

WAS DUST THEIR FOOD AND CLAY THEIR BREAD?
GRAVE GOODS, THE MESOPOTAMIAN AFTERLIFE,
AND THE LIMINAL ROLE OF INANA/ISHTAR*

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Abstract

Many literary texts portray the Mesopotamian netherworld as unrelievedly bleak, yet the archaeological evidence of grave goods suggests that there may also have existed an alternative way of thinking about the afterlife. An analysis of the types of objects found in burials indicates that many people may have anticipated a less harsh form of existence after death. Furthermore, iconographic allusions to the goddess Inana/Ishtar in certain burials raise the possibility that this deity may have been associated with the descent of human dead to the netherworld. The occasional presence of her image and iconography in funerary contexts does not necessarily imply a belief that Inana/Ishtar would personally grant the deceased a happy afterlife, but it may provide an allusion to her own escape from the undesirable netherworld of literary narrative. Inana/Ishtar's status as a liminal figure and breaker of boundaries also may have encouraged Mesopotamians to associate her with the transition between life and death.

Introduction

Scholars basing their assessment of ancient Mesopotamian religion on literary texts typically conclude that the afterlife was bleak and dismal. Cooper (1992: 25) describes it as “a dim shadow of earthly existence,” and Bottéro (2001: 107-108) paints a dark portrait of the netherworld as a “City of the Dead . . . lugubrious, crushing,

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and haunted only by sluggish, melancholy, and floating inhabitants, far from any light or happiness.” These scholars’ dark portrayals of the Mesopotamian afterlife do, indeed, find much support in the texts. *The Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld*¹ describes the underworld as “the house where those who enter are deprived of light, where dust is their food, clay their bread. They see no light, they dwell in darkness, they are clothed like birds, with feathers. Over the door and the bolt, dust has settled” (lines 7-11, trans. Dalley 1998: 155). Similar passages appear almost verbatim in two other Akkadian narratives, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*² (Tablet VII: 176-182) and *Nergal and Ereshkigal*³ (lines 120-129). Another bleak description of the netherworld comes from the Akkadian composition *The Netherworld Vision of an Assyrian Crown Prince*,⁴ in which the underworld is peopled by monstrous human/animal hybrids with names like “Evil Spirit,” “Malignant Phantom,” and “Whatever-Is-Evil” (Foster 2005: 835-836). Sumerian literature expresses a similar pessimism; *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*⁵ portrays the land of the dead as little more than a euphemism for the grave itself. The afterworld is underground and can be reached merely by digging into the earth (Version A: 238-242). The dead Enkidu calls himself worm-infested (Version A: 243-253), apparently describing his netherworld self as a decaying body, and his ability to speak almost seems intended as a poignant form of poetic license (see Katz 2003: 199 for a similar interpretation).

Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld goes on to leaven this dark portrait of death with at least a small degree of hope, however, with its assertion that the more children one has, the better one’s lot in the underworld (Version A: 254-267). This reference to the importance of children may refer to their responsibility to maintain the regular funerary cult known as the *kispum* ritual for their parents (Tsukimoto 1985).⁶ Indeed, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*

¹ For text editions, see Borger (1979) and Ebeling (1949).

² For text editions, see George (2003) and Thompson (1930).

³ For text editions, see Hunger (1976) and Gurney (1960); for the Amarna version, see the editions by Izre’el (1997: 51-62) and Knudtzon (1915: i. 968-974).

⁴ For text editions, see Livingstone (1989: 68-76) and von Soden (1936).

⁵ For text editions, see Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi (2000a) and Shaffer (1963).

⁶ On postmortem rituals and the cult of deceased relatives, see also Katz (2003: 201-212); Meijer (2003: 52, 54); Cohen (1999: 103-116); van der Toorn (1996a: 77; 1996b: 42-63); and Bayliss (1973: 116-117). Schmidt (1996) expresses a different understanding of West Asiatic funerary beliefs, minimizing the evidence for a cult of the dead, but his views remain in the minority (see, e.g., Lewis 1999).

goes on to describe the sad fate of “the spirit of him who has no funerary offerings,” who is forced to “[eat] the scraps and the crumbs tossed out in the street” (Version A: 286-303; trans. Black et al. 1998- c). The Sumerian *Death of Ur-Namma*⁷ similarly suggests that some of the dead have a better lot than others. In this text, one’s condition after death depends not on the number of children one produced but on one’s rank during life. Those who were kings, like Ur-Namma, remain rulers and judges of the dead in the netherworld; those who were priests remain priests; and in all respects, the social order below ground mimics that above (Black et al. 1998- a: lines 76-87, 92-96, 132-144).⁸ *The Death of Gilgamesh*⁹ similarly indicates that the mortal ruler Gilgamesh will, in Tinney’s (1998: 27) words, “become a lord of the underworld on a par with Dumuzi and Ningishzida.”¹⁰ Ur-Namma can only be installed as co-ruler of the dead with Gilgamesh after he gives lavish offerings to the underworld gods (Black et al. 1998- a: 76-144). Perhaps the preferential treatment of the wealthy and powerful dead was a consequence of their ability to afford more sumptuous grave goods. Nevertheless, Cooper declares that “although kings, priests, and notables are recognizable as such [in the netherworld], they enjoy none of the earthly perquisites of their positions, or, at best, only a pale reflection of such” (1992: 25). Many scholars have concurred with this grim assessment of the netherworld.¹¹

However, some of the archaeological data tell a rather different story. Any attempt at a comprehensive overview of Mesopotamian attitudes toward death is doomed to fall short if it considers only textual evidence and ignores the wealth of artifacts found in graves

⁷ For text editions and translations, see Cavigneaux and al-Rawi (2000b); Cohen (1999: 76-77); Flücker-Hawker (1999: 93-183); Black et al. (1998- a); and (Shaffer 1963). For a discussion of the correct reading of Ur-Namma’s name, see Flücker-Hawker (1999: 8-9).

⁸ See also Steinkeller (2005: 23); Cohen (2005: 102); Katz (2003: 113, 194-196); and Tinney (1998).

⁹ For text editions and translations, see Cavigneaux and al-Rawi (2000a); Black et al. (1998- d); Jacobsen (1980: 19-20, 23); Klein (1990: 64-65); van Dijk (1967); and Kramer (1944).

¹⁰ For evidence that Gilgamesh actually did receive cult as a netherworld semi-deity even into the Neo-Assyrian period, see text K.7856 + K.6323 (edition by McGinnis 1987); column 2 on the reverse of this Neo-Assyrian tablet implies that a king performed sacrifices to Gilgamesh at the funeral of his father (McGinnis 1987: 7).

¹¹ See, e.g., Bottéro (2001: 107-108); Reiner (1985: 32-33); Porada (1980: 259); Jacobsen (1976: 212).

and funerary chapels.¹² An analysis of religious beliefs that relies exclusively on texts falls prey to certain limitations, such as the potentially biased perspective of documents designed for an elite audience (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1989: 250). The archaeological evidence from grave goods and related artifacts provides a necessary supplement to the textual information about ancient attitudes toward the next world.

*Combining the Textual and Archaeological Records:
Suggestions of a “Pleasant Afterlife”*

In almost every era, grave goods from sites throughout Mesopotamia suggest a significantly more positive attitude toward the netherworld than the literary texts seem to allow. This trend holds true across categories of age and gender and applies even in poor graves, implying that the possibility of attaining happiness in the next world may not have been quite as exclusive to royalty as narratives like *The Death of Gilgamesh* and *The Death of Ur-Namma*¹³ would lead one to believe.¹⁴ It is probable that many of the artifacts associated with Mesopotamian burials were intended for the use of the dead during their journey to, and sojourn in, the netherworld. An analysis of the types of artifacts found can thus tell us what sorts of items people expected to need in the afterlife, and, accordingly, imply what they expected that afterlife to be like.

The types of objects buried with the dead varied somewhat from period to period.¹⁵ However, while some of the specifics of the treatment of the dead did change over time, this treatment was consistently compatible with a belief that the dead were going off to

¹² As Tinney (1998: 28) remarks, even though there are many parallels between textual and material evidence, “it would be naïve to take . . . literary texts as straightforward descriptions of . . . burial practices.”

¹³ Contrast, however, the description of the afterlife in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World*. In this text, it is the number of one’s children—rather than royal status or the amount of one’s wealth—that is the most important contributing factor to one’s condition after death.

¹⁴ The grave goods in poorer inhumations are inevitably more meager than those available to the wealthy, and occasionally a grave does lack burial goods altogether (Strommenger 1971: 606). Nevertheless, in the majority of cases, it appears that people furnished the deceased with at least some sort of offering.

¹⁵ See Strommenger (1971) for an overview of grave goods throughout Mesopotamian history; see also Orthmann (1971) for an overview of burial customs in general.

some fate preferable to the literary tradition's dismal caverns. Also, the religious iconography found in both poorer and richer burials suggests that ordinary people, as well as the powerful, hoped to attain a pleasant afterlife. Throughout Mesopotamian history, graves of individuals from a variety of social backgrounds contained pottery, jewelry, tools, seals, weapons, and other implements that people had used during life, suggesting that they may have expected to continue their daily tasks in the next world (Strommenger 1971: 606).¹⁶ Grave goods from almost all periods contain such items that seem suggestive of the deceased's social role and daily occupations.¹⁷

Nor is this proliferation of grave goods at odds with *all* textual references to death. Although the literary texts present an almost invariably bleak image of the netherworld, certain administrative texts¹⁸ describe grave goods and offerings to the dead that match up very well with the archaeological evidence. Therefore, the two different Mesopotamian presentations of the afterlife—one bleak, one more optimistic—represent not so much a division between *textual* and *archaeological* evidence as a division between *one type* of texts on the one hand, and the combined weight of archaeology plus certain other textual genres on the other hand. The depiction of the afterlife as bleak and hopeless seems to be restricted to literary narratives, and therefore it may say more about that subgroup of texts than it does about most Mesopotamians' religious beliefs.

The term "pleasant afterlife" is necessarily vague, since one cannot determine what every single aspect of this postmortem existence was believed to entail. One may, however, draw certain

¹⁶ See also Pollock (2001: 198, 207-209); Lloyd (1984: 47); Woolley (1982: 27, 111); Van Buren (1980: 266-268); Delougaz et al. (1967: 58-133).

¹⁷ The literature on this subject is too vast to survey properly in the present paper. A sampling of relevant research, however, may be pointed out. On the fifth through third millennia, see Forest (1983); on the Akkadian period, see Pollock (2001: 208-209) and Woolley (1982: 128); on Ur III, see Woolley (1982: 131); on the Old Babylonian period, see Van der Toorn (1996a), Woolley and Mallowan (1976: 29-30), and Woolley (1927: 399-401); on the Middle Assyrian period, see Dalley (1984: 188) and Haller (1954); on the Neo-Assyrian period, see Nasrabadi (1999) and Damerji (1999); on the Neo-Babylonian period, see Baker (1995; see esp. 219-220); and on graves at Assur dating from the Akkadian period through the Parthian period, see Haller (1954).

¹⁸ For example, text UCLM 9-1798 (edition by Foxvog 1980), an early Sumerian land sale document from Adab, records the grave goods of a temple administrator and his wife; text UET 3 335 (edition by Sallaberger 1995) lists the grave goods for the tomb of a Neo-Sumerian priestess; and text K.7856 + K.6323 (edition by McGinnis 1987) enumerates the grave goods of a Neo-Assyrian king.

inferences about the kind of activities people expected to perform in the netherworld. For example, graves from some time periods and places contained musical instruments and board games, suggesting that the dead expected to have a significant amount of leisure time. For the purposes of this paper, the term “pleasant afterlife” will be defined largely in opposition to the traditional image of the Mesopotamian netherworld in which the dead were confined to dank underground caverns, were covered in feathers, ate dust, and partook of a generally hopeless existence. The archaeological evidence from grave goods and other funerary iconography suggests the existence of an alternative conception of the afterlife, whose specific details must remain unknown and may indeed have varied to some degree over time, but in which people seem to have expected to pursue many activities from everyday life which would not have been possible in the type of netherworld described in the literary texts.

Within the confines of this paper, it is impossible to present a detailed overview of all the grave goods found in Mesopotamian inhumations from all sites throughout all periods. In brief, however, grave goods from most periods,¹⁹ and throughout the areas of North and South Mesopotamia, include a wide range of artifacts both utilitarian and luxurious. The number, quality, and nature of objects buried with the deceased varied over time, but Mesopotamian people rarely went into their tombs without some type of accompanying artifacts. Common grave goods from most periods include tools or models of tools, pottery, stone and metal vessels, cylinder seals, figurines, and jewelry.²⁰ Such goods accompanied individuals of both genders and all ages, although children sometimes received fewer grave goods or received a slightly different selection of items (Charvát 2002: 81; Pollock 2001: 201; Breniquet 1984: 26). Also, during certain periods, a few members of the elite sometimes received extraordinary funerary offerings.²¹

¹⁹ The only era truly suffering from a dearth of burial offerings was the Uruk period, whose funerary customs remain largely unknown.

²⁰ See, e.g., Charvát (2002: 23, 43, 45, 51-55, 81, 91, 96, 109-111, 152, 167, 184, 186, 213, 223-224, 228, 233); Pollock (2001: 180, 198-201, 205-216); Martin, Postgate, and Moon (1985); Lloyd (1984: 47, 72, 81-82, 106, 165); Postgate (1984: 95); Woolley (1982: 27-29, 31, 39-43, 54-55, 64-81, 94, 111, 128, 131, 154, 164-165); Van Buren (1980: 13, 42, 55, 62, 68, 70, 94, 120, 150-152, 154, 165-166, 176, 211, 266-268); Woolley and Mallowan (1976: 51, 74, 85-86, 174-175, 195-213, 217-219, 225, 270); Delougaz (1967: 69-114); Haller (1954).

²¹ The sixteen so-called “Royal Tombs” from ED IIIa Ur contain not only luxury

Although one must bear in mind the important cautions of Ucko (1969; see also Scarre 1994), archaeologists have long taken the presence of grave goods as a potential indicator of belief in some kind of afterlife. Such objects were clearly placed in the tomb for a reason, and it is plausible to assume that the deceased was expected to need them in some way after death²²—either for his or her own use, or, as *The Death of Ur-Namma* indicates, as gifts for the gods of the netherworld (Black et al. 1998- a).²³ If the dead were to continue using the same tools and possessions as in their lifetimes, then their postmortem existence may have been thought to resemble a continuation of life. During the ED III period, the wealthy elites buried in the so-called “Royal Tombs” went to their fate with piles of gold and jewels, musical instruments, cosmetics, and a train of servants. Any afterlife in which such trappings were allowed could not resemble too closely the terrible world described in the literary narratives.²⁴

goods on an unprecedented scale, including musical instruments, cosmetics, and furniture (Zettler 1998b; Woolley 1982: 64, 154) but also the bodies of human attendants. The contemporaneous royal cemetery of Kish contains many burials within chariots; in addition to the chariots themselves, the grave goods include a rein-ring, weapons, and vases (Lloyd 1984: 106; see also Charvát 2002: 213 and Moorey 1978: 103-115). Similarly, the Middle Assyrian Tomb 45 in Assur included large quantities of jewelry and objects made from ivory, faience, and other luxury materials (Wartke 1999; Harper et al. 1995: 81-108; Nagel 1972; Moortgat 1969: 113-115), and the Neo-Assyrian queens’ tombs at Nimrud contained elaborate headdresses and jewelry made of gold and other rich materials (Bouzek 2001; Damerji 1999; Severy 1991: 110).

