

## 30 The Sacred Marriage

The concept of ‘sacred marriage’ is a modern scholarly expression based on the Greek institution of *hieros gamos*. But the study of that sort of Greek marriage does not help us to understand things any better.<sup>1</sup> We will begin with Sumer.

The first genuine sacred marriage was between Heaven and Earth, when the male heaven fertilised with rain mother earth and green vegetation sprang up from her. The introduction to a Sumerian literary text describes this primaeval happening more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

An, mighty heaven, impregnated broad Earth,  
He poured into her the heroic seed of Wood and Reed.  
The good seed of Heaven was poured into Earth, the faithful cow.  
Earth, rejoicing over the plant of life, was ready to give birth,  
Earth, luxuriant, sprinkling wine and syrup, carried bounty.  
When Wood and Reed had been born, she shook out the syrup and wine in the barn.

This cosmic marriage is called a *cosmogamy*.<sup>3</sup> A motif on Old Assyrian cylinder seals has been explained as the depiction of this sacred marriage as envisaged in Syria, between the goddess of love and the god of rain. That northern area of the Middle East has always relied on rain for agriculture. The goddess tends to face forward, opening her garment provocatively, opposite a seated god or king. In other representations she can be seen as an interceding goddess (Figure 49).<sup>4</sup> A Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal is comparable (Figure 50). In the upper register two deities meet each other. The god offers the goddess three ears of corn and a dove takes flight out of her hand, signifying a woman’s love (compare Figure 49). In the lower register we see a man ploughing, with another man behind him broad-

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1 A. A. Avagianou, ‘Hieros gamos in ancient Greek religion: the human aspect of a sacralized ritual’, in: M. Nissinen, R. Uro, *Sacred Marriages. The divine-human sexual metaphor from Sumer to early Christianity* (2008) 145–171.

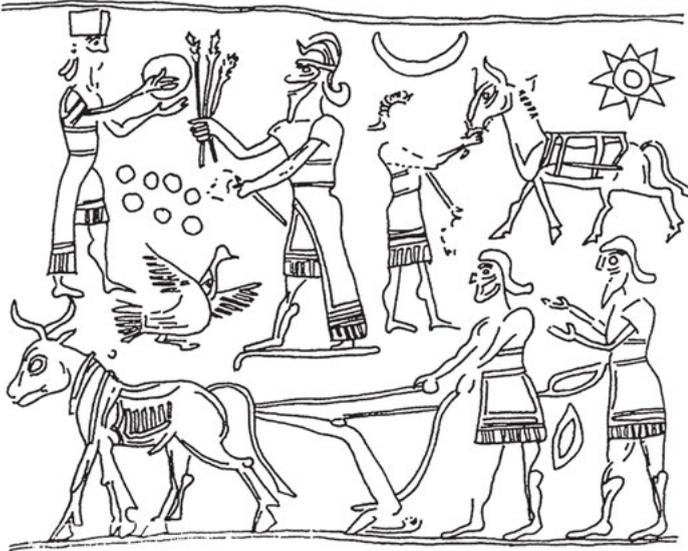
2 ‘The Debate between Wood and Reed’, 6–11. See C. Mittermayer, *Studies P. Attinger* (2012) 252f. On the marriage between heaven and earth see J. G. Westenholz, *Studies T. Abusch* (2010) 294–321.

3 B. Pongratz-Leisten in Nissinen, Uro, *Sacred Marriages*, 44 ff.

4 U. Winter, *Frau und Göttin* (1983) 272–283 (‘Die Göttin die sich entschleiert’, as ‘Mittlerin’, 280); C. Uehlinger, *RIA IX/1–2* (1998) 59–62 with Abb. 7–10 (‘sie öffnet ein schleierartiges Kleid’); O. Keel, Th. Staubli, *Im Schatten Deiner Flügel. Tiere in der Bibel und im Alten Orient* (2002) 71–73 Kat. 64–67 (sacred marriage); D. Collon, *Near Eastern Seals* (1990) 49 fig. 38; B. Brentjes, *Alte Siegelkunst des Vorderen Orients* (1983) 180. She is not facing the man in E. Klengel-Brandt, *Mit sieben Siegeln versehen* (1997) 75 Abb. 68.



**Fig. 49:** Old Assyrian cylinder seal. Cylinder seals from Syria show a goddess opening her garment in front of a god or a seated king. Flying doves symbolise love. They represent Ištar and Adad, the god of rain, whose conjugal love (*theogamy*) guarantees fertility. 1800 BC. Haematite. Height 1.9 cm. *Université de Fribourg*.



**Fig. 50:** The goddess Ištar stands opposite the rain god Adad, with a dove symbolising the love between them. Their marriage brought fruitfulness, suggested below by the farmer ploughing his furrow here on earth. Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal. 9th century BC. *Université de Fribourg*.

casting seed. The sowing of seed can be interpreted as a symbol of fruitfulness on earth, and therefore of a sacred marriage.<sup>5</sup>

This may remind us of a passage where we find a description of Zeus and Hera together in Homer.

