“The Netherworld Beyond the Mountain”:
Early Dynastic Sumerian Beliefs and Interactions with Death and the Afterlife Through Mythic Literature

Charlotte Niblett

Professor Ferrell
History 299
December 8, 2023

“I hereby declare upon my word of honour that I have neither given nor received unauthorised help on this work.”

Abstract

This paper discusses the thoughts and viewpoints of the Ancient Sumerians regarding death and the afterlife and why they think this way by exploring mythic literature from the Early Dynastic Period. The first myth, *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*, explores the transition from life to death and how the mortals descend into the netherworld but more importantly, what they lose in the process. The second myth retold, *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, talks about the status of the underworld's residences and how they fare in the netherworld due to their experiences and accomplishments in life. Those with more sons and those who accomplished great feats in life had better stations than those who died before their time or those whose fate has been sealed malevolently. The last myth, *The Death of Gilgameš*, ties together the mythic themes of immortality and mortality and why they are important to the Sumerians. From the Sumerians point of view death was inevitable and rarely forgiving so they strove to achieve greatness in life. This philosophy would aid them in the afterlife but also soothe the natural anxiety that came with death.

For the Sumerians, there was no life after death, no heaven or benevolent god. Instead, fickle and capricious gods await in a shadowy netherworld beyond the metaphorical mountain.[1] Because of this dark and dismal afterlife, the Sumerians' thoughts on death differed greatly from the cultures around them, the neighbouring Hebrew and Egyptian cultures for instance. Therefore, the question is, how did the Sumerians of the Early Dynastic period interact with death and the afterlife through their mythic literature.

The Sumerians' view on death and the 'afterlife' was overall pragmatic and focused on the means of attaining greatness in life. [2] There is a lot of weight put on one's actions in life and the legacy that they leave behind, whether a physical one such as great walls or temples or a mythical kind like the ever-present tale of the king Gilgameš. This aspect of legacy is seen in later periods of Ancient Sumer such as during the Third Dynasty of Ur, when many kings claimed to be related to the mythic king Gilgamesh, such as Ur-Namma of Ur. [3] Sumerian interactions with death show this attitude through their mythic literature, and it is seen in major sources: *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*, *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, and a short excerpt from *The Death of Gilgameš*.

Being one of the first great civilisations in recorded history, the Sumerians' inventions spanned from writing to geometry to the potter's wheel. They were a people whose civilisation

---

[1] Samuel Noah Kramer. "Chapter 3. Myths of Kur." essay, in *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B. C.*, Rev ed., 111–13. (Literary Licensing, 2021). In some Sumerian texts the underworld is considered to be the place beyond the Zagros mountains where the sun sets.

[2] Note that "afterlife" will be used interchangeably with "netherworld" as the Sumerians did not really believe in 'life after death' as the major semitic religions do, but for simplicity's sake they serve the same purpose. "Gilgameš" will be used interchangeably with "Gilgamesh" as the latter is the anglicised version of the phonetic transcription from Akkadian.

[3] Jeremy Black and Zólyomi Gábor, "The Death of Ur-Namma," in *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 56–62. Honourable mentions being the myth *The Death of Ur-Namma* as it is also an effective and helpful source but does not fit within the guidelines of this paper.

flourished approximately 4,600 years ago during the Early Dynastic period which spans from 2900 to 2350 B.C.E. They lived in walled city-states that dotted the land around the southern Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is commonly called the cradle of civilization. Their most well-known invention, writing, is found in the form of cuneiform. Cuneiform was comprised of wedge-shaped characters imprinted into tablets of clay and baked to create durable and complex documents and stories. From this invention came great works such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* or eternally famous poets such as the high priestess Enheduanna. Most of these cuneiform literary works involve the vast and thoroughly entertaining pantheon that ruled Mesopotamian religion. The Sumerian netherworld served as a prime subject for many mythical tales and a literary playground for their gods.