²² One cannot rule out the possibility that a few items may have been placed in the grave because the deceased had some sentimental attachment to them, rather than because he or she *required* these objects for the afterlife. Text K.7856 + K.6323 describes certain funerary goods as “the *regalia* that he [a deceased Neo-Assyrian king] used to love” (column 1 of obverse; ed. and trans. McGinnis 1987: 4), potentially implying that the king had some particular affection for these items. However, such an explanation is untenable for many classes of grave goods, such as items created specially for the grave (e.g. Meijer 2003: 57). It is also somewhat difficult to credit sentimental motivations alone for the disposal of goods on a scale as massive as that found in royal burials, such as those of ED III Ur.

²³ See also Dalley 1984: 123; Pittman 1998b: 88; Zettler 1998a: 28; Cooper 1992: 24-25).

²⁴ In contrast, commoners from many eras could expect to receive little more than the pottery, tools, and, sometimes, figurines which their families could afford. This finding tallies with that which we might expect from the texts, which suggest that the social order below ground mimicked that above (Black et al. 1998- a: lines 76-87, 92-96, 132-144; see also Cohen (2005: 102); Katz (2003: 113, 194-196); and Tinney (1998). However, the presence of even the simplest tools in a grave implies that the person buried there expected to need those tools in the next existence.

Might some of the treasures in wealthy graves have been intended as gifts for netherworld gods? In the Neo-Assyrian text K.7856 and K.6323, a king describes his father's funeral: "Objects of gold and silver, everything worthy of a tomb, the *regalia* that he used to love, I showed to Shamash and placed with my father in the tomb. I offered gifts to the princely Anunnaki and the spirits who dwell in the underworld" (obverse of tablet, column 1; trans. McGinnis 1987: 4).²⁵ The relationship between the two statements is slightly unclear, but it is possible that the gifts to the Anunnaki and underworld spirits might in fact consist of the previously-mentioned regalia. Zettler (1998a: 32; see also Tinney 1998: 28) explains the frequent and somewhat counterintuitive finds of "female accoutrements, jewelry especially" in male graves in the ED IIIa Royal Cemetery of Ur by proposing that these items represented gifts for netherworld goddesses.²⁶ If any funerary gifts do in fact represent offerings²⁷ to netherworld deities, this phenomenon would support the notion that the Mesopotamians believed in the possibility of a pleasant afterlife. If one's situation in the netherworld were fixed and unalterable regardless of whether or not one brought offerings to the deities, there might be less cause to bring such gifts. The existence of attempts to please netherworld powers implies that when those powers *were* pleased, they could make conditions more favorable for the pious deceased.

There are alternative interpretations of the data, however. Pollock suggests that some Mesopotamian grave goods may have been "ritual objects that could not . . . simply be tossed in the dump or recycled" (2001: 215; see also Garfinkel 1994: 159-162, 178-180). In other words, people could dispose of unwanted but religiously sanctified objects in a respectful way by burying them with the dead, and grave goods might not necessarily imply any beliefs about the afterlife. However, this hypothesis encounters several difficulties. It is true that throughout Mesopotamian history, consecrated objects could not simply be thrown away. However, systematic methods for the disposal of such objects were already in place. Pits under or near temples were often used for such purposes (Evans 2003: 67;

²⁵ Edition by McGinnis (1987).

²⁶ Despite Zettler's assumption that such deities would necessarily be "goddesses," it must be remembered that Assyrian art portrays men as well as women wearing jewelry.

²⁷ Such an interpretation has also been proposed by Chiodi (1994).

Garfinkel 1994: 159-162, 178-180). Also, if all grave goods represented consecrated objects from temples, they might be most commonly associated with priests or cultic personnel; in reality, however, they were a much more widespread phenomenon.²⁸

Finally, a large proportion of funerary artifacts are not obviously ritual in nature. Grave goods from many periods include utilitarian pottery vessels and tools from daily life.²⁹ There is no reason to believe that all of these artifacts were cultic paraphernalia. Indeed, Meijer (2003: 57) lists many graves in which the ceramic offerings were kiln rejects that could never have been used. These are unlikely to have played a role in temple rituals.

Pollock's second explanation for grave goods specifically addresses their increase in lavishness and quantity during ED III. She suggests that the Royal Tombs' exaggerated ostentation may be a byproduct of the increased intra-city competition during this era; as social stratification grew more pronounced, households attempted to show off their wealth and power by extravagantly throwing their resources away in a highly public funeral³⁰ (Pollock 2001: 215-216; see also Meijer 2003: 56). Here, Pollock's point has much validity and provides a good explanation for the *increase* in funerary offerings during this period.³¹

However, Pollock's theory cannot explain the *existence* of grave goods. People probably did want to show off their wealth by giving their relatives the most elaborate funeral possible, but they

²⁸ Just to name a few cases, grave goods appear in the graves of average individuals of the Ubaid period (Pollock 2001: 201), modest Early Dynastic house tombs in the Diyala region (Crawford 2002: 97), "the graves of the common folk" in the Royal Cemetery of Ur (Woolley 1982: 54-55), the house tombs of ordinary Old Babylonian citizens of Ur (Frankfort 1996: 113; Dalley 1984: 124), and Neo-Assyrians of many different economic backgrounds (Nasrabadi 1999: 242).

²⁹ At the pre-literate cemetery at Arpachiyah near Nineveh, graves contained little more than utilitarian-seeming pottery vessels (Lloyd 1984: 165). Similarly, Ubaid-period burials typically include tools and models of tools (Pollock 2001: 198; Van Buren 1980: 267), and the Early Dynastic burials Woolley excavated at Ur provided little more than "simple copper axes and daggers, vessels and possibly also fish-hooks, accompanied [by] a range of plain buff pottery" (Woolley 1982: 111).

³⁰ Compare the well-known "potlatch" rituals of Northwest Coast Native American peoples, in which people give away or destroy their own property partly in order to show that they can afford such waste (Mauss 1990: 33-46).

³¹ Archaeologists have long treated grave goods as potential indicators of achieved or ascribed social status (e.g. Rathje 1970), although the relationship of burial accoutrements to status during life is not entirely uncontroversial and cannot be viewed as a simple one-to-one equation (Trinkaus 1984; Ucko 1969: 265-268).

would not have thought to show off their resources in this particular manner unless their culture's ideology already valued grave goods. After all, relatively few people in contemporary America hold religious beliefs that require the provisioning of the dead with expensive grave goods; accordingly, American burials tend to be fairly simple, with the deceased frequently accompanied into the earth by little more than his or her own coffin.³² However, few people would argue that modern American society is entirely free from the flaunting of status. Conspicuous consumption merely finds other outlets during life. The existence of a religious tradition of supplying the dead with grave goods afforded an *opportunity* for Mesopotamian elites to show off their wealth, but the practice cannot be reduced to this motive alone. Grave goods appear in almost all periods, not just those characterized by intense social stratification. The 'Ubaid period may have been relatively egalitarian (Charvát 2002: 81), yet it produced a great quantity of funerary offerings.

Some other potential explanations of grave goods should also be considered. In some cultures, objects are buried with their owners not because they can contribute to the people's afterlives, but because they are thought to be contaminated by their association with the dead.³³ No afterlife beliefs are needed to explain this phenomenon, in which a person's possessions are so inextricably linked to him or her that upon the owner's death, the objects too must "die."³⁴

Such practices seem insufficient as an explanation of Mesopotamian grave goods, however, since many items in Mesopotamian graves

³² Trinkaus (1984) provides a useful discussion of the difference between mortuary ritual and mortuary remains. As Trinkaus argues, some societies' ideology discourages grave goods, causing the physical *remains* of burials to appear fairly homogeneous and egalitarian; however, people in such societies often display conspicuous consumption in less archaeologically visible mortuary *rituals* such as feasting, funerary rites, etc. Using Trinkaus' distinction, American society might be said to place more emphasis on mortuary ritual than mortuary remains.

³³ In Mycenaean funerary rituals, to name but one case of this phenomenon, pottery belonging to the deceased was ritually "killed" (broken) and buried along with the dead person (e.g. Soles 2001: 232). Also, many cultures view death as polluting to the living. The Classical Greeks, for example, typically buried their dead outside city walls so that the cemeteries could be as far removed as possible from people's daily activity. Sourvinou-Inwood (1995: 433-434) explains this "expulsion" of the dead from living space" as motivated partly by a fear of pollution, or, as the Greeks called it, *miasma* (Burkert 1985: 78).

³⁴ Ucko (1969: 265) suggests that, when examining graves, it is hard to rule out the possibility that "tomb goods have no purpose connected with the after-world; they are simply the visible expression of part of a person's social personality, the visible expression of his having left the living."

were not owned by the deceased during life, but made specially for the grave.³⁵ The ‘Ubaid clay model tools would have been little use to a living farmer; instead, they seem to have more in common with Egyptian *ushabti* figures³⁶ created only for the afterlife, or Minoan ritual weapons too fragile to have been used in actual battles (Rutkowski 1986: 58-59). Similarly, the pottery in ‘Ubaid graves was higher-quality than that found in kiln remains (Woolley 1982: 27), a fact probably indicating that the dead were buried with something finer than the everyday wares they had used during life. At many other sites, the situation appears to be the opposite; instead of tools too fine for daily use, we find instead vessels too flawed for use—overfired pots, pots with holes, or other such “rejects” (Meijer 2003: 57). Here, too, it is clear that the objects could not have been possessions of the person during life.

Winter (1999b) demonstrates that some categories of grave goods may have been placed in the grave not because the deceased was

³⁵ Strommenger (1971: 605-606) proposes certain methods of distinguishing between objects created specially for the grave and personal property used by the deceased during life. She asserts that objects found on the body itself, such as clothing, jewelry, items of personal adornment, and occasionally seals and weapons, are all more likely to fall into the second category, while the first category includes objects “*die darüber hinausgehen und der Versorgung des Toten sowie der Erleichterung seines Daseins im Jenseits dienen*” (Strommenger 1971: 606): food, drink, pottery, toiletries, games, cosmetics, tools, model tools, and weapons. Of course, as Strommenger herself indicates (606), there is some overlap in the sorts of objects found in these categories (weapons, for instance, may appear in both), and in practice it is often difficult to distinguish between the two types of funerary artifacts. One should also add the following caveat to Strommenger’s discussion: even if a particular item was part of the deceased’s costume, one cannot necessarily prove that the deceased wore it during life, as bodies might have been dressed in costumes specially designed for the grave. Use-wear, which Strommenger does not discuss, is the most reliable guide when judging whether or not tools saw actual use. Unfortunately, for items such as jewelry which might not show signs of heavy wear, it may not be possible to determine whether they adorned the living as well as the dead. Therefore, it must remain ambiguous whether some classes of grave goods were used during life or not, whereas such an identification will be more secure for other classes of objects. Tools that show extensive signs of wear were obviously used before their burial, whereas tools too delicate, too impractical, or too flawed for daily use (e.g. Meijer 2003: 57; Rutkowski 1986: 58-59) are more likely to have been designed as funerary objects. When there is some ambiguity as to whether or not an item was used during life, it is important to be aware of this ambiguity, although it remains possible to discuss the function that the item may have served *within* the burial.

³⁶ *Ushabti* figures, commonly thought to have been intended as substitute laborers who would carry out tasks on behalf of the dead in the netherworld, appear as grave goods throughout Egyptian history. Baines and Malek (2000: 219) call them “perhaps the commonest of all Egyptian antiquities.”

expected to use them in the afterlife, but because they served some function in the funerary ritual.³⁷ Therefore, it is possible that some of the other artifacts in Mesopotamian burials were similarly intended for use in graveside ritual. However, it is not likely that *all* grave goods were used for this purpose, as their types are so varied and related to such a wide range of activities. In the absence of other evidence for mortuary rituals involving, for example, certain types of furniture or model tools, it is simplest to posit that these objects were intended for the use of the deceased. Tools used in mortuary ritual probably account for a subset of grave goods, but do not encompass all of them.

Finally, Winter (1999b: 250) distinguishes between “symbolic provisioning for the deceased in an afterlife of continuing need” and “provisioning for a specific single ‘banquet’-meal or gift associated with the entry of the deceased into the netherworld.” As this distinction implies, it is conceivable that some grave goods were intended, not for the use of the deceased *within* the netherworld, but for the provisioning of the deceased *en route* to the netherworld.³⁸ In cases where the archaeological context does not rule out either possibility, one may examine the types of grave goods to determine whether or not their nature lends itself to provisioning for a journey. Such an explanation might be feasible for certain types of artifacts, such as vessels of food and drink.³⁹ However, it is less easy to imagine how some of the other types of grave goods would serve as provisions for a voyage; one might not, for example, want to weigh down a traveler with the Great Lyre⁴⁰ or the large pieces of furniture⁴¹ from the ED III “Royal Tombs” of Ur. Therefore, while

³⁷ Winter (1999b) argues persuasively that certain types of vessels in the Royal Tombs of Ur may have held liquids used in the funerary ceremony, perhaps for libations, cleansing, or anointing the corpse with oil. For further discussion of these vessel types, as well as a discussion of the rituals involved in preparing the corpse, see also Cohen (1999: 70-75, 178-179). One may compare Gallou’s (2005; see esp. 64-65 and 82-135) analysis of certain artifacts from Mycenaean tombs, including vessels for liquids, as evidence for funerary rituals that included libations and anointment of the dead with oil.

³⁸ For an overview and discussion of Mesopotamian beliefs concerning the dead individual’s journey to the netherworld, see Katz (2003: 32-43).

³⁹ G. Selz (1995) suggests that the deceased may also have been expected to pay a toll to a boatman as part of the journey to the netherworld. However, the evidence for Selz’s contention is inconclusive (Katz 2003: 32-34).

⁴⁰ Hansen 1998: 53, fig. 3.

⁴¹ See, e.g., the seat or throne decorated with lion protomes, or the large wooden chest in Puabi’s tomb (Hansen 1998: 50-51).

some grave goods may have been intended for the deceased's use while journeying to the netherworld rather than while remaining within it, this purpose cannot cover *all* funerary artifacts.

The types of artifacts found with the Mesopotamian dead were extremely varied, encompassing a range of objects with highly divergent uses and purposes: items probably used in daily life (e.g. pottery, tools, cylinder seals, cosmetics); objects incapable of functioning for practical use (e.g. kiln rejects or clay model tools); ritual vessels (such as those discussed by Winter 1999b in the context of mortuary ceremonies); items of personal adornment and jewelry; furniture; weapons; musical instruments; board games; figurines; and, in the ED IIIa period, even human retainers. Although it is possible to see some of these objects as implements from graveside ritual or provisioning for a journey to the netherworld, an examination of the corpus as a whole shows that the most plausible explanation for *many* of the grave goods is a belief that such objects had a purpose *within* the netherworld. Accordingly, we can reconstruct some of the characteristics of this afterlife by examining the objects people attempted to bring there with them. The resulting picture of the dead continuing to carry on their daily occupations—working, fighting, listening to music, feasting, applying makeup, and playing board games—is a far cry from the literary portrayal of lonely, dispirited ghosts flitting about in grisly caverns. And although texts like *The Death of Ur-Namma* and *The Death of Gilgamesh*, in which kings receive special privileges in the afterworld, might appear to imply that only royalty could anticipate a good afterlife, the inclusion of a range of grave goods in simpler burials suggests that people from a broad variety of backgrounds expected a continuation of their previous existence in the next world.