The son of Kronos embraced his wife. Beneath them the divine earth produced luxuriant grass and dewy lotus and crocus and hyacinth, thick and soft, a bed that lifted them high up from the earth. On this they lay down and they covered themselves with a beautiful mist of gold. Glistening droplets of dew fell to earth (Iliad XIV 346–351).

### 30.1 Poetry

In Sumer Inanna and Dumuzi had a sort of marriage relationship. Inanna was the goddess of love and war, and the most important goddess of the pantheon. Dumuzi was originally represented as a human shepherd, but also as the ruler of a Sumerian city. Inanna expressed her love for him in a series of songs. As their love developed everyone prepared themselves for their wedding day. These were romantic bucolic songs.<sup>6</sup> The consummation of their marriage was described frankly with one passage showing that in response the plant world began to sprout.<sup>7</sup> Later Dumuzi would die, and there begins the theme of the mourning for Tammuz, which we have already discussed in the last chapter, about women and worship. Such a marriage between a deity and a human is called *hierogamy*, ‘sacred marriage’.

Ceremonially that marriage between Inanna and Dumuzi was re-enacted between the goddess and the Sumerian king. The king, who could be called Ama-*u*šumgal-ana on this occasion, represented Dumuzi. The name of the reigning king and Dumuzi alternated in the songs.<sup>8</sup> In two of them the poet wishes that the goddess Inanna would be greeted with the happy sound of the churning of

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5 F. A. M. Wiggermann in: R. M. Jas, *Rainfall and agriculture in Northern Mesopotamia* (2000) 201f., 230. Wiggermann thinks that the ploughing refers to the sexual union of both gods. For photos see Keel, Staubli, *Im Schatten Deiner Flügel*, 73 Kat. 69; O. Keel, C. Uehlinger, *Altorientalische Miniaturkunst* (1990) 24 Abb. 13. For a drawing see H. Klengel, J. Renger, *Landwirtschaft im Alten Orient* (1999) 277 Abb. 7.

6 For translations see S. N. Kramer, *Le mariage sacré* (1983) 81–100; Th. Jacobsen, *The treasures of darkness* (1976) 27–47; for a concordance see D. Frayne, *BiOr* 42 (1985) 8f.; also Jacobsen, *The harps that once* (1987) 1–23.

7 PAPS 107 (1963) 505 Ni. 9602 iii 7–11 (= ISET 2 16), with Th. Jacobsen, *Aula Orientalis* 9 (1991) 116; also in his *Treasures of darkness*, 46; Y. Sefati, *Love songs in Sumerian literature* (1998) 225.

8 J. Renger, *ZA* 58 (1967) 133f. § 36.

milk in the dairy. One song says it was Dumuzi who did the churning, and another that it was Išme-Dagan, the king of Isin.<sup>9</sup> Very early in the history of Sumer city-rulers and kings would describe themselves as ‘the beloved husband of Inanna’ (Eannatum of Lagash) or ‘the husband of the *nu.gig* [= Inanna]’ (Mesanepada of Ur). King Naram-Sîn of Akkad was called ‘the husband of Inanna-Annunitum’.<sup>10</sup> In their hymns kings from the following Ur III and Isin periods described in great detail that this entailed the physical union of the king and the goddess on a bed in her residence in the building Gipar.<sup>11</sup> Three clear passages concern this theme. One is the hymn of Inanna, composed for King Iddin-Dagan of Isin in about 1950 BC, which culminates in the consummation on the holy bed and the blessing of the land which followed. This bed is no figment of the imagination. It is referred to in administrative texts, and the bedchamber of Nanna and Ningal, the divine couple associated with the sacred marriage, has been identified in the temple of Ningal in Ur as room C 28.<sup>12</sup>

In the hymn Inanna is praised as the ‘Lady of the Evening’, meaning her epiphany as the evening star, referring to the planet Venus in the evening sky. The ritual did not take place in Uruk as it should have done but in the capital city of Isin. Inanna is therefore identified with the local goddess of Isin. As the evening star she was known as Ninsuana, ‘Red Lady of the Heavens’, a name assonant with Nin-Isin. The hymn consists of nine or ten strophes, the content of which can be conveniently summarised.<sup>13</sup> We assume that Strophes 1–3 concern the monthly feast of the New Moon, and the rest concern celebrations for the New Year.

(1) The goddess is greeted with the exclamation *silim.ma*, ‘Welcome’, a Semitic expression sounding very like Hebrew *shalom* and Arabic *salam*.

(2) She is said to occupy a very elevated position among the most powerful gods, An (the sky) and Enlil. This means that ‘monthly, at the New Moon, so that the holy institutions (*me*) may be perfect, the gods of the land gather around her, the great Anunnaki kneel before her (...) my Lady makes decisions on the country’ (27–32). These decisions were made together with the god Enlil.

<sup>9</sup> J. Klein, *Festschrift W. H. Ph. Römer* (1998) 205–222.

