167) emphasised that they are not historical documents.

12. The Old Babylonian version of this Akkadian epic dates around 1700 BCE. Its title comes from the name of the human protagonist Atrahasīs, 'extra-wise', Ea's favourite, who, like the Biblical Noah, survives the deluge. For discussion and bibliography, cf. Kvanvig (2011, pp. 13-82).

13. Other great pieces of Mesopotamian literature contain these stories: *Enūma eliš* details the anthropogony (tablet VI) and the *Gilgameš epic* recounts the deluge (tablet XI). The latest edition of *Enūma eliš* is Lambert (2013) (cf. pp. 108-21 and 478-82 for the tablet VI) and of *Gilgameš* is George (2003) (cf. pp. 411-5, 508-28, 700-25 and 878-98 for the tablet XI).

14. The noise is a much debated issue in *Atrahasīs*, and it may be linked to overpopulation, a motif that has also been observed in the Ur lament (cf. Green, 1984, p. 254). The point is that Enlil decides to destroy the

earth without any valid reason, and also the city laments do not indicate that a sin was committed by humans. Nonetheless, the *Curse of Accade* and the *Tukulti-Ninurta Epic* do imply a wrongdoing by the king. Cf. Cooper (2006, pp. 39-42); Lönhert (2011, p. 410); and Yang (2017, p. 554). For an analysis of the relationship between sin and lament, see van der Toorn (1985). Mander (2009, pp. 99-100) introduces the concept of *bala*, denoting a kind of temporal cycle that must reach completion, which can be the motivation behind the end of the Sumerian urban apogee. Cf. also Jacobsen (1976, pp. 90-1).

15. *At.* III iv, 10-2 (Lambert, Millard, 1969, p. 97).

16. This is evident in the Ur lament (ETCSL, 2.2.2, 275-85 and 348-58) and in several passages of the Nippur lament. For the same motif in the lamentations, cf. Kramer (1983, pp. 73 and 75) and Katz (2003, p. 74).

17. The main edition of this poem is Cagni (1969)

18. There are two versions of this myth: one in Sumerian (*Inanna's Descent to the Nertherworld*, dated to the end of III millennium), and one in Akkadian (*Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*, II millennium). The Sumerian text is longer and more detailed, and the two redactions diverge in certain episodes. The latest critical edition of the Akkadian *Descent* is Lapinkivi (2010). For the Sumerian *Descent*, cf. Sladek (1974). The Sumerian text is also available on-line, on the ETCSL website: https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.4.1#.

19. *Iš. Desc.* 76-80 and 86-90 (cf. Lapinkivi, 2010, p. 31).

20. The issue of Inanna/Ištar's death (and subsequent resurrection) is a contentious one, as is the question of the dying gods in general. On Inanna/Ištar cf. Corrente (2021, pp. 169-85). Also cf. n. 23.

21. The Ugaritic *Baal Cycle* offers a parallel scenario. The setting is once again funerary, since the storm god and future king Baal is presumed dead, and the context is cosmic, because his death is not linked to a specific historical situation, but rather to the repercussions that the disappearance of a powerful god might have on the universe. Another noteworthy element is that the lamentations for Baal's death are performed by a male, the supreme god El.

22. In the city laments the goddesses protect cities, a function linked to the maternal side of femininity. Indeed Kramer (1983) stresses in the very title of his work the organic transition from the role of grieving city goddesses to that of grieving mothers. In the city laments, Ningal and Ninlil, unlike Inanna, exhibit maternal traits (cf. n. 7). Actually, apart from her relationship with Dumuzi in poetry, Inanna is not a particularly nurturing type, in fact she is rather self-centred. Nevertheless, Pryke (2017, pp. 117-8 and 123-6) sustains that Inanna/Ištar's motherly qualities are integral to her personality, because stem from her very nature as a love goddess. They manifest themselves most notably in her close bond with the king and in her unwavering protection of those who are devoted to her: in the *Descent*, for example, she refuses to relinquish to the *galla* the persons who are mourning her.

23. It would be impracticable to summarise here the long critical story surrounding this category, which achieved widespread recognition with James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. I shall cite only the latest works on this topic, where to find a comprehensive overview of it and a detailed bibliography: Corrente (2021; 2022, pp. 345-63); for Dumuzi and the dying gods in the Near East: Mander (2022, pp. 160-86) and Ayali-Darshan (2024). Cf. n. 31.