Iconographic Allusions to Inana/Ishtar on Funerary Remains

If such an alternative conception of the netherworld existed, how can it be integrated into what we know of Mesopotamian religion? One possible link to textual descriptions of Mesopotamian religion comes from a number of grave goods whose motifs recall the iconography of Inana/Ishtar,⁴² a deity known from literary texts to have

⁴² More grave goods depict the iconography of this deity than that of other gods who might at first seem to have held greater importance in the netherworld, such as Utu/Shamash. The sun god served as ruler and chief judge of the netherworld,

gone down into the netherworld and come up again. Appearances of such imagery in funerary contexts do not necessarily indicate that people expected the goddess herself to present them with a happy afterlife, but they may imply that people saw her as a model to emulate without their necessarily having to rely on her direct aid. Both Inana/Ishtar and her partner Dumuzi⁴³ died and returned to life again in the extant literary texts. Although human beings could not hope to return to life—there is no evidence for any belief in physical resurrection or rebirth in Mesopotamia—they might at least hope to avoid the unpleasant aspects of the netherworld from which Inana/Ishtar had escaped, thus also achieving some more desirable form of existence after death.

The Sumerian *Descent of Inana to the Netherworld*⁴⁴ and the Akkadian *Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld*⁴⁵ describe the goddess's apparent attempt to wrest power from the netherworld queen Ereshkigal; her subsequent defeat and death at Ereshkigal's hands; and, thanks to the help of Enki/Ea, her eventual resurrection in exchange for the death of her lover Dumuzi. Inana/Ishtar's return from the netherworld is not presented as a triumph, but a chastening. She fails in her quest for domination; by the end of the narrative, her sister Ereshkigal is still firmly ensconced on the throne where Inana had hoped to sit.⁴⁶ Nor does she even escape the netherworld on her own. Without Enki/Ea's help, she would be lost forever. The very structure of the texts demonstrates that Inana/Ishtar does not come out triumphant.⁴⁷ However, despite the fact that Inana/Ishtar does

transported wandering ghosts back to the netherworld, and was responsible for conveying food and libations to the dead therein (Steinkeller 2005: 23-34). However, his image or symbols are comparatively rare in funerary iconography.

⁴³ See Mettinger (2001: 185-215) for a neo-Frazierian discussion of Dumuzi as a “dying and rising god.”

⁴⁴ For text editions, see Black (1998- f); Alster (1996); Kramer (1980); Sladek (1974).

⁴⁵ For text editions, see Borger (1979) and Ebeling (1949).

⁴⁶ Some praise hymns to Ishtar do refer to her as the “mistress of heaven and netherworld”; see, for example, line 8 of a hymn of Assurnasirpal I (von Soden 1974/7; trans. Foster 2005: 327-330), and line 4 of a prayer against impotence (Biggs 1967: 28; trans. Foster 2005: 676-677). However, when made in the context of a praise hymn, such descriptions may merely be meant to suggest a general idea of universal sovereignty, rather than a specific control over the netherworld.

⁴⁷ As Reiner writes, the first words of a Babylonian poem generally describe its protagonist; however, the first words of the text to which we have given the name *Descent of Ishtar* are “To the Land of No Return,” the underworld, “thus in effect establishing the nether world as the protagonist of the story” (Reiner 1985: 31). The Sumerian text known to us as the *Descent of Inana* similarly indicates that

not succeed in conquering the netherworld, she does at least emerge with her life. She is thus a liminal figure associated with the transition between life and death, a spanning of boundaries which tallies well with Harris's (1991) characterization of Inana/Ishtar as a deity who embodies paradox and contradiction. Inana/Ishtar is "ambiguity incarnate" (Harris 1991: 266), breaking down the boundaries between good and bad, male and female,⁴⁸ adult and child, virgin and prostitute, high and low status, human and animal, and even human and divine (Harris 1991: 272). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that she should be associated with the boundary between life and death as well. It is appropriate for Inana/Ishtar, of all deities, to fill the liminal role of going down into the netherworld and coming up again.

Indeed, another Sumerian text also associates Inana with the transition between the living world and the netherworld. The Sumerian *Inana and Enki*⁴⁹ deals with a transfer of power between its two titular deities. Over the course of the narrative, Inana gets Enki drunk, steals from him an extensively catalogued list of items known as *mes*, and successfully absconds with them to her home city of Uruk. Many scholarly discussions of this narrative revolve around its author/redactor's use of the Sumerian word *me*.⁵⁰ However,

its true purpose has little to do with devotion to Inana. Praise hymns to a god or goddess typically close with a short statement, or envoi, acknowledging the deity honored (Jacobsen 1987: 101, 113, 126). Although the envoi does not necessarily honor the *protagonist* of the story, it does usually celebrate the *winner* of the primary struggle or contest recounted. Piotr Steinkeller (personal communication) points out that the conflict between Inana/Ishtar and Ereshkigal belongs within a broader framework of "contest literature," in which two characters contend for power or superiority. Whether or not one follows Reiner in asserting that Inana/Ishtar is not the protagonist of her own descent myth, it does appear clear that she was at least the loser in the contest. As an example of such an envoi, a hymn to Inana on behalf of Iddin-Dagan concludes with the phrase: "A song of valor pertaining to Ninsianna [Inana's manifestation as the planet Venus]" (line 230, trans. Jacobsen 1987: 124; editions by Black et al. 1998- e and Reisman 1970: 147-211). However, the Sumerian version of the descent story ends instead with the lines, "Holy Ereš-ki-gala—sweet is your praise" (ID 411-412). The poem's final praises go not to Inana but to her conqueror, Ereshkigal.

⁴⁸ See Groneberg (1986) on Inana/Ishtar's own physical androgyny, and Bottéro and Kramer (1989: 229, 326) on that of some of her devotees.

⁴⁹ Text editions: Farber (1973, 1995).

⁵⁰ Most authors agree on the basic dictionary definition of *me*, which Kramer and Maier (1989: 57) take to be "a fundamental, unalterable, comprehensive assortment of powers and duties, norms and standards, rules and regulations . . . relating to the cosmos and its components, to gods and humans, to cities and countries, and to the varied aspects of civilized life." In other words, the *mes* are the perfect,

for present purposes, the issue at hand is not the general definition of *me* but the specific ways in which the word's use is restricted within *Inana and Enki*. According to Alster (1974: 24), Kramer and Maier (1989: 57), and Bottéro (1992: 237-238), this text's catalogue of *mes* includes only those *mes* that represent foundational principles of urban life. Bottéro and Kramer see the *mes* in this narrative as "*données essentiellement culturelles*" concerned with the features of civilization (1989: 250). Alster believes that the *mes* in *Inana and Enki* refer exclusively to "cultural norms" (1974: 24), so that Inana steals precisely those *mes* that govern the operations of human civilization. Therefore, the text essentially describes the spread of civilization from Enki's city of Eridu to Inana's city of Uruk.⁵¹

In contrast to these authors' approaches, however, Jean-Jacques Glassner (1992) convincingly argues that although the term *me* normally has a much broader semantic range, the catalogue of *mes* in this text limits itself to the major aspects of the stories and rituals pertaining to Inana's cult (Glassner 1992: 57). In most cases, these *mes* represent roles and rituals performed by Inana's mortal worshippers. Other *mes*, Glassner argues, describe "*des activités exercées par Inanna elle-même*" (1992: 72). Glassner's argument is compelling. As he points out (1992: 56), if the catalogue were meant to include all the important features of civilization, then it is missing some of the most important ones, such as agriculture and irrigation. Instead, most of the *mes* refer to concepts like royalty, sexuality, war, and certain types of priests, all bearing strong associations with Inana.

This list of *mes* is important to the present study because of two particular entries: "going down to the netherworld" (*kur ed₃-de₃*) and "coming up from the underworld" (*kur ed₃-da*) (Black et al. 1998-g:

essential forms of any concepts people might wish to express. Alster (1974: 33ff.) expands this definition of *me* to include not only theoretical concepts but also their physical realizations: "since *me* is a plan which can (and ideally should) be manifested in visible shape, anything existing can be referred to as *me*." That is, Alster interprets the *mes* not as only ideal constructs, but also any concrete reality on earth which approximates those constructs. Other scholars insist that the *mes* belong exclusively to the world of ideas: Glassner equates the *mes* with relatively abstract principles, "*les grands principes qui permettent le fonctionnement régulier du cosmos*" (1992: 56).

⁵¹ In the opinion of Kramer and Maier, *Inana and Enki* "attempts to explain and validate the restoration of a Sumerian city to eminence and leadership" (1989: 57; see also Bottéro 1992: 237-238). In this interpretation, the religious narrative is a reification of an actual political trend in which Uruk became the dominant city in place of the previously prominent Eridu. The *Sumerian King List* does cite Eridu as the original seat of urban civilization, lending some support to this hypothesis.

F23-24, J16-21). If Glassner is correct that many of the *mes* are “*exercées par Inanna elle-même*,” then surely any trips to and from the underworld must apply to her; we know from the previously discussed textual descriptions of the goddess’s descent that Inana went down⁵² into the land of the dead and re-emerged. Interestingly, the list of *mes* places emphasis not on the goddess’s spending time in the netherworld or out of the netherworld, but on her actual process of “going down” and “coming up.” That is, this text associates her with the *journey* between the worlds of the living and the dead. Therefore, it is understandable that in funerary rituals, people might have buried artifacts associated with Inana/Ishtar along with those individuals who were setting out on their own journey of transition between the two realms.

In one passage in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the spurned Ishtar warns An that if he does not send the Bull of Heaven against Gilgamesh, she will destroy the gates of the netherworld and let the dead come up to devour the living (VI: 89). Ishtar clearly states that she has the power to do this: “I shall smash the *underworld* together with its dwelling-place, I shall *raze* the nether regions *to the ground*. I shall bring up the dead to consume the living, I shall make the dead outnumber the living” (VI: 97-100; text edition and trans. by George 2003: 625).⁵³ The threat seems to be effective; An accedes to her demands. *The Descent of Ishtar* makes it clear that Ishtar failed to gain control of the netherworld, but her threat in *Gilgamesh* may

⁵² Any discussion of the netherworld as a place to which one *goes down* brings up the issue of where exactly the netherworld was located. The text KAR 307 30-38 asserts that it lies below the human world as the lowest of a sequence of three “earths” (text edition and translation by Horowitz 1998: 3-4; see pp. 4-19 for commentary), and Horowitz (1998: 348) has collected a number of additional texts alluding to the necessity of *descending* to the netherworld. However, in addition to this tradition, the netherworld was also associated with mountainous regions of the human earth; the Sumerian word *kur* stands for both “mountains” and “netherworld,” and its sign derives from a pictograph of a mountain (Horowitz 1998: 268; see also Bruschweiler 1987: 21-28 for an analysis of the similarities and differences between *kur* and *hur-sag*). Synthesizing the sources, Steinkeller provides us with the most useful way to understand the netherworld’s place in Mesopotamian cosmic geography. Steinkeller (2005: 18-21 and 47, fig. 1) demonstrates that the netherworld was conceived as the “lower hemisphere” of a spherical universe, connected to the “upper hemisphere” by gates in the Cedar Mountains in the west and the Habur Mountains in the east. See also Bruschweiler (1987: 79) for a discussion of Inana’s epithet *kur-ra diri-ga*, “she who rules the *kur*.”

⁵³ This threat clearly echoes Ereshkigal’s words in *Nergal and Ereshkigal* (lines 247-250).

imply that she did at least wield some influence in the *transport* of people to—and, in this case, from—the land of the dead.

A Sumerian prayer further associates Inana with the journey of spirits to the netherworld. Veldhuis (2003) has reinterpreted the Sumerian text RBC 2000⁵⁴ as a prayer in which the spirit of a dead person pleads for admittance into the netherworld. Following the speaker's opening address to the door, bolt, crossbar, and gate of the netherworld, Veldhuis (2003: 1) reads line 11 as "May Inanna be my vanguard."⁵⁵ This line strongly suggests that people associated Inana with the journey of human beings to the netherworld. The context of the tablet is unknown, but because it takes the form of a round "hand tablet" (*im-šū*), Veldhuis (2003: 4) speculates that "It may be . . . that this tablet was given to the deceased person in the grave to be held by hand, to be consulted and recited on his or her journey to the netherworld."

Finally, the third tablet of the hymn known as "Ishtar Queen of Heaven"⁵⁶ further associates Ishtar with the passage of human beings between the netherworld and the living world. Foster (2005: 594) reads lines 27-32 as: "No one but she [Ishtar] can bring back the one who revered her. No one but she can revive the dead, restore []. No one but she can grant long life to him who heeds her." This reference to the ability to bring up the dead recalls Ishtar's threat in the *Gilgamesh* passage, although here the sense of menace is absent or diminished.

⁵⁴ Originally published by Hallo (1985).

⁵⁵ Similar references to a deity as a person's vanguard are also common in battle contexts. Many gods can be described as leading the king into battle or otherwise going before him; see, for example, line 4 of the second tablet of Naram-Sin's siege of Apishal (Westenholz 1977: 183-187; trans. Foster 2005: 115-117), line 36 of a hymn to Tiglath-Pileser I (Hurowitz and Westenholz 1990; trans. Foster 2005: 324-326) or line 29 of an account of one of Shalmaneser III's battles (editions by Grayson 1996: 84-87; Livingstone 1989: 44-47; Lambert 1961: 143-158; trans. Foster 2005: 779-782). Compare also the description of Ninurta's fighting in the vanguard of a battle in lines 151-167 of the Sumerian composition known as "The Exploits of Ninurta," although here there is no reference to a mortal king (Black et al. 1998: b; Geller 1985: 220-221; van Dijk 1983). Ishtar herself is less frequently described as going *before* the king into battle than as standing *at his side*. See, for example, line 16, tablet 1 of a donation text attributed to Kurigalzu (Ungnad 1923: 29-36; trans. Foster 2005: 365-366); the conclusion of a temple inscription from the reign of Nabonidus (Schaudig 2001: 353-358; Ehelolf 1968: 136-137; Smith 1925: 60-62; trans. Foster 2005: 858); and see also the collection of Ishtar's warlike epithets in Tallqvist 1938: 337-338).

⁵⁶ Text edition: Lambert (1982).