<sup>10</sup> M.-J. Seux, *Epithètes royales* (1967) 173, 388; J. S. Cooper, ‘Sacred marriage and popular cult in early Mesopotamia’, in: E. Matsushima, *Official cult and popular religion in the Ancient Near East* (1993) 83f.

<sup>11</sup> For the allusions to ‘bed’ and ‘lap’ in hymns see W. H. Ph. Römer, *SKIZ* (1965) 147f.; for the Gipar see P. Steinkeller in: K. Watanabe, *Priests and officials in the Ancient Near East* (1999) 132.

<sup>12</sup> J. G. Westenholz, *Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies Journal* 1 (2006) 40b.

<sup>13</sup> ŠRT 1 with W. H. Ph. Römer, *SKIZ* (1965) 128–208 (Kapitel IV); D. Reisman, ‘Iddin-Dagan’s Sacred Marriage Hymn’, *JCS* 25 (1973) 185–202; Th. Jacobsen, *The harps that once* (1987) 112–124; Römer, *TUAT* II/5 (1989) 659–673; P. Attinger, *Festschrift J. Krecher* (2014) 11–82.

(3) The exclamation ‘Welcome’ sounds out again, accompanied by musical instruments.

(4–6) The servants in her cult parade past. Among them is a group of men who lacerate their bodies with knives until the blood flows, an important element in the ceremonies of the cult of Inanna/Ištar.

(7) She is worshipped by man and beast and a feast is held.<sup>14</sup>

(8) Inanna blesses the one who is good and punishes the one who is bad.

(9) The people bring offerings and food, evidently for the feast.

(10) The New Year feast. A throne (*bara*) is erected for her as Nin-Egala, ‘the Lady of the Palace’, and the king sits beside her as a god (*dingir.àm*). At New Year, the day of rites, the bed is set up for ‘my Lady’, so that she will take it upon herself to provide life for the country, so that she will inspect the loyal servants, so that the holy institutions (*me*) will be perfect on the day that the moon disappears (167–175). The goddess bathes ‘for the lap of the king’, and then the king goes to ‘her pure lap’, and Ama-ušumgal-ana ‘does the bed’ with her (185–187). That long name was one of those used for Dumuzi, meaning that the king in this situation is being identified with the lover of Inanna. Holy Inanna addresses Iddin-Dagan, ‘You are truly my beloved’ (192). The king organises a banquet for her and a feast for the people. The story ends with Inanna being praised as the *nu.gig*, Holy Lady.

An earlier example of sacred marriage, one from the Ur III period, involves King Šulgi. He describes in a hymn his glorious return from a battle.<sup>15</sup> On the way back to his city of Ur he visits the great Sumerian temples and presents offerings to their gods, possibly freshly claimed booty. Each god he visits blesses him. The first episode of the hymn describes his visit to the temple of Inanna in Uruk. This is in fact a retrospective reference to his sacred marriage with her. On that occasion Šulgi had arrived in his royal boat (*magur*) at the quayside of Uruk-Kullaba. He had entered the temple of Eanna with animals for sacrifice. Inanna had intoned a love song in the woman’s dialect using very explicit vocabulary, reminiscing about being fondled by the king, Dumuzi.

He played with the hair in my lap, laid his hand on my sacred vessel (...), he spoke in bed pleasant words to me (28–34).

<sup>14</sup> For the festive activities, like competitions, see M. M. Fritz, ... *und weinten um Tammuz. Die Götter Dumuzi-Ama-ušumgal'anna und Damu* (2003) 319 f.

<sup>15</sup> Hymns D and X. Hymn Šulgi X (= TLB II 2) looks like the conclusion of hymn D. For a new edition see J. Klein, *Three Šulgi Hymns* (1981) 124 ff. Klein assumes that this passage in the hymn looks back at the marriage and gives no full description (as is commonly assumed). A central point is that Inanna destines Šulgi to be king (p. 126 n. 205).

Then she had determined a good fate for the king, just like all the other gods in the hymn were to do. A third text does not name the king, but in it Inanna invited him longingly to share her bed with her, and the kingship was promised to him with prosperity for his land. This happened on the occasion of the New Moon.<sup>16</sup>

In the same Ur III period a legend was known, in which Enmarkar, the king of Uruk, boasted to a rival that he did not just live with Inanna, like his rival, but that he lay with her in a splendid bed. He did not see her in a dream, but spoke to her whenever he was awake. He could describe the bed and added, that Inanna shouted with pleasure when he visited her.<sup>17</sup> The rival admitted that Enmerkar was indeed the ‘beloved city-ruler (*en*) of Inanna’.<sup>18</sup> Other songs tell of the love of Inanna and Dumuzi and portray similarly erotic scenes. If these count as songs for sacred marriage, then there are still a few more scurrilous passages to add, in which Inanna boasts of the excellence of her sexual organs to ‘Dumuzi the king’ and invites him ‘to plough my wet field’.<sup>19</sup>

### 30.2 The reality of the situation

We can assume that a real bed was prepared for the ceremony but we doubt that the couple really climbed into it. If they did then we must ask who played the role of the goddess. It has been suggested, but without direct evidence, that it was the queen, and this is a subject to which we shall return. It may have been a priestess. Inanna herself had the title *nu.gig*, which we earlier saw was equivalent to ‘the holy woman’ (*qadištu*), but there is no indication at all that this woman was the lucky one. If it was the high priestess, the *entu*, she would have been the daughter of the king, so the relationship would have been incestuous.<sup>20</sup> A better candidate would be the *ereš.dingir*, a priestess who may have been the daughter of a king but not necessarily so. Although we have no facts to confirm this hunch, it is cer-

<sup>16</sup> CT 42 4 with Y. Sefati, *Love songs in Sumerian literature* (1998) 301–311 (DI D<sub>1</sub>).