Otherwise known as Kur or "The Land of No Return," this place of death is referenced in many of the Sumerian myths, yet its mechanics are somewhat of a mystery to scholars.[4] The general understanding of Kur is that is it the bleak and grey parallel to the land of the living, where its residents drink brackish water and eat bread made of clay. This typically dreary and desolate netherworld has its exceptions, though. For those with many dutiful decedents, offerings of food and drink are left at cult altars and are intended to feed their ancestors. Some accomplished kings are granted roles in the underworld akin to an administrator, supervising the dead and keeping order. In a rather unexpected bit of compassion, the children who died stillborn are said to be placed at a table of gold and silver with honey and ghee.[5]

---

[4] Jeremy Black and Anthony Green. *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University Texas Press, 1992), 180. Direct translation means earth but is commonly used to mean the underworld in Sumerian and Akkadian literature. Other names such as 'Irkalla' are used and are from Akkadian version of the myths and can be used interchangeably as well.

[5] Jeremy Black and Zólyomi Gábor, "Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Underworld," in *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 32–39.

This netherworld is complex and runs both with a natural order and with the meticulous touch of its queen Ereshkigal as well as the many lesser gods bound to work for her. In Kur, Ereshkigal has a palace and keeps a court in which gods who are bound to the netherworld dwell. Such is the case of Geshtinanna who serves as Ereshkigal's scribe during her semi-annual stay.[6] In this court, one may see former kings who have been deified, such as Ur-Namma and Gilgamesh, who were granted various roles posthumously. Ereshkigal's divine attendant or sukkal, Namatar, may also be present in her court.[7] One of the key features of Kur are the seven gates that bar passage from the mortal world of which the gatekeeper Neti guards.[8] These gates are thought to be the metaphorical stages of death in which people are stripped of their human qualities until they are prepared to join the dead. This shedding of humanity is seen in a slightly different sense in *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld* as the goddess of love and war sheds her heavenly layers.[9]

Inanna's Descent to the Underworld has been widely translated, but it is best known for its Sumerian and Akkadian versions that largely parallel each other. The more malignant face of the later coming Aphrodite, Inanna is the Sumerian Venus also known as her Akkadian

---

[6] Black and Gábor, "Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Underworld," 65. Geshtinanna is the sister of Dummuzid or Tammuz in some myths and takes his place in the underworld for half the year as a result of one of Inanna's schemes.

[7] T. M. Sharlach, "Diplomacy and the Rituals of Politics at the Ur III Court," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 57, no. 1 (2005): 17–29, https://doi.org/10.1086/jcs40025987. Otherwise known as a "sukkal," a divine attendant is a personal minister to a god and is typically but not always female.

[8] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 86.

[9] "Inanna", "Ishtar", and "Inana" are used interchangeably as they are all variations of the same Sumero-Akkadian name for the Venus goddess.

counterpart Ishtar.[10] Inanna was a goddess of love, war, sex, fertility, and, over time, political power. She was one of if not the most prominent deities in Mesopotamia; Inanna is beautiful, arrogant, flippant, spoiled, frivolous but greatly powerful, respected by her followers, and revered by all as the heavenly mistress.

The two most important parts of this myth, regarding its relation to death and the afterlife, are the rule of equivalent exchange and the seven gates that bar Kur's entrance. When the gods of Kur apprehend Inanna they proclaim to her, "Who has ever ascended from the Underworld, has ascended unscathed from the Underworld? If Inana is to ascend from the Underworld, let her provide a substitute for herself."[11] From this line it is clear to discern that the 'Land of No Return' earns its name for those trapped, but these rules seem to bend regarding the divine. Inanna must provide a substitute, something to keep the balance of the two worlds equal. More importantly this shows that the laws of the underworld are stern and set. For mortals, in Kur, there is no room for accomplishments nor a place to thrive. Even the gods are not impervious to Kur's draw and the threat of death; should they break the rules of the netherworld, even they may fall victim to it.