Before discussing evidence for the presence of Inana/Ishtar's iconography in Mesopotamian burials, it is first necessary to review some diagnostic features of this iconography.⁵⁷ Symbols and images associated with Inana/Ishtar include: the "rosette" symbol or eight-pointed star⁵⁸ (Saggs 1962: 334; Moortgat-Correns 1994; Steinkeller 2002); the *mùš* symbol (Steinkeller 1998; see also Beaulieu 1998);⁵⁹ lions and lionesses (Wilcke 1976: 82; Seidl 1976: 88-89); and carnelian and, in certain cases at least, the color red. The goddess herself is usually portrayed wearing the divine horned cap, and she is often either nude, nude below the waist (most commonly in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian times), or depicted in a warlike aspect with weapons emanating from her shoulders (Seidl 1976: 87-89). Sometimes she also has wings (Groneberg 1997: 128). In addition, her cult was linked to that of her consort Dumuzi, a shepherd deity or semi-deity sometimes associated with lapis lazuli and the color blue (or, more properly, blue/black).⁶⁰ Images of sheep and goats may sometimes allude to this shepherd god (I. Winter, personal communication), although no known representations of Dumuzi in human form survive in Mesopotamia (Black and Green 2000: 73).

Most of these attributes of Inana/Ishtar are well-established and need little further discussion here, but some explanation is necessary to clarify the proposed color symbolism. Much more work remains to be done on color symbolism in ancient Mesopotamia, and further study is needed to clarify this issue. However, many artifacts associated with Inana/Ishtar make extensive use of the color red, a phenomenon which may suggest the goddess's astral aspect. In an explanation of Inana's epithet of *mùš-me-ḫuš*, "she of the red face," Van Dijk⁶¹ (2000: 125, n. 2, n. 25) points out that

⁵⁷ For some more general descriptions of Inana/Ishtar's personality, attributes, and rituals, see Groneberg (1997: 123-154); Bottéro and Kramer (1989: 201-337); Seidl (1976); and Wilcke (1976).

⁵⁸ See Steinkeller (2002) for an analysis of the interchangeability of the star and rosette and a discussion of the word (Sumerian *ul*, Akkadian *ullu*) that signifies both.

⁵⁹ Steinkeller's interpretation supersedes earlier explanations like that of Seidl (1976: 87), who sees the symbol as a "*Schilfringbündel*" or bundle of reeds.

⁶⁰ The Mesopotamians recognized only four colors: red, white, blue/black, and green/yellow (Charvát 2002: 233). The conflation of blue and black explains the frequent textual descriptions of men with "lapis lazuli" beards and the common use of lapis lazuli to represent hair and beards in art (e.g. Jacobsen 1987a: 91; Winter 1999a: 46-48).

⁶¹ I thank Paul-Alain Beaulieu for pointing out this reference.

the goddess becomes visible as the planet Venus at sunrise and sunset, the two times of day when the sky is red. Red is also the color of Anu's heaven, which is identified with the reddish *luludānītu*-stone (Horowitz 1998: 9-10). It is possible, as Paul-Alain Beaulieu (personal communication) has suggested, that Ishtar's association with the color red relates to the tradition that she dwelt in Anu's heaven and sat on his dais (Horowitz 1998: 245-246, 250-252). The fragmentary text known as "Love Lyrics of Ishtar of Babylon" (lines 15-17, trans. Foster 2005: 948)⁶² explicitly identifies Ishtar with the red stone carnelian: "You are mother, O Ishtar of Babylon, you are mother, O queen of the Babylonians, you are mother, O palm tree, O carnelian!" The Uruk-period Mosaic Temple in the Eanna, Uruk's religious complex devoted to Inana, was decorated with stone cones painted red, white, and black (Crawford 2002: 59; Hilprecht 1904: 148), and the rosettes on the nave of the Tell Brak "Eye Temple" shared the same three colors (Charvát 2002: 233). The Old Babylonian Burney Relief, which probably depicts Inana/Ishtar,⁶³ was originally painted red and black (Collon 2005: 17). Irene Winter (1999a: 51-52) notes that in the "Royal Tombs" of Ur, the colors red and blue were paired especially often and frequently decorated artifacts whose iconography was meant to suggest themes of fertility and abundance.

One Old Babylonian text⁶⁴ on childbirth—the incantation "*Munus-ù-tu-da*," text AUAM 73.3094 (Cohen 1976:133-138)—implies that red carnelian represents the female principle, while blue lapis lazuli represents the male.⁶⁵ In this text, Winter (1999a: 52; see also Cohen 1976: 133) observes that "the unborn child is likened to a boat filled with carnelian or lapis," and the uncertainty about whether it will be carnelian or lapis conveys the notion that "the gender of the child will only be known at birth." The same incantation advocates giving different gender-appropriate objects to newborn boys and girls (Cohen 1976: 134, 139), demonstrating the text's concern with the baby's gender and supporting the idea that the carnelian or lapis in the boat has a similar significance.

⁶² Text edition by Lambert (1975: 127-135).

⁶³ See discussion below.

⁶⁴ Cohen (1976: 138) classifies the text as an "enuru-incantation."

⁶⁵ I. Winter (personal communication) has suggested that this color scheme may be ancestral to our modern associations of "blue for boys, pink for girls."

Indeed, carnelian and lapis lazuli are often paired in both jewelry and textual references. As Hansen (1998: 48; see also Moorey 1999: 177 and Winter 1999a: 52) points out, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* describes a fantasy garden of trees bearing carnelian fruit and lapis lazuli foliage (IX: 280-285). Similarly, *The Descent of Ishtar* ends with the lines “On the day when Dumuzi comes back up, (and) the lapis lazuli pipe [or flute] and the carnelian ring come up with him, (when) male and female mourners come up with him, the dead shall come up and smell the smoke offering” (lines 137-139, trans. Dalley 1989: 160; see also Winter 1999a: 52). Although neither text specifically links the two stones to masculinity or femininity, they at least carry associations of fertility and abundance. These suggestions of fecundity and new growth are visible not only in the fruit and foliage of the paradisiacal garden, but also in the ring and flute,⁶⁶ which evoke a context of new life and regeneration: part of the celebration at Dumuzi’s yearly resurrection, they mark the temporary return not only of the god but of the dead more generally.⁶⁷

The pairing of carnelian and lapis lazuli, or of red and blue/black in general, may represent the pairing of Inana/Ishtar and Dumuzi. Alternatively, as Eckart Frahm (personal communication) suggests, this color scheme may represent the coexisting male and female elements of Inana/Ishtar’s own character; she is, after all, an androgynous deity (Groneberg 1986). Indeed, one of Inana/Ishtar’s emblems, the scarf or turban which Steinkeller (1998) associates with the *mùš* sign, was associated at different times with both blue and red.⁶⁸ Another piece of evidence suggesting an association between lapis and Inana/Ishtar herself comes from an Akkadian record of the donation of a lapis lazuli vulva to the goddess (Foster 2005: 677; Farber 1977: 146-149).

⁶⁶ A modern reader might be tempted to speculate about the more Freudian implications of the “ring and flute,” since the “ring” is made of the “female” stone carnelian, while the “flute” is composed of the “male” lapis lazuli. However, it is dangerous to rely on our own cultural associations when analyzing another society’s iconography. That which carries one set of connotations today may not have carried such connotations thousands of years ago.

⁶⁷ Note, however, that there have been some challenges to the widely accepted view that the spirits of the dead returned to earth during this festival. See, for example, Katz (2003: 42), who feels that the evidence is equivocal.

⁶⁸ Literary references suggest that the archaic form of this scarf was the color of lapis lazuli (Steinkeller 1998: 5), while in the Neo-Babylonian period, it seems to have become red (Beaulieu 1998: 26).

To summarize, the iconography of Inana/Ishtar commonly includes many of the following elements: (1) the “rosette” symbol or eight-pointed star; (2) the *mùš* symbol; (3) lions and lionesses; (4) red/carnelian, frequently paired with blue/lapis lazuli; and (5) direct depictions of the goddess herself. Such direct depictions typically portray Inana/Ishtar as a female figure who is either (wholly or partially) nude or depicted with weapons emerging from her shoulders; she usually wears the horned crown of divinity and sometimes also possesses wings. Although many of the above iconographic elements and attributes frequently occur together, it is not necessary for all to be present in a single image of the goddess.

Let us now examine several selected Mesopotamian burials, describe the repertoire of motifs present within them, and compare those motifs to this list of the most common elements of Inana/Ishtar’s iconography. The more elements of the goddess’s imagery are present on an object, the more plausible it is that the object’s owner or maker consciously intended to allude to her. Many of the iconographical features that sometimes suggested Inana/Ishtar also had other associations. People may have used carnelian and lapis lazuli in jewelry not only because of their ideological connotations but also because, as expensive and exotic stones, they made good status symbols (Charvát 2002: 233; Moorey 1999: 180). Furthermore, people may have valued motifs such as the rosette not only for their meaning, but also for their decorative value. However, when many elements of this iconographic assemblage appear in combination, it is possible to speak of a probable intended reference to Inana/Ishtar. We should not assume that those iconographic elements that seem to us purely “decorative” or “ornamental” are necessarily devoid of meaning merely because they are also decorative. As Andrae (1954: 136) warns, it is not uncommon to find that “*Eine tiefere Bedeutung hat jedes ‘Ornament.’*”

Many Mesopotamian graves contain objects decorated with certain basic elements of Inana/Ishtar’s iconography, such as rosettes,⁶⁹ whereas many other graves lack such imagery. For the purposes of this initial study, I will not attempt to draw definitive conclusions about the potential extent of such imagery throughout the entire corpus of Mesopotamian burial. A statistical analysis of the proportion

⁶⁹ Rosettes are ubiquitous in both elite and non-elite interments in almost every period from which we have funerary evidence.

of extant graves incorporating such imagery would be far beyond the scope of this brief paper. Instead, I will merely discuss five cases where I propose to show that imagery clearly associated with Inana/Ishtar appears in a funerary context: (1) the “Royal Tombs” of Ur from the Early Dynastic Period, (2) the “Burney Relief” and related terracotta figurines and plaques from the Isin-Larsa/Old Babylonian⁷⁰ Period, (3) the Middle Assyrian burials at Tomb 45 in Assur, (4) the frit “masks” found in Middle Assyrian tombs at Mari and elsewhere, and (5) the burials of the Neo-Assyrian queens at Nimrud.

It is necessary at the outset to address two consequences of using this sample. First, the five cases above involve artifacts from a wide range of periods and regions. Such an approach has the benefit of providing a broader perspective, putting these individual sites and artifacts in the wider context of Mesopotamian religion rather than restricting the focus to a single era or place. However, the societies involved were not monolithic, and many aspects of funerary practice—for example, the form of burial, the positioning of the corpse, and some specific types of grave offerings—do show great variation between sites and periods (e.g. Orthmann 1971); for example, the human sacrifice practiced in the ED IIIa “Royal Tombs” of Ur remains extraordinary for Mesopotamia. The existence of certain broad commonalities in Mesopotamian religious beliefs, such as those pertaining to the fundamental organization of the cosmos (Steinkeller 2005: 18), makes diachronic and interregional comparisons permissible. Yet it remains the case that each of the artifacts discussed below also emerged from a unique local context, with its own specific set of circumstances. In order to make statistically meaningful statements about the relative prominence of specific iconographic motifs in grave goods from one period as opposed to another, it would be necessary to present a comprehensive survey of Mesopotamian grave goods from all time periods and regions. Such a survey is beyond this paper’s scope but remains a promising goal for future research.

Second, because the greatest amounts of jewelry and other iconography-rich materials inevitably appear in wealthy graves, the few examples presented below (with the exception of the Isin-Larsa/Old Babylonian terracottas) are necessarily biased heavily toward the elite segments of Mesopotamian societies. However, similar iconographic

⁷⁰ See note 79, below, for a discussion of the dating of these artifacts.

elements also appear—albeit in smaller numbers—in many poorer contexts. For example, the mass-produced, inexpensive Isin-Larsa/Old Babylonian terracotta plaques are common throughout a wide variety of socioeconomic contexts, so their iconography must reflect ideas that were widespread in society.⁷¹ Although poorer graves do not contain as many valuable or beautiful artifacts, some of their contents do similarly allude to a repertoire of images associated with Inana/Ishtar.

The “Royal Tombs” of Ur

The iconography of many of the ED III grave goods in the so-called “Royal Tombs”⁷² of Ur evokes themes of fecundity and fertility; the goat and plant emblems of Inana/Ishtar’s consort Dumuzi are common, and many of the artifacts are adorned with rosettes. Red and blue color symbolism is particularly prominent, and indeed, the gendered interpretation of these colors arose partly out of the study of the “Royal Tombs” (Winter 1999a: 52). The rosette pattern appears on numerous artifacts from the “Royal Tombs,” including silver and gold vessels (Weber and Zettler 1998: 128-129 fig. 98, 133 fig. 105, 134 figs. 106-107) and jewelry.⁷³ Most spectacularly,

⁷¹ See discussion below.

⁷² It is still unclear who the principal burials in the tombs were, and theories range from members of the royal family (Woolley 1982: 87-94; Zettler 1998a: 33) to substitute kings and queens executed when an evil omen predicted the ruler’s death (Woolley 1982: 88) to members of *oikoi* or “public households” (Pollock 2002; see Maisels (1993: 161, 171-191) on the importance of the extended household, or *oikos*, as an economic unit). Hansen (1998: 43), following Moorey (1977), suggests that they were actually cultic functionaries of Nanna, the moon-god and patron deity of Ur. However, the evidence for this interpretation is scanty, and Marchesi (2004) dismisses it in favor of the theory that the tombs contain royalty. There is also some disagreement about the nature of the apparently sacrificed retainers; Charvát (2002: 225-226) suggests that they may be secondary burials rather than sacrifices, although Meijer (2003: 60) is probably correct to argue in favor of the traditional sacrifice interpretation.

⁷³ The “Great Death Pit” contained three ornaments of gold and lapis lazuli in the shape of eight-pointed rosettes (Pittman 1998b: 122 fig. 94). Strings of beads from PG 580 (Pittman 1998b: 110 fig. 66) and PG 800 (Pittman 1998b: 97 fig. 34) prominently feature rosettes. Puabi’s grave, PG 900, contained “seventeen gold leaf rosettes” which must once have been part of some piece of jewelry (Pittman 1998b: 94). Two silver combs from the Great Death Pit are decorated with eight-petaled, rosette-shaped flowers (Pittman 1998b: 106, figs. 54, 55), and these combs resemble the more elaborate gold example from Puabi’s headdress (Pittman 1998b: 90). Also, Hansen (1998: 65) notes the presence of rosettes on a gold headband decorated with a ram and plant motif.



Figure 1. Puabi's headdress, PG 800, "Royal Tombs" of Ur. After Pittman (1998b: 91, cat. no. 29).

Puabi's headdress from PG 800 (Figure 1) is covered with rosettes of gold and lapis lazuli (Pittman 1998b: 90-91, fig. 29); the dead woman was herself crowned with the goddess's symbol. Similarly, the so-called "Ram in a Thicket" sculpture (Figure 2)—a possible offering table whose subject is actually a goat, not a ram⁷⁴—depicts a rearing goat nibbling on branches on which grow leaves and rosettes (Hansen 1998: 61, cat. no. 8).