<sup>17</sup> ‘Enmerkar and Ensuĥkešdanna’, 27–32, 80–99 (ed. Adele Berlin), with Cooper, 82f.

<sup>18</sup> P. Lapinkivi gives a survey of sacred marriages in Mesopotamia from 2700 (Enmerkar) to 1250 BC (Shalmaneser I) in: Nissinen, Uro, *Sacred Marriages* (2008) 18–21. See also P. Steinkeller in Watanabe, *Priests and officials*, 129–137; J. G. Westenholz, ‘Heilige Hochzeit und kultische Prostitution im Alten Mesopotamien. Sexuelle Vereinigung im sakralen Raum?’, in: *Wort und Dienst. Jahrbuch der Kirchlichen Hochschule Bethel*, Neue Folge 23 (1995) 43–62.

<sup>19</sup> Th. Jacobsen in: *Unity and Diversity* (1975) 83 (ISET 2 16); Sefati, *Love songs*, 224 f.

<sup>20</sup> Jacobsen (p. 78 n. 6) mentions a passage in an administrative text which seems to say that ‘Dumuzi is going to the high-priestess (*en*)’; *Orientalia* SP 47–49 no. 344:22–23. Cf. R. Kutscher, *Studies P. Artzi* (1990) 33. Inanna was both *en* and *lagar* in Uruk; ‘The Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld’, 6; TUAT III/3 (1993) 461.

tainly possible that the duty fell to the *ereš.dingir*. It has even been suggested that any son born of this union would be the future king.<sup>21</sup> Gudea of Lagash could be an example of this, for in his prayer to the goddess Gatumdug he says,

I have no mother. You are my mother. I have no father. You are my father. You have received my seed. You have born me in the sanctuary.

That is the evidence for the idea that Gudea was conceived by an *ereš.dingir* in a sacred marriage ceremony.<sup>22</sup> But the language he uses can also be seen as literary exaggeration to show a relationship of intimate trust with the goddess.

There would have been a margin of secrecy about this institution, something that can be compared with the traditional nightly rituals in which a new emperor of Japan indulged when he took office. He is known to have retired to an inner room with two ‘hostesses’, without any more details being given.<sup>23</sup> But it could be that absolutely nothing took place. The songs with their colourful language can be seen as literary fiction. It has been pointed out that we have figurative language to describe the king drinking beer with Utu and An, the Sun and the Sky.<sup>24</sup> The king was certainly seen as the ‘husband of Inanna’, the incarnation of her friend Dumuzi, and at the feast a bed may well have been made ready, but the rest was nothing but poetry.<sup>25</sup> J. S. Cooper tends to the view that the ceremony was indeed carried out once a year, as a confirmation of sacred kingship, to confirm the social bonds between the gods and society, not just for the joy of sex. Cooper does not hazard any opinion on which woman was involved. In his latest contribution he decided not to *chercher la femme* but to conclude that there was no physical marriage. He now thinks differently than he did before. We were misled by those strong metaphors.<sup>26</sup> If it was the queen then we recall that in Chapter 23 about the court and the harem we saw that in Ebla she played an important role in the ceremonial surrounding an accession to the throne, where the marriage bed was part of that procedure. An unexpected clue comes from Girsu in the province of Lagash, where the wife of the governor was the *ereš.dingir* of the city goddess Bau. There ‘the governor and his wife played the roles of Nin-

<sup>21</sup> D. Frayne, with Cooper, 87 f.; W. W. Hallo, with Cooper, 89 f. See also Renger, ZA 58 (1967) 144 §50.

<sup>22</sup> A. Falkenstein, AnOr 30 (1966) 2f.; Renger, ZA 58, 142 n. 224.

<sup>23</sup> Cooper, 95 f.

<sup>24</sup> R. F. G. Sweet, ‘A new look at the “Sacred Marriage” in Ancient Mesopotamia’, in: *Corolla Torontonensis. Studies in honour of Ronald Morton Smith* (1994) 85–104; esp. 102–104.

<sup>25</sup> For the latest discussion see G. Rubio, JAOS 121 (2001) 268 f.