24. A selection of texts can be found in Jacobsen (1976, pp. 63-73); Cohen (1981, pp. 18-9 and 80-3); Kramer (1983, pp. 73-9); and Katz (2003, pp. 2-12, 16-25 and 309-36),

25. There are two traditions about Dumuzi's death. One is mythological, and intertwines with the story of Inanna/Ištar in the *Descent*, the other is documented in the ritual songs for his death, more recent (from the Old Babylonian period onward). There are several compositions on the death of Dumuzi: for example, *Dumuzi and Geštinanna*, *Dumuzi's dream* and *The Death of Dumuzi*. Cf. Jacobsen (1976, pp. 47-63) and Katz (2003, pp. 131-43 and 289-308). For an analysis of the Sumerian poetry about Inanna and Dumuzi's story of love and death, see Mander (2005).

26. Damu is a vegetation god, while Ningišzida, a god associated with trees, is an official ("the chairbearer") of the netherworld.

27. A transcription and translation of the text in Langdon (1919, pp. 286-8).

28. Kramer (1982, pp. 141-6). The words *arali* in the Damu text and *kur* (the last translated "mountain" in the *eršemma*) indicate the underworld. For both texts, dated to the Old Babylonian period, cf. Katz (2003, pp. 2-5 and 19-22).

29. This myth is the only source of information about the reasons for Dumuzi's disposal: he is taken to the underworld in place of Inanna, and at her own behest.

30. *At.* III iv, 12-3 (Lambert, Millard, 1969, p. 97).

31. Anthropomorphism, a modern word moulded on the Greek terms for "man" and "form", is indicative, in a broader sense, of the representation of the divine in physical/human form. The reflection on the qualities of deities has a long history, from ancient Greece (Xenophanes) to modern times (Hume), and intersects with theology and philosophy. While deities may manifest in human shape, they can have also other forms, for instance, the animal (= zoomorphism). In Mesopotamian mythology, the relation god-human is a central theme, as evident in *Atrahasīs*' suggestive opening line: «when gods were human» (a discussion in Kvanvig, 2011, pp. 39-59). Jacobsen (1976, p. 73) delineates a progression from anthropomorfism to sociomorphism and politicomorphism, while Mander (2022, p. 103, n. 152) underscores the role of anthropomorphism as a narrative device. For a general bibliography, cf., among others, Guthrie (1993, ch. 3) (basing on a cognitive approach); Assmann (2004, pp. 18-24); Panikkar (2005, pp. 2252-63); and Werblowky (2005a, pp. 388-92) (with further bibliography).

32. As is the case with other topics treated in this paper, there is a considerable body of literature on polytheism. Cf., among others, Assmann (2004, pp. 17-31); Werblowsky (2005b, pp. 7315-9); Brelich (2007); and Pye (2010).

33. The existence of intermediate figures between deities and humans, who could undergo tribulation and death, like the heroes, was already observed by Greek philosophers like Plutarch and Xenophanes. The Italian historian of religions Ugo Bianchi coined the definition "dio in vicenda" ("god subjected to vicissitude") to denote a suffering god, as an alternative to the Frazerian dying god. Cf. Casadio in Casadio, Johnston (2009, pp. 1-20).

34. Particularly in the case of the dying gods and Dumuzi, there is a tendency to underplay the natural backdrop of the myths, which is the theoretical frame for the divine resurrection, in favour of the funerary (Pryke, 2017, p. 58). Nevertheless, as already evident in Frazer's speculation and illustrated in the *Descent*, the naturistic metaphor served as an ideal complement for the royal ideology. Cf. Bachvarova (2008, p. 18; and Corrente (2022, pp. 253-4). Cf. n. 36.

35. Inanna/Ištar delights in altering the course of things, often on a whim: she changes people's sex and threatens to release the dead. This utterance is intended to instil fear, because it would result in chaos taking over the earth.

36. On dying gods and politics cf. Corrente (2021, pp. 200-14). There are numerous references to the regal qualities of Dumuzi: for instance, his depiction in the *Descent*, his high status among the netherworld deities, and his role in the *hieros gamos*. Cf. Jacobsen (1976, p. 60) and Katz (2003, pp. 136-7 and 389-90). Yang (2017) insists on the significance of Dumuzi's role as a king in the lamentations.

37. As Lönhert (2011, p. 412) specifies: «The "city laments" were means by which a collective disastrous event could be memorialized, whereas the function of the cultic laments was to prevent a catastrophe before it happened».

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