As Irene Winter (personal communication) has noted, this consistency of imagery strengthens the hypothesis that the rosettes carry more meaning than mere decoration. In fact, the creators of some of these objects went out of their way to depict rosettes in situations where they would not normally appear. On the sculpture of the rearing goat eating the branch, Hansen (1998: 62) astutely observes that, in contrast to the very realistically rendered animal, the rosette-sprouting plant represents a type that does not exist in nature and must have been portrayed for its symbolic value alone. The religious significance of this goat sculpture, which Woolley (1982: 81-82, 95-97) found in the "Great Death Pit," deserves special attention. I. Winter (personal communication) has suggested that the goat feeding on rosettes may represent the pairing of Dumuzi and Inana.⁷⁵ Further reinforcing the object's associations with reproduction and new growth, Hansen (1998: 62) notes that the goat rears up in a position identical to this animal's stance when mating. The lapis lazuli material of much of the goat's body might further support a link to Dumuzi.

An emphasis on abundance and reproduction is also visible in many other artifacts from the tombs, such as the collection of pendants and beads that Woolley mistakenly grouped together as the so-called "diadem."⁷⁶ Many of these pendants depict plants, sheep, and other herd animals. The golden amulets consist of paired

⁷⁴ The misleading modern nickname alludes to the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac.

⁷⁵ Similarly, Frankfort (1996: 63) describes the goat sculpture as "that combination of herbivore with plant which we have repeatedly met as symbol of the great gods of natural fertility." The rosette/goat pairing is far from unique in Mesopotamian art; an Akkadian-period cylinder seal from Tell Asmar depicts an eight-pointed star or rosette directly next to a goat standing in a similar pose to that of its ED IIIa counterpart, eating vegetation held by a god (Frankfort 1996: 90, fig. 96).

⁷⁶ Pittman (1998b: 92) characterizes these beads as originating from "as many as six discrete items that might have been intended as elements in a coordinated ensemble."

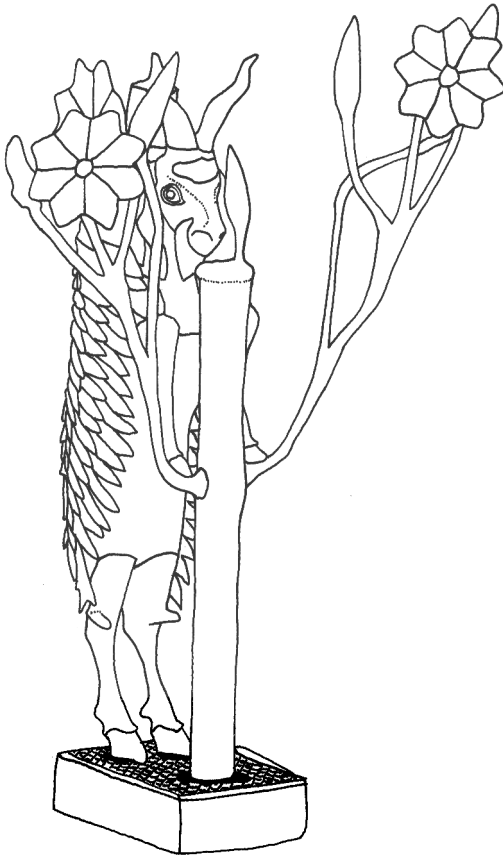


Figure 2. Sculpture of a rearing goat, PG 1237, “Royal Tombs” of Ur. After Hansen (1998: 8, cat. no. 8).

animals and paired plants of various species. All the animals are male, and the floral/vegetal pendants—pomegranates, wheat, and dates—are associated with metaphors of plentiful growth.⁷⁷ Fertility and abundance appear to be the governing iconographic themes, and the new life of the natural world may here be a metaphor for the new existence of the deceased in the netherworld.⁷⁸

Numerous artifacts in the “Royal Tombs” utilize the gendered color scheme of alternating red and blue. Much jewelry incorporates paired beads of carnelian and lapis lazuli, as well as other red and blue stones.⁷⁹ The red and blue color scheme extends even to the Great Lyre, which was colored red, white, and blue (Woolley 1982: 80-81). It is also worth noting that the women in the Great Death Pit wore what Woolley (1982: 80) identified as “garments of bright red woollen stuff,” dressing themselves in Inana’s color.

Finally, lion imagery is also common on the artifacts in the “Royal Tombs.” In Puabi’s tomb, lion motifs decorate a chair or throne, a sledge, and a cosmetic box.⁸⁰ From PG 789, called the “King’s Grave,” comes a more martial example of lion imagery: a

⁷⁷ For a discussion of Mesopotamian representations of abundance in the Assyrian period, and of cultivated fruits such as the pomegranate and the date palm as representations of plenty and fecundity, see Winter (2003), esp. p. 256 and n. 29. Winter understands the palm as an appropriate metaphor for abundance partly because of its method of reproduction through numerous shoots (2003: 253), and the numerous seeds of fruits like the pomegranate may have similarly conveyed an idea of bounty and fertility (I. Winter, personal communication).

⁷⁸ The fact that the pendants or amulets originally came from different ornaments does not alter this observation; in fact, it only strengthens the point to note that multiple artifacts shared a consistent symbolic system.

⁷⁹ In addition to gold, the beads of the “diadem” incorporate significant quantities of lapis lazuli and carnelian (Pittman 1998b: 92-93). Puabi’s burial contained a garter, belt, and cuff made from the two stones, sometimes with the addition of gold; a lapis lazuli amulet of a bull hanging from lapis and carnelian beads; two necklace strings alternating between lapis, carnelian, and gold beads; and Puabi’s own gold headdress is decorated with lapis lazuli and carnelian (Pittman 1998b: 90-100). Also in the same tomb, gold, lapis lazuli, and carnelian make up a female attendant’s wreath and a male attendant’s headband; similar headbands, cuffs, and strings of beads appear in the “Great Death Pit,” PG 1237 (Pittman 1998b: 99, 101, 105, 117). Also made of gold, lapis lazuli, and carnelian are a frontlet from PG 1054 and strings of beads from PG 580, 453, 1116, 57, and 1054 (Pittman 1998b: 104, 110, 112, 116, 117). Many other items of jewelry combine lapis and carnelian with additional stones, such as agate or chalcedony. A game board from PG 580 is made of shell, red limestone, and lapis lazuli; the color scheme enhances the imagery of the shell plaques on the board, which depict rosettes and “incised representations of animals and plants” (Hansen 1998: 60; see also Hansen 1998: 49).

⁸⁰ Silver lion heads once decorated the arms of a chair or throne (Woolley

copper alloy relief, presumably from a shield or chariot, shows two lions trampling dead enemies above a huge ten-pointed rosette (Hansen 1998: 67). Cylinder seals⁸¹ depicting lions fighting with humans and/or animals are also common throughout the “Royal Tombs.” The contexts of these lion images suggest many of Inana’s own varied roles. The possible throne implies royalty, the cosmetic box may suggest a concern with appearance and sexuality, and the combat imagery recalls Inana’s role as patroness of war.

*The “Burney Relief” and Related Terracottas of the
Isin-Larsa/Old Babylonian⁸² Period*

The terracotta figurines and plaques of Isin-Larsa/Old Babylonian house chapels differ from most of the other types of iconography considered in this paper, because they were not the exclusive property of the wealthy. As Auerbach (1994: 2-12, 203-206) shows, terracotta plaques belonged to people from many different economic backgrounds.⁸³ Because the cheap mass production of these objects made them accessible to a broad cross-section of society (Frankfort

1934: 82) and the sides of a wooden land sledge (Woolley 1982: 100-101). A cosmetic box found near the so-called “wardrobe chest” in the same tomb shows a lion devouring a “horned caprid” (Hansen 1998: 66, fig. 12). The inlaid design is made of lapis lazuli and shell, and traces of red and black paint are still visible on the shell (Hansen 1998: 66), creating the familiar red and blue/black color scheme.

⁸¹ Such cylinder seals appear (usually on the bodies of attendants) in PG 800, PG 1054, PG 261, PG 1382, PG 1374, and similar seals were also found loose in the soil above the tombs (Pittman 1998a: 80-82).

⁸² The chronology of these objects, particularly the moldmade plaques, is somewhat controversial. In the absence of archaeological provenience, it can be hard to distinguish between plaques from the Old Babylonian period and those from the Isin-Larsa period (Assante 2002: 1 n. 2, 2), and there are problems with most attempts to date the plaques based on their typology (Moorey 2004: 75). The plaques were abundant throughout both the Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian periods, and Auerbach (1994) sees most of the post-Ur III specimens from the Diyala as Isin-Larsa rather than Old Babylonian.

⁸³ Auerbach (1994: 281-329) discusses the wide variety of findspots of these objects in the Diyala region, and Assante (2002: 15) presents a strong case that their production was independent of temple or royal institutions. However, their “non-elite”—or not exclusively elite—nature does not prevent them from partaking in an iconographic repertoire similar to that of “elite” art, and many of the artisans who made them appear to have been highly skilled (Auerbach 1994: 11-12, 203-206). The degree to which in these “popular” artifacts share the iconography of “official” art cautions against attempts to portray an insurmountable divide between the themes of “popular” and “official” religion. (Contrast the

1996: 110-112), one may presume that any religious concepts underlying them were fairly widespread.

Old Babylonian burial procedure seems designed to maximize the ease of *kis̄pum* offerings (Tsukimoto 1985) to the dead. In-house burial within domestic chapels⁸⁴ meant that families had easy access to their relatives' last resting places so that they could perform the necessary ceremonies (Dalley 1984: 124; Van der Toorn 1996a: 74-77; Payne 1995), and the lack of large public cemeteries throughout this time period assured that "death remained largely a private and family matter" (Dalley 1984: 124). The house chapels in which living family members carried out the cult of the dead, and beneath which the inhabitants of Ur often buried their dead (Woolley 1927: 399-401; Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 29-30), frequently contained⁸⁵ terracotta statuettes or plaques.⁸⁶ Despite the fact that such terracottas may be found outside the domestic setting as well, they are predominantly associated with domestic contexts.⁸⁷ Although there

arguments of Auerbach 2002, who sees the gods portrayed on plaques as differing markedly from those shown in monumental art and argues that the plaques represent a form of folk religion completely distinct from institutional, official beliefs).

⁸⁴ The "domestic chapel" was first defined at Ur by Woolley, who described these constructions as long, narrow, brick-paved rooms at the rear of a house, containing family burials, a low altar, a recess for burning incense, and a pedestal or table which may have held religious images (Woolley 1927: 399-401; Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 29-30). Some of Woolley's assertions about these chapels may be open to debate; as Barrelet (1978: 274-275) points out, not every Old Babylonian house at Ur contains such a chapel, and not every "chapel" area contains all the identifying features Woolley described. However, most scholars (e.g. Postgate 1994: 99-101; Van der Toorn 1996a: 70; Moorey 2004: 87) agree that a number of houses in Old Babylonian Ur contained spaces for domestic cult. Excavators have found similar household shrines at other sites and from other periods, including Ur III and Isin Dynasty Nippur (McCown and Haines 1967: 39-40), Early Dynastic Khafajah (Delougaz 1967: 11-12) and Akkadian-period Tell Asmar (Hill 1967: 151, 163, 175). There is also textual evidence for the existence of domestic shrines. According to *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, the Akkadian word *āširtu*—which more broadly refers to any type of sanctuary—can also have the specific meaning of "a special room in a private house for cultic purposes" (*CAD* A/II: 439).

⁸⁵ Brusasco's study of the Ur houses (1999-2000: 72) has confirmed Woolley's assertion that the terracottas at Ur come primarily from these domestic chapels.

⁸⁶ The figurine and relief plaque traditions were closely related. Auerbach (1994: 336) sees the plaques as an "outgrowth of . . . the production of terra cotta figurines."

⁸⁷ The vast majority of terracotta plaques with known findspots come from household contexts (Assante 2002: 14). This trend holds true throughout most sites for which the locations of terracottas were carefully recorded, although Auerbach (1994) suggests that the Diyala region may prove an exception; Diyala terracottas came not only from residences but also temples and certain contexts that Auerbach calls "secular public" (1994: 281-329). However, she does not clearly

is great variety⁸⁸ in these terracottas' subjects, by far the most common subject for terracotta figurines and plaques is a nude female.⁸⁹ It remains unclear whether this figure represents a goddess or a human woman. Moorey (2004: 77-79) wisely hesitates to identify any such image as Inana/Ishtar unless the figure wears a horned crown. However, he is probably correct to propose that these images were *consecrated* to Inana/Ishtar, even though they may not have represented her (Moorey 2004: 77-79). The image of the nude female evokes Inana/Ishtar, and although the figures' lack of a horned crown makes it unlikely that they represent the goddess herself, they may depict her devotees.

A series⁹⁰ of unusual⁹¹ terracotta reliefs, of which the most detailed and spectacular example is the so-called "Burney Relief," depicts

define what she means by "secular" or "public," and it is not clear that the terms "domestic" and "public"—or, for that matter, "religious" and "secular"—are mutually exclusive at the sites she describes. Indeed, in two of her three cases of "secular public" contexts, the functions of the buildings are unclear or debatable (Auerbach 1994: 290-299). Similarly, it is true that many plaques came from temple contexts in the Diyala, but here too there may be some complicating factors. Exceptionally well-supplied with plaques of nude females was the Ishtar Kitium temple from late Isin-Larsa period Ishchali, and the Sin temple at the same site contained a slightly smaller number of similar plaques (Auerbach 1994: 323). At the Sin temple complex, these plaques were restricted to temple workshops and other rooms outside the temple proper, whereas at the Ishtar temple complex, large numbers of these objects were found within the temple itself (Auerbach 1994: 323). However, Assante has argued that most of the Kitium plaques originate from temporary housing that local people built in the temple "when their neighborhood suffered a conflagration, forcing them into the temple for shelter" (2002: 15; see also Assante 2000: 163-168). Thus, Assante shows, these plaques too should be considered fundamentally domestic in origin. Additionally, because molds are found predominantly outside temple contexts, Assante demonstrates that production of terracotta plaques and figurines was probably independent of temple institutions (2002: 15 and n. 67).

⁸⁸ The figures portrayed in the plaques vary widely (Frankfort 1996: 112), and some of them may represent that family patron deity which Van der Toorn (1996a; see also Scurlock 2003) calls the "god of the house." For a sense of the range of variation in the subjects of these terracottas, see Assante's (2002: 6-14) overview, Auerbach's (1994: 45-72) typology of Diyala plaques, Moorey's (2004: 77-86) discussion of terracottas from the Ur III through Old Babylonian periods, and Woolley and Mallowan's (1976: 174-175) description of the terracottas from Diqdiqqah.

⁸⁹ See Auerbach 1994: 117, 185-187 and 207-209 on the history of this motif. As Moorey puts it (2004: 86), "She is the single most popular mass-produced terracotta image, though varying in details and style, either shown alone or paired in scenes of sexual activity." Occasionally the nude woman is suckling an infant (Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 174-175).

⁹⁰ See n. 88 below.