<sup>26</sup> J. S. Cooper, ‘Sex and the temple’, in: K. Kaniuth, *Tempel im Alten Orient* (2013) 49–57, esp. 54–56.

girsu and Bau respectively at the rite of the sacred marriage'. We presume that the governor consummated this marriage with his wife.<sup>27</sup> In the state cult the queen also seems to have been the female partner in the sacred marriage, as was suggested more than thirty years ago.<sup>28</sup> Annual gifts for the sacred marriage were recorded by Gudea, the previous city ruler, showing that sacred marriage was a real life event in Lagash.

Various scenes have been interpreted as depictions of the sacred marriage ritual.<sup>29</sup> In the main these are 'banquet scenes' focused on eating and drinking. But those scenes could just as easily represent some other feast. It has also been thought that clay images depicting copulation between a man and a woman may be relevant. Copious numbers of these have been found, most of which depict penetration from behind. These may well have been privately commissioned as aids to fertility. Some involve a number of people, pointing to an orgy of communal intercourse as part of some ceremony, but not necessarily the sacred marriage.

### 30.3 The function of the ritual

Even though we cannot be sure whether or not real sex was involved in this ritual, we would have liked to know what function it played in society, but we do not. There is no single ritual with which the songs can be associated, and there are countless and conflicting opinions on the sacred marriage. One recent book gave an overview of several opinions, including that it promoted agricultural fertility, celebrated a coronation, deified the king and therefore legitimated kingship, obtained a blessing for the king, installed a high priestess, the *entu*, commemorated the mystic union between God and Man, or simply that the hymns and songs were mere court poetry.<sup>30</sup> One hymn clearly suggests the intention of this marriage. Enlil and Ninlil, the divine couple, having built a temple for Inanna, gave King Išme-Dagan to her as her husband, and gave them as their 'present'

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**27** K. Maekawa in K. R. Veenhof, *Houses and households in ancient Mesopotamia* (1996) 172–174. Gudea, the city ruler of Lagash, and his wife may have celebrated the sacred marriage at the festival of Bau; W. Sallaberger, *Der kultische Kalender der Ur III-Zeit I* (1993) 291.

**28** See W. H. Ph. Römer, 'Einige Überlegungen zur "Heiligen Hochzeit" nach altorientalischen Texten', in: *Festschrift J. P. M. van der Ploeg* (1982), 411–428; esp. 421. This contribution never played any role in the discussions of the sacred marriage.

**29** We follow J. S. Cooper, 'Heilige Hochzeit. B. Archäologisch', *RIA IV/4–5* (1975) 259–269.

**30** Nissinen, Uro, *Sacred Marriages*, 9f.; 33–39; 48f.; 201–205.

the feeding of the gods and their temple. In this way contact between the realm of government and the world of the gods was sustained.<sup>31</sup>

A few aspects of these suggestions deserve closer consideration. First of all we note that although the king is identified with Dumuzi this does not mean he was deified. Dumuzi himself was essentially a human shepherd beloved by the goddess Inanna. As a result he acknowledged himself that he had acquired a superhuman status. In the myth 'Dumuzi's Dream' (206) he says

Old woman! I am not just a human, I am the husband of a deity.

The king also held the special superhuman status of uniting heaven and earth, and had been granted special access to the world of the gods. It has often been said that the rite of sacred marriage symbolised fertility and the king would have wanted to secure this fertility and secured it magically, as when we read 'The sexual congress of the human actors who incarnated divinities acted by sympathetic magic to cause fertility and productivity in all nature'.<sup>32</sup> This gives too great an emphasis on the sexual element.<sup>33</sup> The goddess Inanna never became pregnant, and it has been perceptively noticed that a marriage with her can hardly have symbolised fertility.<sup>34</sup> Alternatively it has been suggested that in this ritual Inanna did not function so much as the goddess of love but as the dominant goddess of the pantheon. By having a direct relationship with her the king ensured the security of his country. It is the maintenance of kingship that was crucial to the ritual, not fertility, as scholars often think. It was about her blessing him, expressed in the establishing of his function, his 'lot', to be the shepherd of his country, and a rich yield from his fields and flocks would follow.<sup>35</sup> It may well have been true that this marriage relationship was confirmed by a physical union during the ritual but that does not put fertility in first place.<sup>36</sup> The Iddin-Dagan hymn clearly states that the ceremony took place on New Year's Day. We also

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**31** Hymn Išme-Dagan K with Cooper, 90; W. H. Ph. Römer, *Hymnen und Klagelieder in sumerischer Sprache* (2001) 55 ff., lines 36–41.

**32** Th. Jacobsen, *Aula Orientalis* 9 (1991) 116; cf. T. Frymer-Kensky, *In the wake of the goddesses. Women, culture and the Biblical transformation of pagan myth* (1992) 54 (bountiful yields of fields, gardens and streams); 58 f. (the king 'touched by divinity'). The tendency to connect the Uruk Vase with the sacred marriage was rejected by R. F. G. Sweet (contra Th. Jacobsen).

**33** Frymer-Kensky, 56 f.

**34** M. I. Gruber, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76 (1995) 214 f., in his review of the book by T. Frymer-Kensky.