The physical representation of these rules is seen in the seven gates as they are held fast and bolted shut by the gatekeeper Neti. As Inanna passes through each gate, she is stripped of a divine right until she is naked and bare in front of the underworld. Something also seen in the myth *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld* is this notion of strict rules at the gate and this stripping of features. When taken into consideration, one could see this as a person losing their mortal characteristics as they prepare for "life" in Kur. Mortals no longer need their clothes nor the metaphorical "light in their eyes" and are stripped of them through the methodical seven gates

[10] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

[11] Black and Gábor, "Inana's Descent to the Underworld," 73.

of descent. The finality of death and the afterlife as well as threat of harsh rules influences the Sumerians culture and life greatly as they have a keen understanding that nothing good will come after death but also the knowledge to respect the rules of Kur at risk of a wicked punishment. They see this through the myths they tell and revere as scripture, meaning that in Sumerian society this is a tale of absolute truth, and its messages should be headed thoroughly.

Inanna's Descent to the Underworld starts with Inanna, insatiable, and ambitious as ever. She sets her gaze downward on the great land below. She abandons the earth and the heavens, her priestess and her temples, and takes seven divine powers with her as she starts her descent. She dresses herself in all the trappings of a heavenly queen with each of the seven divine powers encapsulated in an adornment upon her body: beads, a turban, a robe, and four sets of jewels. As she makes her way to the entrance of the netherworld, she speaks with her minister or sukkal, Ninšubura, entrusting her with plans and specific instructions should she not return from the depths.[12]

When Inanna arrives at the gates to the underworld, she bangs on the doors, demanding and shouting aloud, "Neti, open the door, open up! I am all alone and want to come in." Neti, being the chief gatekeeper of Kur, answered the goddess saying, "Who are you?" The goddess introduces herself but Neti, wary of her motivations, presses the goddess by asking her why she would travel through The Land of No Return. The goddess Inanna answers claiming that she is here to observe the funerary rites of her sister Ereshkigal's husband. Neti ponders for a moment before telling her to wait as he will go to his mistress, Ereshkigal, and notify her of her sister's arrival and intent.

[12] Jeremy Black and Zólyomi Gábor, "Inana's Descent to the Underworld" in *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 65–76.

Neti runs to the palace of Ganzer, to Ereshkigal's throne, and tells of her sister's arrival, her intent, and her banging on and shouting at the gate. He explains what the goddess has left behind and the adornments she wears on her body with great hubris. When the Queen of Kur heard this, she is certain of her sister's intent, so she instructs Neti to let Inanna through but open each gate one at a time, each time stripping her of one of her divine adornments until she is fit to enter the netherworld. Following her instructions, the gatekeeper lets Inanna through the gates one by one. Each time she questions why, Neti proclaims, "Be satisfied, Inana, a divine power of the Underworld has been fulfilled. Inana, you must not open your mouth against the rites of the Underworld."[13] After she passes through the final gate, her clothes and adornments carried away, she approaches her sister on the throne and takes the throne for herself. The judges of the underworld look at Inanna with anger, death, and disgust; they shout at her with such rage that it strikes her with an affliction so much so that she is made a corpse and hung from a hook for her insolence.

After three nights, her minister carries out the instructions given to her, and goes to each of the head gods for help. She enters the shrines of Enlil and Nanna but is rejected in her pleas for help. Then, Ninšubura heads to the house of Enki and pleads Inanna's case. Enki, worried for the goddess, takes the dirt from under his nails and gives it life, fashioning two uncanny creatures. The creatures, galatura and kugara, are given instructions to make their way swiftly into the underworld like phantoms. The beings successfully resurrect Inanna but as they attempt to rescue the goddess, they are caught in their ascent from the depths. The guards of the netherworld stop them, and the gods of the netherworld proclaim that the goddess cannot leave without a substitute. Nobody can leave Kur unaccounted, as it is The Land of No Return. Escorted by

[13] Black and Gábor, "Inana's Descent to the Underworld," 69.

demons of Kur, Inanna ascends to the mortal world in search of a replacement where she finds one of her lovers, the shepherd god Dummuzid. The demons seized him, and Dummuzid pleads to the gods to save him, but despite his efforts he is seized and brought down to The Land of No Return in Inanna's place.

This begs the question, how do the non-divine residents of the underworld fare, and what are their conditions? The state of Kur's residents is more adeptly seen in the myth *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*.

Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld is one of the more well-known myths when it comes to descriptions of the underworld mainly due to its famous main characters, but also to its descriptions of conditions in Kur. It thoroughly lists many stations of people and how they fare but lacks physical descriptions of the underworld itself. Regardless, this myth provides valuable insight and is certainly worth understanding. Its most important content regards the different types of deaths that were common in Ancient Sumer and how they were weighed in terms of status in the afterlife. This helps to explain why the Sumerians may have acted as they did, an example would be if one dies with leaving no legacy or barren then their station in Kur is low, therefore in life it would be ideal to leave your mark or produce many children. This myth also features the strict rules of the afterlife that were seen in *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld* and how they bind those who are not divine.

This myth also shows a differing viewpoint from the modern notion of a life after death, for if these stipulations hold true then the underworld is truly a hostile place with binding rules for all. The greatest points to take from this lament are the values placed on how one dies and what one does before they die. An overall theme is that the Sumerians want to live long, accomplished lives with great things to look back on, whether that be many sons or a long and

prosperous reign. Specifically mentioned in the tale are the ranks of fathers in the underworld and how they fare based on how many sons and dutiful descendants they have. This suggests that the Sumerians valued a strong linage as something to be proud of; this is ultimately true and was a strong value in Sumerian society as reflected in the myth. Also described in the myth is the condition of those who died early in unnatural ways as well as those who lacked achievement in life: those who died of leprosy, those run over by a ship, married couples who never consummated, and those barren. These kinds of deaths lead to a low and unhappy eternity in Kur as the ones this happens to typically perish young or before starting a business or family. These reveal the kinds of values placed on the kinds of death that is seen as good and appropriate for Sumerian society. There is a clear corelation between life accomplishments and station in the underworld, this displays a Sumerian mindset reminiscent of "carpe diem," to seize the day and do great things that bring one's name honour.

Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld's main story features the valiant duo, Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Well known from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the pair are dynamic and strong-willed but the best of friends. Gilgamesh, former king of Uruk, is two-thirds god and one-third man and his companion Enkidu is a beast-like man.

The ancient tale starts with a most beautiful line by the narrator, "In those days, in those distant days, in those nights, in those remote nights, in those years, in those distant years; in days of yore, when the necessary things had been brought into manifest existence. . ."[14] In the myth, the king Gilgamesh goes into the town square to play his ellag and ekidma, but leaves it for the

[14] Black and Gábor, "Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Underworld," 32.

evening, planning to return later.[15] When he returns, he finds that his instruments have fallen into the underworld. He attempts to retrieve his playthings but to no avail; Gilgameš then laments about the loss of his instrument. His companion, Enkidu, hurries to him at the sound of his cries and asks why he weeps. Enkidu proclaims that he will go down to Kur to the palace of Ganzer and retrieve the lost items. Delighted, he instructs Enkidu carefully, "If today you are going to go down to the Underworld, let me advise you! My instructions should be followed . . . pay attention to my words."[16] Enkidu should not wear clean garments, or they will surely recognize that he is an imposter. He should not anoint himself with fine oils as the scent would attract the residents of Kur. He should not wear sandals on his feet or shout aloud, nor kiss his beloved wife or child. Lastly, he should not hit nor disturb the residents for their outcry would detain him in the underworld.

Enkidu, in his brazen way, does not heed his companion's words and does almost all the things Gilgamesh warned him not to do. Enkidu arouses an outcry and is detained in The Land of No Return. Slightly stunned and even more woeful, Gilgamesh makes his way to the temple of the wise god Enki and cries out for the gods' aid. Gilgamesh explains that Enkidu has not been claimed by the gods of the underworld or its demons but is trapped by the underworld itself for violating its laws. Enki, agreeing to help, lifts Enkidu from the depths to the land of the living. Once reunited, the two hug and kiss, happy that Enkidu was not lost to the land of the dead.

Stricken with curiosity, Gilgamesh wearies Enkidu with questions of the underworld. "What was its order? How do the people fare?" Enkidu proclaims that if he tells Gilgamesh he

---

[15] Possibly a drum and sticks also referred to as 'pikku and mikku' in earlier translations by S.N. Kramer. Black and Gábor, "Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Underworld," 35; Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 34.