⁹¹ Many terracotta reliefs are less specifically focused on a cult of Inana/Ishtar and more general in their subjects (see, e.g., Frankfort 1996: 112-113; Auerbach

what can best be explained as an underworld form of Ishtar. The famous “Burney Relief” (Figure 3) portrays a naked, winged goddess with bird talons instead of feet, wearing the horned crown of deities, holding a rod and ring, standing on two lions, and flanked by owls. Sadly, the piece’s original archaeological context is lost.⁹² However, the terracotta plaque medium suggests that it may have come from a domestic chapel.⁹³ Although the iconography of the Burney Relief remains without exact parallel, a number of smaller

1994: 18-19, 45-72). An extensive list of their most common motifs appears in Moorey (2004: 77-86). Subjects such as mounted riders, dogs, or Humbaba (Moorey 2004: 77-86) probably have little connection to any domestic funerary cult of Ishtar. Many reliefs, however, do depict the goddess—sometimes nude, surrounded by rosettes (Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 177, pls. 78, 79), standing on a lion (Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 179, pl. 81), or in her warrior guise (Auerbach 1994: 171-172). Probably also associated with Inana/Ishtar’s cult are the common plaques featuring sexual intercourse (Assante 2000; Opificius 1961: 235).

⁹² Based on stylistic details, Porada posits a Nippur origin for the piece (1980: 266; see also Kantor 1947: 250-274). There is little evidence to suggest that the object came from a bordello, as the figure’s sexual connotations led Jacobsen (1987b: 6) to hypothesize. Sites of origin are known for a number of the smaller terracotta plaques with related imagery, but in these cases too, the specific context is unknown (Curtis and Collon 1996: 89), and it is unclear whether the pieces came from a domestic context, a temple context, or something else.

⁹³ This possibility must remain somewhat tentative, since the presence of terracotta figurines and plaques in domestic chapels is best attested at Ur. Because of the indifference of an older generation of excavators to domestic quarters in general and to the context and recording of small terracottas in particular, much data about these artifacts’ provenience has been lost (Assante 2002: 2). The original use-context of these objects remains somewhat uncertain at many other sites, including Nippur (Moorey 2004: 72-75), so one must use some caution in assuming that these objects were used in a similar way in domestic settings outside of Ur. Furthermore, not all of the terracotta reliefs from Ur can be demonstrated to come from domestic chapels, as many lack known provenience (Moorey 2004: 74). Partly because of the gaps in our knowledge of the artifacts’ original context, Auerbach (1994: 19-23) takes the extreme position of refusing even to say that the plaques had a religious purpose. However, the limits of the available data do not justify our despairing entirely of making meaningful statements about these artifacts’ possible uses, although caution is certainly appropriate. The presence of a number of such plaques in domestic chapels at Ur certainly enables us to hypothesize that these plaques may have been used in similar settings at other sites as well. The designs on many of the plaques were highly standardized throughout much of Mesopotamia (Assante 2002: 2-3; Auerbach 1994: 10, 123-193), and this standardization of design may conceivably imply similarities in use and significance, as well. Finally, a number of terracotta plaques from various sites in southern Mesopotamia actually depict shrines whose specific features “vividly recall household altars, especially those from Ur” (Assante 2002: 17, n. 72). Such depictions of shrines may be self-referential, reflecting the use of the plaques on which they appear.

terracotta reliefs depict very similar winged female figures; these are almost certainly simplified versions of the same basic image.⁹⁴

Attempts to identify the female figure have been many. As Jacobsen (1987b: 2) points out, the image must represent a goddess rather than a demon; the figure's divinity is indicated her four-tiered crown and by the large size of the relief, which suggests an object of cultic worship.⁹⁵ In fact, since the figure holds what Porada (1980: 266) describes as "the rod and ring, emblems of universal power in the Old Babylonian period," she must be among the most powerful deities. Porada (1980: 266) suggests that she is "the female ruler of the dead," thus implying an identification with Ereshkigal.⁹⁶ However, Ereshkigal has no known iconography and Mesopotamian art appears to be otherwise devoid of direct depictions of her (Collon 2005: 45). Therefore, although Collon (2005: 43-45) considers it possible that the relief depicts Ereshkigal, she ultimately concludes that it is impossible to prove such a link. If the Burney Relief and the similar smaller plaques were to show Ereshkigal, it would be quite revolutionary in view of the broader corpus of Mesopotamian art. Therefore, it is preferable to look for other possibilities, seeking well-documented parallels for this iconography.

Jacobsen was the first to recognize this terracotta figure as Ishtar. She stands on lions, emblematic of that goddess (Jacobsen 1987b: 2).

⁹⁴ An Old Babylonian figure published by Curtis and Collon (1996) lacks the lions and flanking owls, but otherwise bears a great similarity to the figure on the Burney Relief (Moorey 2004: 76). This figurine, BM WA 1994-10-1, 1, depicts a naked female with birds' talons in place of feet, large wings, and a necklace. Additional plaques of nude winged goddesses have been found at Nippur, Nuzi, and Kish, and there additionally exist a number of unproven examples of such plaques and the molds used to make them (Curtis and Collon 1996: 89, 91, figs. 1a and 1b; Auerbach 1994: 153-154, pl. 76c; Barrelet 1952: figs. 4-5, 7; Zervos 1935: 138). A winged, taloned goddess also appears on other media, such as a relief vase from Larsa and certain cylinder seals from Tell Leilan, Nuzi, and Tell Harmal (Curtis and Collon 1996: 89, 91, figs. 1d, e, f, g). Curtis and Collon's (1996) review of these images demonstrates convincingly that they, like the Burney Relief, represent Ishtar.

⁹⁵ Jacobsen's demonstration of the figure's divine nature thus disproves the conclusions of Frankfort (1996: 110) and Lloyd (1984: 171), who identify the subject of the Burney Relief as the demon Lilith.

⁹⁶ Porada (1980: 266) declares, "In addition to the male gods thought to be associated with death, a female deity has long been known. She is best represented in the so-called Burney relief. . . ." and goes on to suggest that the relief may show "the female ruler of the dead or . . . some other major figure of the Old Babylonian pantheon which was occasionally associated with death."

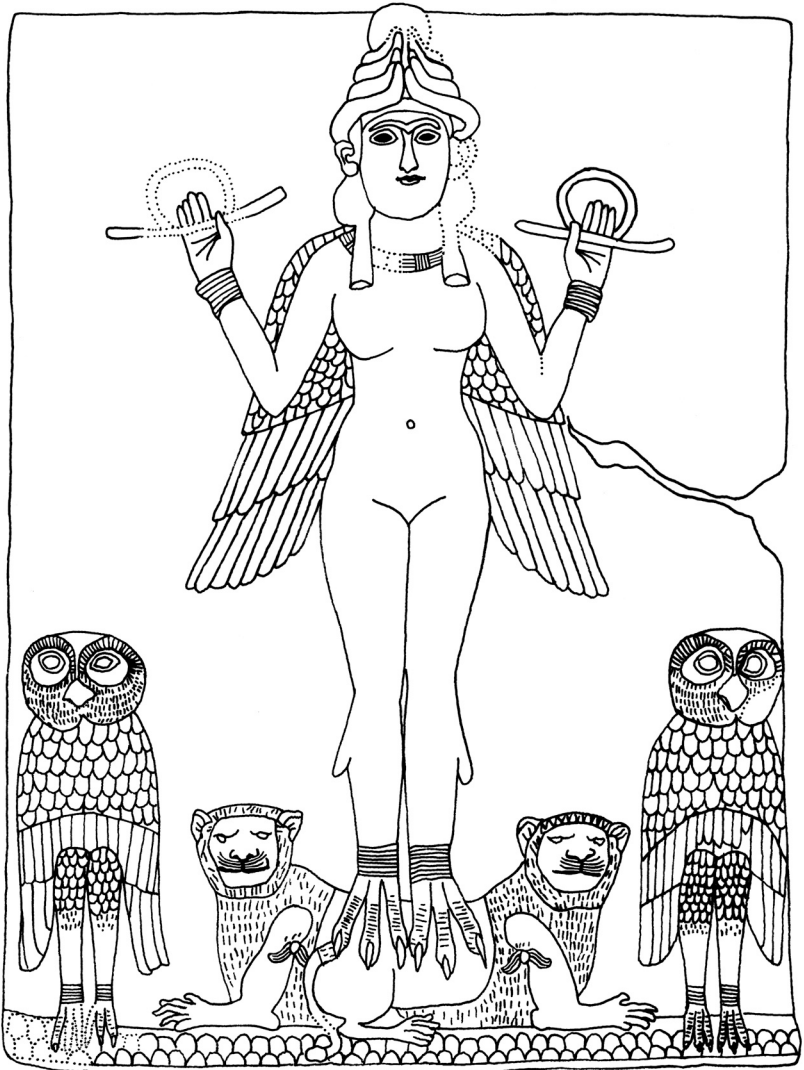


Figure 3. The “Burney Relief.” After Collon (2005: 6, fig. 1), with restorations (shown in stippling) after the digital reconstruction by the British Museum New Media Unit (Collon 2005: 8, fig. 2).

Her companion owls⁹⁷ carry connotations not only of death and darkness but also of Ishtar's prostitute aspect, "the harlot who like the owl comes out at dusk" (Jacobsen 1987b: 5). The relief was originally painted red and black, and the figure's body itself is red (Collon 2005: 17). Also, the wings are characteristic of Ishtar, who is often portrayed as a winged female nude (Groneberg 1997: 128; Otten 1959: 91). Furthermore, as Collon (2005: 26) points out, the frontal portrayal of the figure on the Burney Relief recalls the common frontal portrayal of Ishtar.

Not only does the Burney Relief almost certainly portray Ishtar, but furthermore, she appears in an underworld context. Many analyses of the relief's iconography have pointed out the allusions to death and the land of the dead (e.g. Frankfort 1996: 110-112; Lloyd 1984: 171; Porada 1980: 266). Flanked by owls, the goddess stands on a stylized mountain⁹⁸ (Frankfort 1996: 112), and mountains were in many ways equated with the netherworld (Horowitz 1998: 268). Also, Ishtar's portrayal on the Burney Relief corresponds almost perfectly to certain elements of her depiction in the Sumerian and Akkadian versions of her descent to the netherworld. Her semi-birdlike state suggests *The Descent of Ishtar's* description of the dead as "clothed like birds, with feathers" (line 10, trans. Dalley 1998: 155), while her nudity recalls the goddess's being forced to strip naked before she could enter the netherworld. As Jacobsen (1987b: 4-6) observes, the figure's necklace and her rod and ring correspond to specific accoutrements which Inana carries to the netherworld in the myth of her descent (lines 14-25). Pereira (1998: 35) also detects parallels between the Burney Relief goddess's headgear and bracelets and those worn by the goddess in *The Descent of Inana* (lines 14-25). In addition, the same text (lines 14-19) mentions that Inana wore a wig to the netherworld, and Jacobsen (1987b: 3) argues that the image on the relief seems to be wearing a wig. The resemblances between the Burney Relief's depiction of Ishtar and the descent narrative's description of the goddess support the theory that the relief shows her in a specifically netherworld context,

⁹⁷ On the association of the owl with Ishtar, see, for example, lines 18-20 of the second tablet of the text known as "Ishtar Queen of Heaven" (Lambert 1982; trans. Foster 2005: 592-598).

⁹⁸ Her stance recalls the goddess on the Akkadian seal of Adda, who also stands atop a mountain in a pose that may suggest either triumph over or association with death.

making it more plausible that the image might have functioned as part of a funerary cult.

It is thus intriguing that, by analogy to the finds at Ur, one of the possible contexts for this plaque may have been a domestic chapel devoted to the burial and cult of the dead. Certainly, this artifact is only one of many terracotta plaques—many, indeed, from much better-substantiated contexts than the Burney Relief—and many of the others do not portray Ishtar. However, the evidence of this relief, together with many other figurines and plaques from domestic chapels, suggests that at least some subset of the population incorporated the iconography of Inana/Ishtar into their funerary rites and *kispum* practices. The widespread accessibility of these plaques and figurines implies that the use of Inana/Ishtar's iconography in a funerary context was not restricted to any particular class or social group, providing a counterpart to the evidence from strictly elite settings such as the "Royal Tombs" of Ur or the other contexts described below.

Tomb 45 at Assur

The iconography of many artifacts from Tomb 45 at Assur incorporates motifs associated with Ishtar and Dumuzi. One ivory pyxis (Figure 4) found near the head of a female skeleton (Haller 1954: figs. 160, 161)⁹⁹ is particularly suggestive. Rosettes festoon the lid, while around the body, paired goats or gazelles¹⁰⁰ nibble rosette-shaped flowers emerging from the bases of alternating date palm and conifer trees.¹⁰¹ On the trees perch paired birds, probably hens and cocks (Harper et al. 1995: 84). Two bands of rosettes form the top and bottom borders of the scene (Moortgat 1969: 115). The animals, the male and female birds, and the trees all appear in dyads. These pairs may represent mated couples, evoking the fecundity of

⁹⁹ See also Harper et al. (1995: 83-84) and Moortgat (1969: 115) for further references to, and discussion of, this artifact.

¹⁰⁰ Moortgat (1969: 115) identifies the animals as goats, while Harper et al. (1995: 84) refer to them as gazelles. The goat identification may be slightly more likely, based purely on historical precedent for scenes of goats nibbling rosette-flowers; compare the Akkadian seal from Tell Asmar (Frankfort 1996: 90, fig. 96) and the statuette of a rearing goat nibbling a rosette from the Royal Tombs of Ur (Hansen 1998: 61, cat. no. 8.)

¹⁰¹ Object number: VA Ass 1099 (Ass 14630 ao).

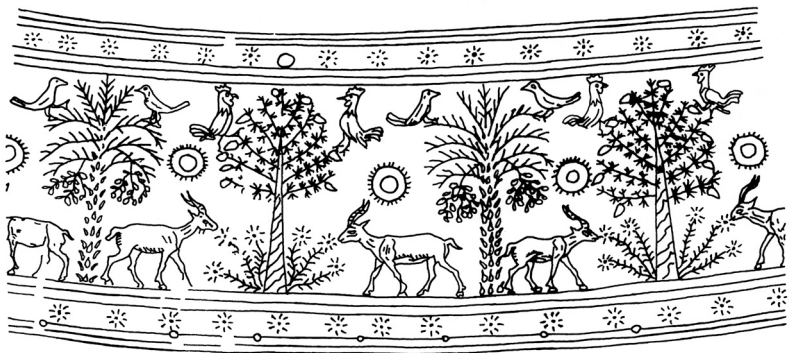


Figure 4. Decoration on an ivory pyxis found near the head of a female skeleton in Tomb 45, Assur. After Haller (1954: fig. 161).

landscape, flocks, and by extension the rest of the world.¹⁰² Although the gender of the other animals is not obvious, the hens and cocks are clearly complementary, and one of the trees—the date palm—may be associated with Dumuzi as well as, sometimes, with Ishtar herself.¹⁰³ The several sets of rosettes—on the lid, framing the scene on the body, and emerging from the base of the coniferous trees—may evoke Ishtar (Andrae 1954: 136).

Several artifacts in the tomb may go further and represent Ishtar directly. Found inside the pyxis, a pin¹⁰⁴ depicts a female tambourine player whom Harper et al. (1995: 87) tentatively associate with Ishtar’s warlike form. One fragmentary relief vessel, found next to the legs of a skeleton, depicts a winged female with raised skirt (Andrae 1954: 139, Abb. 164).¹⁰⁵ The figure’s pose recalls Shaushka,

¹⁰² Harper et al. (1995: 84) take note of the fact that the hens sit on the (“male”) palm trees, while the cocks sit on the coniferous trees. For a further discussion of the trees and their potential role as signifiers of abundance, see Andrae (1954: 137-139).