**35** J. Renger, 'Heilige Hochzeit', *RIA IV/4–5* (1975) 256 f. § 17; somewhat differently J. Klein, *Three Šulgi Hymns* (1981) 126 n. 205.

**36** This was the earlier explanation of Cooper, 91 f.

know that in Lagash the god Ningirsu and the goddess Bau celebrated their marriage on that day.<sup>37</sup> Some say it was not necessary to observe the ritual every year but only when a new king came to the throne,<sup>38</sup> perhaps at his coronation, or during the first year of his reign, or on the first New Year's Day of his reign. It is possible that Ur-Nammu, the first king of the Ur III dynasty, had already observed this ritual, for he spoke about lying down on 'the splendid (*giri*n) bed'. Certainly his son Šulgi observed it, probably when he had himself deified.<sup>39</sup>

The sacred marriage ritual with all its symbolism was limited to a period of about two hundred years, during the reigns of the kings of the Ur III period and the subsequent periods of Isin and Larsa, who adhered to the traditions of the court of Ur.<sup>40</sup> Sumerian royal hymns from the later period of the Amorite kings, such as Hammurabi and Samsu-iluna, stayed true to the ideology of their divine birth, but leave no trace of references to sacred marriage.<sup>41</sup> These kings were no longer regarded as gods.

It is here relevant to observe that in the Gilgamesh Epic (Tablet VI) Ištar proposes marriage to the hero, the king of Uruk. But he rejects her proposal, listing some of her former lovers with whom things had gone badly. This motif can be seen as a reflection of the rejection of sacred marriage. In the sacred marriage ritual it was Inanna who similarly took the initiative. Here, as the goddess of Uruk, she chooses a mortal to be her husband. Such a procedure could conflict with the principle of dynastic succession from father to son to determine the successive kings of Uruk, for Inanna could as easily cast a king away as choose him. Thinking along these lines Gilgamesh refused to take this risk. He rejected Inanna, and his son succeeded him.<sup>42</sup>

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**37** In Elam we have the month name 'Month of the divine *ereš.dingir*'; S. Greengus, *JAOS* 107 (1987) 228a (only in MDP 23 187:5).

**38** As argued by Renger, 257 § 17; accepted by Römer in *Studies J. P. M. van der Ploeg* (1982) 420 f.; based on the ritual in CT 42 4; but Cooper, 86 f., thinks of it as a confirmation of the kingship.

**39** Ur-Nammu: Frayne, *BiOr* 42 (1985) 16 f. Šulgi: Renger, *RIA* IV/4, 257 § 20.

**40** Iddin-Dagan (see above) and Išme-Dagan at Isin; for Larsa we now have an Akkadian love song for Rim-Šin; YOS 11 24 with J. G. Westenholz, M. Sigrist, *Studies S. M. Paul II* (2008) 667–704. In general see Y. Sefati, *Love songs in Sumerian literature* (1998) 38–49.

**41** A. Falkenstein, *ArOr* 17/1 (1949) 214.

**42** W. Heimpel, *ZA* 82 (1992) 11 f., 17.

### 30.4 The Assyrian period and later

In the first millennium this marriage ritual consisted of nothing more than bringing together the statues of a god and goddess in a cell, the ‘room of the bed’. Going into a garden was also involved.<sup>43</sup> Such a marriage between two gods is called *theogamy*, which brings us back in some ways to the ancient myth of Zeus and Hera. King Ashurbanipal announced proudly how he gave an opportunity to the god and goddess of Babylon to share a bed.

A bed of sissoo-wood, a durable sort of wood, that is overlaid with ... gold and decorated with exquisite precious stones, I skilfully set up an elaborate bed for the Lord (Bel) and my Mistress (Beltiya), for conducting the sacred marriage (*hašādu*), for making love. In Kaḫilisu, the bedroom of Zarpanitum [= my Mistress], which is sprinkled with sensuality, I placed (it).<sup>44</sup>

We have much information about the ritual in this period. Letters to the Assyrian king refer to what was happening and administrators speak of offerings for ‘the bedroom of Mulissu’, the wife of the god Assur, being brought by the king and others.<sup>45</sup> It was carried out each year at a fixed time. We know most about the Babylonian ‘marriage’ between Nabû and Tašmetu in the second month, celebrated in Borsippa and nearby Babylon. In the Neo-Babylonian period Nabû and Nanaya celebrated their marriage for six days in the first month.<sup>46</sup> At this time Nabû also had two divine girlfriends, and he would spend several nights in their temples during this ritual. The best known of these was the one named after a nomadic tribe, ‘the Sutaean’, and the second was called ‘the Aramean’.<sup>47</sup> Do these two goddesses represent the nomadic population of the Empire?

A number of other Neo-Babylonian texts from Sippar speak about bed linen, repairs for ‘the bed’, and ‘the bedroom’. In connection with the god of this city Šamaš there is also talk of ‘the bed’ or ‘the marriage’ (*hašādu*) of the Lady of Sippar (Belet-Sippar), meaning Ištar. The reports about that marriage are all

<sup>43</sup> All the material is in E. Matsushima, ‘Les rituels du mariage divin dans les documents accadiens’, *ASJ* 10 (1988) 95–128. The garden in sacred marriage rituals was discussed in P. Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian sacred marriage in the light of comparative evidence* (= SAAS XV) (2004) 212–226.

