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Summary Article: **INANNA**

From *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*

Inanna was the most powerful goddess of Sumeria, the ancient civilization that emerged during the fourth millennium BCE in the area of Mesopotamia that now forms part of Iraq. She was later identified with the Babylonian goddess Ishtar and the Phoenician goddess Astarte, and was worshiped throughout western Asia for over 2,000 years.

In the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, city-states began to emerge from the earlier farming cultures around 3800 BCE. One of these states was Sumeria, which formed around the city of Sumer. Worship of Inanna is evident from the beginning of the Sumerian civilization. Sumerian mythology was the foundation of the later mythologies of neighboring Assyria and Babylon and had parallels with the developing mythology of Judaism.

Changing roles

Inanna was the daughter of the moon god Nanna and his wife, Ningal. She was most often referred to as Queen of Heaven. Originally she may have been simply the goddess of the storehouse, particularly of dates—an important food source in ancient western Asia—but also of wool, meat, and grain. Her symbol was the storehouse gates, depicted as bound reed bundles. She was the wife of Dumuzi or Amaushumgalana, "the one great source of date clusters." Inanna was also the goddess of rain and thunderstorms, which provided essential grazing pasture for the Sumerians' flocks of sheep. In this aspect her husband was Dumuzi, a shepherd, who was later identified with the Babylonian Tammuz, and she was often depicted with a lion, or lion cub, whose roar resembled thunder.

Inanna evolved into an increasingly complex figure of beauty and light, darkness and death. As goddess of love, she was venerated for her happy marriage. As goddess of battle, she brought victory to the Assyrian armies. She was the goddess of the morning and evening stars (both aspects of the planet Venus), and as such formed part of a triad with her father, the moon god, and her brother Utu, the sun god. In her aspect as goddess of love and sex, her cult included sacred prostitution, and her symbol was the owl, a creature of the night.

Into the underworld

In all her aspects, Inanna's chief trait was her desire for power. Her machinations to obtain it were the driving force behind one of the most famous Sumerian myths, that of Inanna's descent to the underworld. She first gained power over much of the earthly world by getting Enki, god of wisdom, drunk. He was the holder of the *me*, the basic aspects of civilization, such as kingship, music, peace, and victory. One by one Inanna wheedled the *me* out of Enki. She then turned her covetous eyes on the underworld, which was ruled by her sister Ereshkigal. As Inanna descended into the underworld, she had to pass seven gates; at each one she had to surrender an item of clothing or jewelry until, by the time she came face to face with Ereshkigal, she was crouched and naked—the same state and position in which ancient Sumerians were buried. Ereshkigal's judges of the dead ordered Inanna to be hung on the wall on a hook as a decaying side of meat. Thus the power of death proved stronger than Inanna.

Sacred Women

Inanna's sacred prostitutes were organized in a strict hierarchy: the high priestesses, or *entu*; the *naditu*, who came from high-ranking families; the *qadishtu* (sacred women); and the *ishtaritu*, who specialized in dancing, music, and singing. The prostitutes' sexual acts symbolized the sacred marriage between the goddess and her husband, which ensured the fertility and annual renewal of the earth. Greek author Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE) reported that every Babylonian woman had to offer herself once in her life to any man who chose her in the temple of Ishtar. The man would indicate his choice by throwing a silver coin into her lap and invoking the goddess. The silver was given to the temple as a sacred offering.

However, before setting off on her journey, Inanna had told Ninshubur, her handmaiden, that if she did not return in three days, Ninshubur should take action to recover her. First Ninshubur began the ritual of public mourning. Then she went to Enlil, the god of earth, wind, and spirit, and tried to persuade him that Inanna was too precious to be lost to death. He reluctantly declined to help, on the grounds that he had no power over the underworld, and that Inanna had brought her fate upon herself. Nanna, Inanna's father, also refused to provide any assistance.

Finally, Ninshubur persuaded Enki to take action. He created two messengers, Kurgaru and Kalaturru, out of the dirt under his fingernails and sent them to the underworld. There they ingratiated themselves to Ereshkigal by accompanying her in her constant mourning for the dead. The goddess was touched by their sympathy and promised them whatever they asked; they requested the decaying side of meat hanging on the wall. Ereshkigal offered them many other desirable objects but finally had to give them the meat. They restored Inanna to her former state by throwing the grass of life over her. However, Ereshkigal only agreed to let Inanna leave the underworld if she undertook to find someone who would take her place in death. Ereshkigal ordered a number of demons to accompany Inanna to the land of the living. If she failed to fulfill the terms of the agreement, the demons were to bring her back to the underworld.