¹⁰³ The previously quoted lines 15-17 from “Love Lyrics of Ishtar of Babylon” which address Ishtar as carnelian also refer to her as a palm tree: “You are mother, O Ishtar of Babylon, you are mother, O queen of the Babylonians, you are mother, O palm tree, O carnelian!” (trans. Foster 2005: 948; see Lambert 1975: 127-135 for text edition).

¹⁰⁴ Object number: VA Ass 1101 or Ass 14630 ao₁.

¹⁰⁵ Object number: VA Ass 1114 (Ass 14630 ay). Harper et al. (1995: 90) identify the figure on this relief vessel as Ishtar, as does Moortgat (1969: 113), who describes her as Ishtar “with four wings, *en face* and wearing a polos: the lower part of her body is naked.” Andrae (1954: 140), however, avoids making any identification of the figure’s identity.

an originally separate goddess who had been syncretized with Ishtar by the Middle Assyrian period; images of this deity sometimes show her lifting her garment like the figure on the vase (Alexander 1986: 122).¹⁰⁶ Finally, an ivory comb (Andrae 1954: 137, Abb. 163 a, b) depicts seven women, their group broken up by three palm trees, giving presents of fruit and flowers to a figure who probably represents Ishtar (Moortgat 1969: 114).

Other artifacts may allude to the goddess and her consort in a more symbolic way.¹⁰⁷ Rosette designs are prominent in the jewelry, and as in the “Royal Tombs” of Ur, many artifacts pair red and blue stones (particularly, though not exclusively, carnelian and lapis lazuli).¹⁰⁸ Isolated necklace beads from the tomb alternate symbols of death, such as flies, with fruit such as pomegranates, a rosette, and other fertility symbols (Wartke 1999: 326, 328; Harper et al. 1995: 97; Andrae 1954: 146). A number of images of rams and goats may also allude to Dumuzi.¹⁰⁹ Given the burial context of all these artifacts, the constant stress on imagery of renewal, fecundity, and male and female pairs in Tomb 45 is worthy of attention. In fact, Ishtar and Dumuzi are almost the only deities who can be said to appear in image or symbol in Tomb 45.¹¹⁰ The near-exclusive use of these deities’ imagery is striking.

¹⁰⁶ On this goddess and her association with Ishtar, see Wilhelm (1982: 71-73). I thank Piotr Steinkeller for calling to my attention the relief vessel’s similarities to images of Shaushka.

¹⁰⁷ In particular, both Wartke (1999: 329) and Harper et al. (1995: 93) have remarked on the striking emphasis on vegetal symbolism in much of the Tomb 45 jewelry.

¹⁰⁸ One skeleton in tomb 45 wore rosette earrings, and flower rosettes also decorate a cloisonné pectoral found on a skeleton’s chest (Wartke 1999: 328-329, 334, 336 fig. 5d; Andrae 1954: 129, 146-147). A headband found next to one skeleton’s head, studded with what Harper et al. (1995: 92-93) call gold “rosette-like medallions,” features carnelian pomegranates, lapis lazuli beads, and beads of imitation malachite and rock crystal (Wartke 1999: 325-326 and note 17; Nagel 1972: figs. 8, 19; Andrae 1954: fig. 166). Another necklace found to the left of the other skeleton similarly pairs carnelian and lapis lazuli beads (Wartke 199: 326-327), and lapis lazuli and red jasper appear together as the materials for a pair of earrings with “eye” designs (Wartke 1999: 327, 340 fig. 17; Harper et al. 1995: 96).

¹⁰⁹ One pendant features a ram’s head made of lapis lazuli set in gold (Haller 1954: Taf. 34s), combining the ram of the god with the male stone lapis lazuli. Lapis lazuli also forms the raw material for a seal depicting a tree and a suckling goat (Moortgat 1969: 113). Both the goat and the tree suggest Dumuzi, while the infancy of the kid implies new life and regeneration.

¹¹⁰ Perhaps the only exceptions are a vessel marked with a goat-fish, the creature of the god Ea (Andrae 1954: 140, Abb. 164 d, e), and a bead shaped like

Is Tomb 45 an anomaly? Certainly, the simple fact of its never having been robbed makes it rare among burials of this era. Therefore, the wealth of artifacts is unusual, and one should not expect to see such a hoard of grave goods—whether related to Ishtar or not—preserved in many other Middle Assyrian tombs. However, it is also worth noting that Tomb 45 lay just southwest of the Ishtar Ashuritu temple (Harper et al. 1995: 81). Although it appears to have been located beneath the remains of a house (Harper et al. 1995: 81), its proximity to the temple means that one cannot rule out the possibility that the people buried in Tomb 45 were professionally affiliated with the cult of the goddess during their lifetimes (Andrae 1954: 147-148). In that case, the great abundance of Ishtar-related objects laid to rest with them might not necessarily imply a broader religious practice. In order to demonstrate that the worship of an underworld form of Ishtar was more widespread, it is necessary to turn to a group of thirteenth-century graves at Mari (Dalley 1984: 188-189; Parrot 1937: 81-84).

Glazed Frit “Masks” from Mari

These Mari inhumations are notable primarily for the glazed frit clothing attachments shaped like faces (Figure 5) placed over the chests of the (probably female) deceased (Parrot 1937: pl. XIV, no. 3 and 4, and pl. XV, no. 3). These so-called “masks”¹¹¹ appear to have been perforated for attachment to the individual’s clothing, so Dalley (1984: 188-189) speculates that “the function of the ‘mask,’ as with the other grave goods [mostly jewelry and cosmetics], may have been adornment, the face of the goddess of love attached between the breasts. . . . Since the frit heads were found both in a temple and in a woman’s grave, we may speculate that the temple sold or hired these objects to make a woman more attractive.” Dalley’s description of the “mask” as “the face of the goddess of love” assumes it to represent Ishtar. Peltenburg (1977: 184), too,

a half-moon (Wartke 1999: 328), perhaps recalling Sin. Other major gods of the pantheon seem to be completely absent.

¹¹¹ Woolley and Mallowan identify such artifacts as “masks,” but they are more properly clothing attachments. They cannot really be masks, since they lack eye-holes and airholes (Peltenburg 1977: 177-178). They do, however, feature holes in the ears, presumably designed to hold fasteners for attachment to the wearer’s clothing.

argues that “these faïences . . . may represent goddesses,” and because they are often found in temples of Ishtar, she is the most likely candidate to be the goddess in question.¹¹² As Dalley points out, the other grave goods—primarily jewelry, cosmetic substances, and one mirror (1984: 188; Parrot 1937: 83-84)—serve the primary purpose of enhancing the appearance. Certainly, Ishtar was the patroness of feminine allure, so her inclusion in such a setting seems quite in character. In addition, some other artifacts from these tombs may also be associated with her cult, such as jewelry decorated with rosettes¹¹³ or utilizing a color scheme of alternating red and blue elements.¹¹⁴

However, Dalley’s suggestion that “the temple sold or hired these objects to make a woman more attractive” requires a critical examination. She refers to the discovery of three similar frit faces (Figure 6) in a thirteenth-century temple in Tell al-Rimah, built during the reigns of Shalmaneser I and Tukulti-Ninurta I (Dalley 1984: 187). There is no epigraphic evidence concerning the patron god of the temple, but the excavator discusses several finds that encourage him to “suggest tentatively that the temple was dedicated to Ishtar” (Oates 1966: 125-126).¹¹⁵ Oates (1966: 125) further records that one of the frit faces was associated with “a gold disc . . . bearing a repoussée eight-pointed star with linear rays.” Even if rosettes sometimes served a purely decorative purpose in Mesopotamian art, it is improbable that they would be viewed as devoid of religious meaning when placed on temple paraphernalia.

In view of this probable religious significance, Dalley’s theory that the face-shaped clothing attachments were little more than a

¹¹² Parrot (1937: 83) takes the frit masks from Mari to be “*hommes imberbés*,” but the clearly female parallels from other sites make such an interpretation unlikely.

¹¹³ Tomb 135 at Mari contained several gold discs, probably part of a head-dress, which featured a rosette pattern (Parrot 1937: 83-84, pl. XV no. 2).

¹¹⁴ For example, between the gold coils of the fine necklace from tomb 125 were red (carnelian) and blue (lapis lazuli and blue paste) colored discs (Parrot 1937: 83-84, pl. XV, no. 2). Another necklace from this tomb took the form of carnelian pomegranates (Parrot 1937: 84, pl. XV, no. 2).

¹¹⁵ Among other things, these finds included a gold disc decorated with an eight-pointed star (Oates 1966: 125, pl. 35b), a bone needle (Oates 1966: 125), and “a terracotta mould for the production of plaques showing a naked female holding her breasts. . . . and a fragment of a terracotta bed model” (Dalley 1984: 183). Based on these artifacts, Oates (1966: 125-126) associates the temple with Ishtar. Dalley (1984: 183), in contrast, does not propose an identification for the temple’s chief deity, but she does suggest that the temple was particularly suited to those “who had problems with fertility, lactation, insomnia or conjugal love” (1984: 183).

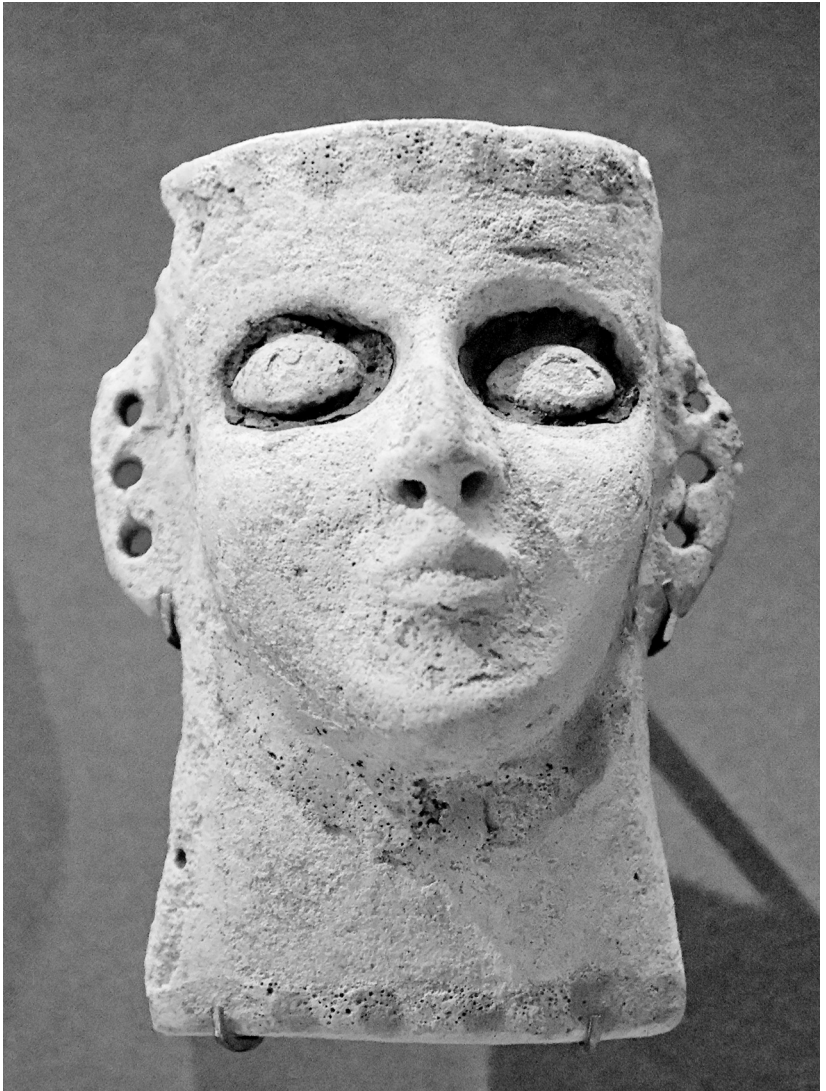


Figure 5. Glazed frit face found on the chest of a female burial at Mari. (Photograph courtesy of Marie-Lan Nguyen.)



Figure 6. Glazed frit face from a temple at Tell el-Rimah. After Oates (1966: pl. XXXIVa).

“fashion craze” (1984: 189) calls for modification. Middle Assyrian art does not depict women wearing such objects during daily life (Peltenburg 1977: 178), as it might if they were simply everyday items of adornment. Instead, they are more likely to represent another type of Ishtar-related iconography in burials. Similar “masks” have been found in Syro-Palestine (Ugarit), southern Mesopotamia (Ur), and Susa (Dalley 1984: 1989; Strommenger 1971: 607; Parrot 1937: 84), and this widespread popularity suggests their religious importance. Their typical archaeological contexts are tombs and temples of Ishtar (Peltenburg 1977: 179-184).

The Royal Tombs at Nimrud

The Neo-Assyrian period Royal Tombs at Nimrud consist of the elaborate burials of at least three queens from the ninth and eighth centuries. Rosettes¹¹⁶ and lions¹¹⁷ are particularly ubiquitous in these burials’ iconography, as are palm trees¹¹⁸ and juvenile

¹¹⁶ Rosettes decorate several necklaces of gold and gemstones, like the large specimen from Grave I (Damerji 1999: 62, Abb. 8). A huge central rosette dominates one gold armband; a band around the rosette depicts genii pointing cones at smaller rosettes that appear to be sprouting from vegetal stems (Damerji 1999: 40, Abb. 30; Severy 1991: 110-111). Since the typical object of veneration for genii is the “sacred tree” (e.g. Frankfort 1996: 163, fig. 187), or, more properly, the “Tree of Abundance” (Winter 2003: 253), the stems may represent truncated and stylized versions of this tree. A gold ring with a similar design depicts two genii seemingly offering libations to a large rosette (Damerji 1999: 40, Abb. 30). Additionally, the bottoms of gold and crystal bowls from the tombs generally bear rosette designs (Damerji 1999: 26-27, Abb. 47-46; 39, Abb. 31; 46 Abb. 23, 24) much like those on bowls from the Early Dynastic “Royal Tombs” of Ur.

¹¹⁷ Bouzek (2001; see also Damerji 1999: 41, Abb. 29) notes a lion’s head motif on bracelets and pitchers, and the theme appears also on gold rings and the setting for a cylinder seal (Damerji 1999: 21-25, Abb. 49-52; 55, abb. 15, 30; Severy 1991: 110-111).

