

Spring 2020 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Visions of the Afterlife in Asia
Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art

The Descent of Ištar and the Epic of Gilgameš: Afterlife in Early Mesopotamian Traditions

Niek Veldhuis, UC Berkeley
January 31, 2020

This talk will discuss various ancient Mesopotamian narratives about the realm of the dead, in particular the story of the attempt by goddess Ištar (Inana in earlier sources) to conquer the Netherworld, and various narratives around the legendary king Gilgameš that deal with the Netherworld in one way or another.

In order to put these texts in some perspective we will also pay attention to some administrative documents that illuminate one or another aspect of the care of the dead. We may then ask the question: do the narratives about Ištar/Inana and Gilgameš faithfully reflect actual beliefs and practices of ancient Mesopotamia? Or do they serve some other goal?

The following concepts are important as background for the lecture (in alphabetical order):

Akkadian: Language of the Semitic family (related to Arabic, Hebrew, etc.), written in cuneiform on clay tablets. Texts in Akkadian are known from the middle of the third millennium BCE to the first century of our own era. Akkadian is divided into several dialects, including Assyrian (the northern variant) and Babylonian (the southern variant). Akkadian literary texts are almost always composed in Babylonian, rarely in Assyrian.

Assyria: Present-day Northern Iraq; the area around Mosul. In the period 900-600 BCE this area was the political and military center of the Neo-Assyrian empire, which at some point dominated the entire Middle East, including Egypt. [Essentials: key topics in Assyrian politics and Scholarship](#). By Karen Radner and others.

Babylonia: Present-day southern Iraq, including Baghdad and everything to the south. The literary heritage of ancient Mesopotamia is almost exclusively of Babylonian origin.

Cuneiform: An ancient writing system, invented in the deep south of what is now Iraq. Originally cuneiform was used for writing Sumerian. Later on it was adapted to represent Akkadian and many other (ancient) languages. [Cuneiform Revealed](#) by Eleanor Robson, Karen Radner and others.

Gilgameš: According to legend, Gilgameš was king of the city of Uruk (Babylonia, close to the Persian Gulf), son of the goddess Ninsun, and her human spouse Lugalbanda. He is known for heroic feats, such as killing monsters, and traveling

beyond the end of the earth, but also for his deep engagement with death. Gilgameš became one of the governors of the Netherworld and was revered as a god.

Inana/Ištar: Inana (Sumerian) or Ištar (Akkadian) is by far the most powerful female divinity in Babylonia and Assyria. She is the goddess of lust and physical love as well as the goddess of war. Her complex character makes her an interesting subject for narratives of various kinds. It is often stated that she is a goddess of fertility, but there is no evidence for that role. [Inana/Ištar](#) by Yağmur Heffron.

Mesopotamia: A term introduced by ancient Greek geographers meaning "between the rivers," referring to the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris. The term is used today to capture Babylonian and Assyrian history and culture under a single concept. It is important to notice, though, that there is no native Babylonian or Assyrian concept that corresponds to "Mesopotamia."

Old Babylonian: An important period in Babylonian history, ca. 1,800 – 1,600 BCE. King Hammurapi promulgated his famous laws in this period. Much of [Sumerian literature](#) that is known today was written down by scribal pupils in this period – several centuries after Sumerian had died as a spoken language. Many important Akkadian literary texts (such as the Epic of Gilgameš) were first composed in the Old Babylonian period.

Sumerian: A language that was spoken in the third millennium BCE in the deep south of what is now Iraq. After Sumerian died out as a living language, it continued to be used for literary and religious purposes for at least two millennia. Sumerian is not related to any known language. [Sumerian Language](#) by Jason Moser.

Ur III: A period in Babylonian history (approximately 2,100-2000 BCE) famous for the very large number of administrative texts (> 100,000) in Sumerian illuminating many aspects of agriculture, trade, kingship, religion, taxes, etc. The term "Ur III" derives from The Sumerian King List, a (largely fictional) list of kings who reigned over Babylonia, starting in the period before The Flood. According to the Sumerian King List this was the third time that kingship resided in the city of Ur. [The Sumerian King List](#) by Gábor Zólyomi and others.

General works on Mesopotamian History and Culture:

J. Sasson (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. New York 1995.

K. Radner and E. Robson, *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*. Oxford 2011.