<sup>44</sup> R. Borger, *BIWA* (1996) 139 f. *Prisma* T I 46–53; cf. 206 § 5.

<sup>45</sup> SAA VII p. XXXV (3) and 220 s.v. *quršu* ‘wedding night’.

<sup>46</sup> J. N. Postgate, ‘The Bit Akiti in Assyrian Nabu temples’, *Sumer* 30 (1974) 51–74; E. Matsushima, ‘Le rituel hiérogamique de Nabû’, *ASJ* 9 (1987) 131–175; SAA XIII (1998) p. XV f. For Nanaya see C. Waerzeggers, *The Ezida temple of Borsippa* (2010) 129 f.

<sup>47</sup> Waerzeggers, 29, referring to P.-A. Beaulieu.

dated in the eleventh month.<sup>48</sup> King Nabonidus reporting on the rebuilding of the Šamaš temple of Ebabbar in Sippar said to the god,

May Aya, the great bride, who lives in the bedroom, constantly make your face light up, may she daily say good words to you.

The good words to be spoken were intercessions for the people.<sup>49</sup> The god Šamaš seems to have had two marriages here, one with Aya and the other with the Lady of Sippar.

Herodotus suspected that some such affair occurred high in the ‘Tower of Babel’ (I 181 f.).

On the uppermost tower stands a temple and in the temple a large bed is made up, and beside it a golden table. There is in that temple no statue set up and also no person spends the night there, except a native woman who has been chosen out of them all by the god, as the Chaldeans tell, who are priests of this god. They are the same people who claim (but I believe nothing of it) that the god comes to the temple in person and sleeps on the bed.

We do have one reference to the roof of a chapel in the temple tower where a ritual was carried out for Anu, the god of the heavens.<sup>50</sup>

A papyrus from Egypt has an Aramaic text written in Demotic script recounting some legends about the kings of Assyria. It includes an account of a sacred marriage ritual between the king and the goddess Nanaya.<sup>51</sup>

Nanaya, you are my wife. The bed of rushes they have laid down, perfumed fragrances for your nostrils. Our goddess, may you be carried, escorted to your dear one; let them bear you to the dear one. In your bridal chamber a priest sings. Nanaya, bring near to me your lips. We stayed in the morning. We shall stay in the evening. I have stayed with you until evening. (...) My beloved, enter the door into my house. With my mouth, consort of our lord, let me kiss you. (...) Horus-Bethel will lay you on a bedspread, El on embroidered covers.

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**48** E. Matsushima, ‘Le “Lit” de Šamaš et le rituel du mariage à l’Ebabbar’, *ASJ* 7 (1985) 129–137; F. Joannès, ‘Le lit de Šamaš et le mariage de Bēlet Sippar’, *RA* 86 (1992) 166–168; A. C. V. M. Bongenaar, *The Neo-Babylonian Ebabbar temple at Sippar* (1997) 242f. For more see B. Pongratz-Leisten in Nissinen, Uro, *Sacred Marriages*, 62–66.

**49** 5 R 65 ii 19–20 with Matsushima, 132.

**50** TCL 6 41:14 with M. J. H. Linssen, *The cults of Uruk and Babylon* (2004) 245.

**51** R. C. Steiner in: W. W. Hallo, *The Context of Scripture* I (1997) 322, column XVI.

Blessings follow and the king is able to go and rebuild his ruined city.

A very late implicit allusion to the motif of the sacred marriage is seen when Antiochus IV Epiphanes sought to ‘marry’ (*sunoikein*) Nanaya, stipulating that he wanted the temple treasures as a dowry (2 Maccabees 1:14).<sup>52</sup>

I conclude that the union of the two gods in their bedroom means that the goddess makes intercession with her husband on behalf of the king. A colophon on texts in the library of Ashurbanipal, which we cited in the discussion on intercession in Chapter 29, says this clearly. Of course she was successful in achieving this and the result was blessing for the king and country. Such an act of intercession had to be repeated regularly. From an increasing number of Assyrian songs about the love of the gods for the king which are coming to light we are learning of a female deity who intermediates between the god and the king. Some scholars have proposed that it is God’s love for the king, traditionally for King Solomon, that is alluded to in the Song of Songs. They would, therefore, place that Biblical book in this context.<sup>53</sup>

Could the sacred marriage ritual from the older Sumerian period have had the same meaning? At that time the words in the blessing of the gods were the most important feature of the texts.<sup>54</sup> All these songs deal with the love of the deity for mankind. Such love is best expressed in metaphors, and the most obvious metaphors are erotic ones, as is evident everywhere in the world.<sup>55</sup>

### 30.5 The demise of goddesses

In the third millennium BC many more goddesses can be identified than in the period after 2000 BC.<sup>56</sup> Around 3000 BC, in the Uruk period, goddesses arranged all aspects of life for humans and animals, in particular ensuring fertility and reproduction and securing health and death. We know of Ninḫursag, Nintu and Gatumdug the mother and birth goddesses, Nisaba and Ninsud the grain goddesses, Ninsumun the livestock goddess, Gula the healer, and Ereškigal the goddess of death (Figures 51, 52). Their male counterparts were the god Enki, and

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52 M. Stol, ‘Nanea’, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons* (1995) 1152–55.