¹¹⁸ Severy remarks on “a palm-crested plaque of uncertain function” (1991: 110), a gold rectangle inlaid with a date palm design. Dates hang heavily from the branches of this palm, whose trunk is a mosaic of alternating blue-green and red inlaid pieces (Severy 1991: 111). The handle of a mirror in Grave II is shaped like a palm tree (Damerji 1999: 49, Abb. 21). A pair of earrings from these burials contains an interesting combination of motifs; one earring depicts a date palm, and the other depicts the composite “tree of abundance” covered in numerous palmettes (Winter 2003: 253). On the significance of this composite tree, see Winter (2003); palm trees reproduce through underground runners, and Winter demonstrates that the palmettes surrounding the so-called “sacred tree” or “tree of abundance” probably represent new growth from such runners. The tree is thus a representation of fertility and can serve as “the formal statement of the king’s role

caprids¹¹⁹ which may refer to the cult of Dumuzi. The Assyrian queenly crowns share both the general shape and the rosette motif of the ED III queen Puabi's headdress (I. Winter, personal communication; see also Damerji 1999: 32, Abb. 41; 29, Abb. 43; Severy 1991: 111).¹²⁰ One crown from Grave III (Figure 7) is encircled not only by two rows of rosettes but also by a ring of winged, frontally portrayed female figures (Damerji 1999: 30-31, Abb. 42-45; Oates and Oates 2001, pl. 4a). The only decoration of another gold crown from Grave II is three rows of twelve-petaled rosettes (Damerji 1999: 43, Abb. 26; Severy 1991: 110-111). These parallels to the Ur tombs are surprising because of the great amount of time elapsed between the ED IIIa period and the construction of the Nimrud tombs, almost two thousand years. Such striking continuity in funerary tradition typically implies some unusual religious significance (Coogan 1987: 3), especially when the tradition in question is so complicated; items like the rosette-covered headdresses are elaborate enough that people probably would not continue making them if their form were not somehow important. Of course, the fact that these artifacts are crowns complicates matters. They may very well have been worn during life, and thus they are not necessarily part of an exclusively funerary tradition.¹²¹ Given Ishtar's associations with royalty, it would not be surprising for queens' official apparel to invoke her.

Another royal burial at Nimrud also contains similarly themed imagery. The burial, found inside a room of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud, contains the body of a woman whom Mallowan (1966: 113-115) identifies as a princess. Found with her body was a chalcidony pendant, the so-called "Nimrud Jewel," engraved with the figures of two pipers on either side of the "sacred tree" (Mallowan

in achieving the desired abundance for the land" (Winter 2003: 253). Winter's article further lists many examples in which the composite tree is paired with rosettes.

¹¹⁹ A ring of juvenile sheep or goats gallops around the base of the lion-headed gold pitcher (Damerji 1999: 20, abb. 52), suggesting the shepherd god Dumuzi and the new life associated with the animals' youth.

¹²⁰ Note also that the text UET 3 335, which lists the grave goods of a Neo-Sumerian priestess from Ur, includes a gold crown (line 1 of the obverse of the tablet; trans. Sallaberger 1995: 15), although the crown's decoration is not specified.

¹²¹ Listing the grave goods of a Neo-Assyrian king, text K.7856 + K.6323 (edition by McGinnis 1987) describes some gold and silver objects as "the *regalia* that he [the deceased king] used to love" (column 1 of obverse; trans. McGinnis 1987: 4). This statement may imply that the grave goods included items that the king had possessed in life.

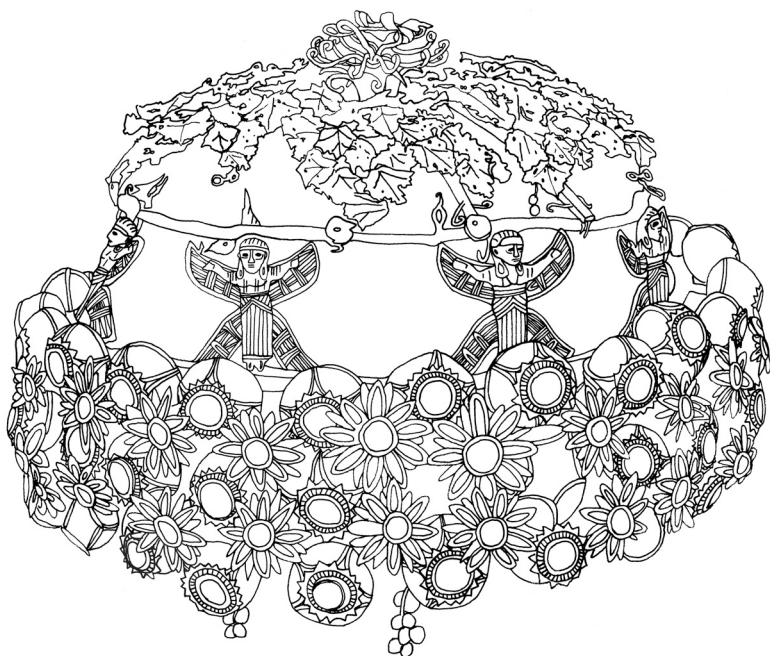


Figure 7. Crown from Grave III, tombs of the Neo-Assyrian queens, Nimrud.
After Damerji (1999: 30, abb. 43).

1966: 114-115, fig. 58). The design incorporates not only the tree with its Dumuzi associations but also the eight-pointed star of Ishtar crowning the scene. The pipes recall the passage from the end of *The Descent of Ishtar* that states that the “lapis lazuli pipe” will accompany Dumuzi’s return to earth (line 137; see also Winter 1999a: 52).

Conclusion

Images and symbols suggesting a belief in the possibility of a pleasant afterlife appear in burials from almost every period of Mesopotamian history, creating a striking continuity despite the many changes in details of funerary practice. The types of objects interred with the dead varied from era to era, with emphasis placed sometimes on utilitarian items like tools and tool models, sometimes on luxury goods. The positions in which the corpse was laid (extended, fetal, wrapped, unwrapped), the type of burial in which it was placed (shaft grave, pot, above-ground mausoleum), and the media used

for funerary art (Ubaid statuettes, Early Dynastic offering stands, Isin-Larsa/Old Babylonian terracotta plaques, Middle Assyrian and Kassite frit “masks”) all vary greatly from time to time and from place to place (e.g. Orthmann 1971). Yet despite these changes in the style and substance of burial ritual, many indications suggest that Mesopotamian peoples through the ages wanted to send the dead into their graves equipped with items which would only have been of use if the afterlife they expected was somewhat different from the grim vision depicted in extant literary texts. The archaeological evidence further demonstrates that common people, as well as the wealthy, took action to ensure a pleasant afterlife—or at least an afterlife in which they could continue some of the daily activities of life—through the use of grave goods. While literary compositions like *The Death of Ur-Namma* and *The Death of Gilgamesh* associate happiness or privileges after death with the amount of wealth commanded by the deceased, the archaeological excavation of burials suggests that even the relatively poor brought objects into their graves with them that they hoped would enable them to obtain a comfortable afterlife.

In at least a few cases, those objects seem to have been chosen partly because they evoked the cult of Inana/Ishtar. In order to determine whether these cases represent a truly general phenomenon or whether they are isolated anomalies, it would be necessary to prepare a more comprehensive survey of Mesopotamian grave goods from all periods and regions. However, the cases examined here may at least raise the questions of why certain individuals chose to use this iconography in a funerary context and what such a choice implies about their theology of death. Although there is little evidence to suggest that Inana/Ishtar was herself capable of improving the lot of her worshippers after death, it may be that people wished to allude to Inana/Ishtar in a mortuary context because she had achieved what they, too, wished to achieve: an escape from bleak and dismal conditions after death. The goddess was set free from an unpleasant netherworld by returning to life. The human deceased could not anticipate such actual resurrection, but might at least hope to escape the dire situation presented in textual descriptions of the afterlife and achieve—perhaps through the help of descendants’ constant attentions and offerings, as I will discuss below—some more desirable condition after death. Those Mesopotamians who decorated funerary offerings with symbols of Inana/Ishtar did not necessarily do so in order to induce the goddess

herself to grant a pleasant afterlife; the grieving relatives of the dead might consider it comforting to surround the deceased with optimistic symbols of renewal and abundance without necessarily believing those symbols would in fact *cause* the renewal and abundance. This may explain the fact that the grave goods' allusions to Inana/Ishtar tend to be indirect, merely depicting symbols of the goddess rather than invoking her directly through inscribed prayers. If Inana/Ishtar's personal aid were essential to the achievement of a good afterlife, then surely people would have recorded direct appeals to her for such assistance, as the Greeks appealed to Persephone.¹²² Instead, it seems that people merely wanted to *allude* to her, rather than *appeal* to her.

In the often-criticized interpretation of Parpola (1997: xxxi), *The Descent of Ishtar* becomes a metaphor for "man's salvation from the bondage of matter." The arguments against this interpretation, which attempts to project more recent Christian theology onto the Mesopotamian past, have already been made eloquently by Cooper (2000) and Frahm (1998). The grave goods do not provide any evidence to support Parpola's argument that Ishtar and Dumuzi personally provided "resurrection from the dead" to their devotees (Parpola 1997: xxxiii), or that Mesopotamian people actually expected anything like a bodily resurrection.

Indeed, in order to understand the implications of Mesopotamian grave goods, it is necessary at last to turn back to the literary texts that this archaeological data appeared *at first glance* to contradict. In fact, the textual and archaeological data are quite compatible, though the relationship between them is more complex than might at first be assumed. Textual evidence implies that rather than beseeching a deity's help to attain a pleasant afterlife, as in the Greek mystery cults, ancient Mesopotamians may have believed that the possession of grave goods itself guaranteed them a happy existence after death. Whether the lavish supplies were intended for the deceased's own use or as gifts offered to induce the nether-world gods to treat him or her better (Cooper 1992: 24-25; Dalley 1984: 123; Pittman 1998b: 88; Zettler 1998a: 28), compositions like *The Death of Ur-Namma* and *The Death of Gilgamesh* suggest that one's

¹²² Many graves all over the Greek world from circa 450 BCE to the second century CE contain copies of the "Orphic Gold Tablets," inscribed gold leaves which urge the dead to appeal to Persephone for a better afterlife (Burkert 1985: 293-295; Edmonds 1997).

condition after death depended on the amount of offerings taken into the grave. Thus it is possible to reconcile these texts with the possibility of a happier afterlife: as Paul-Alain Beaulieu (personal communication) has suggested, perhaps the literary texts' grim descriptions of the naked, feathered, starving dead apply only to the "worst-case scenario" of people who were buried without any grave goods and lacked descendants to perpetuate the ancestor cult. Without funerary offerings of food and clothes, the dead would have little choice but to go scrounging miserably in the dust. As one version (UET 6 59) of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World* puts it: "'Did you see the spirit of him who has no funerary offerings? How does he fare?' 'He eats the scraps and the crumbs tossed out in the street'" (Black et al. 1998- a: Segment B, 1-11). An average person's condition after death might thus be expected to lie somewhere on a continuum between this worst-case situation and the relative luxury associated with Ur-Namma or Gilgamesh, depending on the amount of resources one's relatives could afford, or cared, to provide. If grave goods and funerary offerings were all that was needed to ensure a comfortable afterlife, then the primary agents responsible for one's condition after death were not gods at all but people: one's own descendants. Human fate would have rested at the last in human hands.

Unfortunately, an afterlife whose quality relies on the generosity of one's descendants ultimately runs up against the well-documented problem of genealogical amnesia. One's immediate descendants may remember one fondly, but after many years, they will be replaced by new generations with no such memories. This gradual effacing of the memory of the deceased individual occurs in most societies that practice a cult of the dead,¹²³ and no doubt it occurred in Mesopotamia too. Perhaps it is no wonder that texts frequently warn about the anger of these forgotten ancestors, who would vent their frustration by visiting calamities upon the living until their

¹²³ See, for example, Doxiadis (2000: 143-146) and Petrie (1889: 15) on the domestic cult of mummies in Roman-period Egypt; mummies of deceased family members were initially kept in the home and venerated, but after a few generations, later descendants disposed of the now-unwanted mummies through quick and unceremonious burials. Also see Graeber's description of the modern Madagascar ritual of *famadihana*, in which people crush up the bodies of dead ancestors, as "the concrete or tangible aspect of a process of genealogical amnesia. Ancestral bodies are gradually dissolved at the same time as their identities are gradually forgotten" (1995: 264).

kispum offerings were resumed (Cooper 1992: 27-28; Scurlock 1988).¹²⁴ If the quality of one's afterlife depended on other human beings' actions, then a pleasant afterlife would certainly not be *guaranteed*, and indeed its long-term security might be highly precarious; nevertheless, it would be *possible*.

At first glance, the literary texts and the archaeological evidence seem to point in different directions; the literary texts portray a bleak netherworld, while the grave goods seem to imply something significantly more bearable. To some degree, these two different portrayals may simply reflect the emotional needs of their different contexts. It is understandable that, even in a society in which refined theological speculation tended toward pessimism about the next world, bereaved people might want to believe in something more comforting when they were actually burying their friends or family. In any case, it is dangerous to assume an overly rigid homogeneity within a society's religious beliefs.¹²⁵ As Katz (2003: 242) points out, even within the texts, contradictory portrayals of the afterlife exist side by side. For example, *The Death of Ur-Namma* and *The Death of Gilgamesh* imply that high rank during life leads to high rank in the netherworld, but *The Epic of Gilgamesh* suggests that even for a king, death is dreadful and to be avoided at all cost. Some of this diversity in belief may have to do with the fact that Mesopotamia contained so many different cultural and ethnic groups (Katz 2003: 242). Also, some elements of afterlife beliefs no doubt changed over time; for example, the burial of retainers in the ED III period certainly implies some unique features about attitudes to death in this era. More broadly, though, most belief systems might be said to incorporate elements that seem, to the casual analysis of outsiders, to be mutually contradictory. It is also possible for the same person to believe somewhat different things at different times or to be unsure of how to reconcile two seemingly competing beliefs. Indeed, one might point out similar contradictions in more modern

¹²⁴ Cohen (1999: 104-116) suggests that this concern about wrathful ancestors, though well-attested in the Old Babylonian period, does not yet appear in Early Dynastic texts. These earlier texts refer to offerings to the deceased but do not yet suggest any fear of them.

¹²⁵ Cross-cultural parallels exist for the notion that mythological texts and cultic rituals may sometimes offer two different, even contrasting, perspectives on the same deity. In Greece, for example, there were certain inconsistencies between the myths about Adonis and the cultic celebrations devoted to him (Mettinger 2001: 31; Ribichini 1981: 133-134, 139-140).

beliefs; for example, popular Christian theology holds simultaneously that the dead are in heaven and that they are sleeping within their graves, awaiting resurrection at the Second Coming.¹²⁶ We should not be too astonished that there was some diversity in Mesopotamian ideas about the afterlife or that the ideas expressed during actual funerary rituals may have emphasized different concepts from those expressed in more abstract theological speculation.

Nevertheless, the presence of Inana/Ishtar's iconography in at least some of these tombs shows that their occupants did incorporate elements of the literary texts' theology into their funerary rituals. The invocation of Inana/Ishtar in burials may emerge from the textual portrayal of this deity as particularly concerned with transitions and the breaking down of boundaries between different spheres of existence. As Harris (1991) has shown, Inana/Ishtar was a profoundly liminal figure who embodied the idea of contradiction. Spanning all realms, she was thus particularly concerned with the transition *between* realms. Just as she was associated with people who were in between categories during life, such as the transgendered, the funerary evidence suggests that she was also associated with people in between worlds: between life and death. An analysis of the relationship between these grave goods and the textual evidence for Mesopotamian beliefs about the netherworld demonstrates the need to combine the results of philological and archaeological studies. When both fields are used to shed new light on each other, the results may lead the study of Mesopotamian religion into productive new realms.

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