As Inanna made her way back to Uruk (the first major city in Sumeria), she encountered one mourner after another who offered to take her place, but Inanna could not bring herself to condemn any of them to death. However, when she arrived home, she discovered that her young husband, Dumuzi, far from mourning her loss, was sitting on her throne and enjoying himself immensely. In a rage, Inanna turned him over to the demons to take back to the underworld.

Dumuzi's sister Geshtinanna offered to take his place in the underworld for half the year. The time that Dumuzi, the god of sheep and spring plants, spent in the underworld was the period during which nothing grew, but when he reemerged, plants blossomed and the world sprang back to life. When the crops were harvested and the lambs grown, Dumuzi was forced to return to the underworld to await his sister's next reprieve.

Greek parallels

This myth explaining the change of seasons bears a strong resemblance to two Greek myths. In one, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, goddess of corn, is abducted by Hades, god of the underworld. Demeter mourned for her daughter so deeply that she failed to produce crops. Zeus, king of the gods,

ordered Hades to set Persephone free. He agreed but tricked Persephone into eating four pomegranate seeds. Since she had eaten in the underworld, Persephone could not leave it forever, so Zeus decided that she should spend four months of the year with Hades and the remaining eight months with Demeter.

In the second myth, Adonis, a god of vegetation and fertility, spent part of the year in the arms of Aphrodite, goddess of love, and part with Persephone in the underworld. Adonis was introduced to Greece from Cyprus or Assyria and was closely related to Dumuzi.

Fertility rituals

One of the regular major rituals in the worship of Inanna involved the annual reenactment of her marriage to Amaushumgalana-Dumuzi. The king of the city took the role of Amaushumgalana and the high priestess of Inanna took the role of the goddess. The king brought a wedding gift—the year's harvest—to the date storehouse, where the priestess opened the door to him. The couple retreated into the storehouse and closed the door. The king had to prove his sexual prowess to the goddess as a metaphor for the fertility of the land and the community. This ritual marked the beginning of the new year. The high priestess, or *entu*, was not allowed to have sex with any man other than the king, as representative of the god. She remained in this role for about 40 years.

The later cults surrounding the Phoenician Astarte and the Hebrew Ashtoreth involved a much wider use of prostitution. Women took a special vow and made themselves available for a short or long period of prostitution, not with representatives of the gods, but with worshipers. Such women were called *qedeshoth* in the Bible. In time their acts lost their religious purpose and meaning—the promotion of fertility—and degenerated into ordinary prostitution.

The World's First Named Author

Most early writings are anonymous. The earliest writer whose name is known to posterity is the high priestess of Inanna at the temple of Ur about 2250 BCE. Her name was Enheduanna, and she was the daughter of Sargon the Great, king of Ur. Archaeologists have discovered more than one hundred cuneiform clay tablets inscribed with Enheduanna's hymns. However, none of these writings is contemporary with Enheduanna herself; most date from around five centuries after her death. Another relic of the period is an alabaster disk that is thought to depict Enheduanna, in a rolled-brim headdress and flounced skirt, performing a ritual to Inanna. This artifact is now housed in the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania. Enheduanna's hymns stress Inanna's role as a war goddess, both defending her worshipers and bringing them victory in battle. She is the mistress of all gifts to humankind, from success in business to an active sex life.

Worship of Inanna

In art Inanna is usually depicted as a warrior goddess wearing a horned headdress and tiered shirt. She has wings, and weapon cases are slung over her shoulders. Her earliest symbol as goddess of the storehouse was a bundle of reeds tied in three places. Later, her symbol changed to a star or rose.

Inanna was worshiped throughout Sumer, but her main temple was located in Uruk, where she was the guardian deity of the city. The Eanna sanctuary, or House of Heaven, is the oldest preserved temple in

Uruk and the first known site of writing—archaeologists have found more than 8,000 clay tablets in the temple grounds. The temple complex includes a large ziggurat—a pyramid with outside staircases and a shrine at the top.

See also: ADONIS; ASTARTE; DEMETER; DUMUZI; ENKI; ENLIL; FERTILITY; PERSEPHONE; REBIRTH.

Further reading

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LESLIE ELLEN JONES

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