[16] Black and Gábor, "Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Underworld", 36.

will weep for his ancestors and his people. Regardless, Gilgamesh wishes to hear the state of Kur and Enkidu tells of what he had seen. Enkidu explains the conditions of men with many sons, children that bring offerings and give him pride, that man's status is of great comfort and joy in the underworld. Those with no sons find no joy or purpose and sit woefully among the dust and stones of Kur. He says that those who die unnaturally and before their time are stricken with gruesome and cruel afflictions that mirror their cause of death. He remarks though that those who never knew life, stillborn children, spend their fate with the luxury and comfort they did not find in the mortal world, surrounded by gold and honey to comfort them. Lastly, Enkidu proclaims that those who have burned to death have no existence in the underworld as their souls have turned to smoke.[17] This is where the tale ends, providing great insight into the thought process behind the underworld rather than its mechanics.

Though one may have great accomplishments in life, it is a natural human instinct to fear death, and despite the Sumerians overall pragmatic view, fear still plays a great part in their lives. An example of this internal conflict is best seen in the myth, *The Death of Gilgameš.*

In it, the gods of Mesopotamia are in a predicament: Gilgamesh, partially divine king of Uruk, lies ill in his death bed as the emissaries of Kur call to him. Should the gods let the underworld claim him or should he elude death due to his heavenly parentage? The gods come to an agreement that Gilgamesh should descend to the netherworld but be given special standing as a judge of the dead, much like the former lover of Inanna, Dummuzid. The important part of this tale is its notion on the inevitability of death as it displayed in this line from the Andrew George translation: "O [Gilgameš], I made your destiny a destiny of kingship, but I did not make it a

[17] Black and Gábor, "Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Underworld," 31-40; Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, trans., "Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Nether World," The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, 2006, https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.1.4#. In other translations of this tale there are lines talking about the parents of Gilgamesh.

destiny of eternal life . . . For mankind, whatever life it has, be not sick at heart, be not in despair, be not heart-stricken!"[18] This tells that "death is the lot of man" but it is not something to despair about, Gilgamesh has a long legacy of achievements, and deeds and would doubtfully ever be forgotten. This same idea is seen in the main tablets of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* where the holy barmaid, Siduri, warns Gilgamesh not to seek immortality. She proclaims, "When the gods created man they allotted him death, but life they retained in their own keeping."[19] Siduri goes on to explain the joys and happiness that can come with human life, and that is something uniquely mortal, but in exchange for this life humans must die. Theoretically, one can apply this attitude to the common masses of Ancient Sumer; though none wanted to die, it is something that must happen, for people are mortals not gods. The best way to cope with this reality is through acts, services, and achievements in life; that is the general idea of life and death that the Sumerians held during the Early Dynastic period.

The Sumerian people had an overall pragmatic understanding of death: that death would come of station in life. So why waste away in sorrow and woe when one can achieve greatness in life and leave a legacy worth noting, ensuring a comfortable position in The Land of No Return? This reflected the Sumerian ideals and views on how to live life according to its views on the netherworld. The underworld is not a place one desires to be, but regardless of mortal wants it is the final threshold and with its stern rules it looms over all life. The Sumerians' view on life inspired them to strive for greatness, and this stems from the culture itself being shaped by its views on the netherworld and the afterlife.

---

[18] A. R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 200.

[19] N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1968), 102.

Bibliography

Black, Jeremy, and Anthony Green. *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

Black, Jeremy A., Cunningham, G., Fluckiger-Hawker, E., Robson, E., and Zólyomi, G., trans. *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Black, J.A., Cunningham, G., Fluckiger-Hawker, E, Robson, E., and Zólyomi, G., *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/), Oxford 1998- .

George, A. R., trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*. 2nd ed. London: Penguin Books, 2020.

Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Treasures of Darkness : A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976.

Kramer, Samuel Noah. *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.* New York: Harper & Row, 1961.

Sandars, N. K, trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1968.