53 M. Nissinen, ‘Song of Songs and Sacred Marriage’, in Nissinen, Uro, *Sacred Marriages*, 173–218. The Assyrian songs: p. 206–208.

54 Pongratz-Leisten, 55 f.

55 P. Lapinkivi in *Sacred Marriages*, 15.

56 T. Frymer-Kensky, ‘The marginalization of the goddesses’, in her *In the wake of the goddesses* (1992) 70–80.



**Fig. 51:** Vase dedicated to a goddess by the city-ruler Entemena. Flower buds sprout from her shoulders, she has spikes in her hair, and she holds the branch of a date palm. She resembles a goddess of vegetation, possibly Nisaba, the goddess of grain, who was no longer venerated after the Sumerian period. 2400 BC. Basalt; height 25 cm. *Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin.*

three additional celestial male gods, Sky, Sun and Moon.<sup>57</sup> After the Sumerian period we often see a god taking over the role of a goddess. Nabû followed Nisaba as the god of writing; Ninkasi the goddess of beer-brewing was succeeded by Siraš the god of must. The goddess of the art of incantation and the *primaeva* waters had her functions taken over by Enki/Ea. The function of the mother goddess was subsumed under those of Ištar and the goddess of medicine, Gula. She no longer played any role in the creation of mankind, which was then taken over by Ea.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> P. Steinkeller in K. Watanabe, *Priests and officials in the Ancient Near East* (1999) 113–115. We follow him almost literally.

<sup>58</sup> M. Krebern timer, ‘Muttergöttin’ § 6.1, *RIA VIII/7–8* (1997) 512.



**Fig. 52:** The mother goddess. The Greek letter omega on the left and the right of this figure represents her womb, and children about to be born squat underneath. Terracotta. Height 10 cm. *Iraq Museum, Baghdad.*

Some of the goddesses even changed sex and became known as male. Even so, in the Sumerian period there were a great many male gods and they were certainly the most important ones in the pantheon.<sup>59</sup> The only prominent goddesses were Ninḫursaga the mother goddess and Inanna the goddess of love. One of the reasons for this change was that a number of Sumerian cities with a goddess as their patron had disappeared.<sup>60</sup> W. Sallaberger sees more in it. He believes that the

<sup>59</sup> P. Michalowski, 'Round about Nidaba: on the early goddesses of Sumer', *CRRAI* 47/II (2002) 413–422.

<sup>60</sup> Thus P. Michalowski; also P. Steinkeller, who thinks of the disappearance of twin Sumerian capital cities, the one political and the other religious (p. 115).



**Fig. 53:** Gula, the goddess of healing, with her faithful dog. A cylinder seal showing the goddess standing with a beardless worshipper. Her Greek counterpart Asklepios was also accompanied by a dog. Gula and Ištar were among the few early goddesses still venerated after the Sumerian period. 700 BC. Cylinder seal. Quartz, sardonyx. 3,4 × 1,6 cm. *British Museum, London.*

world of the gods was portrayed as a reflection of human society. In the Sumerian period the focus was on the household (German *Haushalt* or Greek *oikos*) where the ruler and his wife were in control. There were extensive estates and relatively large businesses belonging to the wife of the city-ruler called ‘the house of the woman’. Nisaba fitted well into this picture as the goddess of writing and grain. But later it was the king alone who decided how to run the state.<sup>61</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky agrees with the view that the change occurs with the transition from small city-states to the larger nation. As a consequence the myth of the sacred marriage disappeared also.

Thus the later kings took part in a ritual that celebrated stability rather than fertility; order rather than union, monarchy rather than renewal. In such a ritual, women and goddesses could have no role other than as the mother to be deposed.<sup>62</sup>

Ištar, the goddess of love and war was an exception. She could be seen in the sky as Venus, goddess of the evening star, but also as the bearded god of the morning

<sup>61</sup> W. Sallaberger, ‘Pantheon A’, § 14, RIA X/3–4 (2004) 305–307.

<sup>62</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 76

star.<sup>63</sup> Over time Gula, the goddess of healing, became identified with her.<sup>64</sup> Gula is depicted on some boundary stones from the end of the second millennium as a well-endowed woman seated on a chair, but on cylinder seals from the first millennium she has become a slim woman standing erect (Figure 53).

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**63** W. Heimpel, 'A catalog of Near Eastern Venus deities', *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4/3 (1982) 14 f.

**64** S. Dalley, *Esther's revenge at Susa* (2007) 138 f.