

Section 6 – Devolution of the Goddess

The Huluppu Tree

This myth reveals a shift in the balance of power between Goddess and God, reflecting that between women and men. It is probably based on an older myth but appears to have been updated during the third millennium BCE. It features a new character, Gilgamesh, who is part man and part god. Gilgamesh appears in the *Sumerian King List* during the third millennium. While we cannot be certain if this was one man or a dynasty of kings, it seems probable that his character was based on a real man. It is likely that the story sought to legitimise the mortal ruler by association with a powerful deity.

This is a well-known phenomenon that mythologists call ‘euhemerisation’, after a Greek writer who placed historical figures in contact with deities.¹

The myth discusses Inanna and her special Huluppu tree:

‘The woman tended the tree with her hand, placed it by her foot,²
Inanna tended the tree with her hand, placed it by her foot,
“When will it be a fruitful throne for me to sit on,’ she said,
“When will it be a fruitful bed for me to lie on,’ she said.
The tree grew big, its trunk bore no foliage,
In its roots the snake who knows no charm set up its nest,
In its crown the Imdugud-bird placed its young,
In its midst the maid Lilith built her house –
The always laughing, always rejoicing maid,
I, the maid Inanna, how I weep!”³
Her brother, the hero Gilgamesh,
Stood by her in this matter,
He donned armour weighing fifty minas about his waist –
Fifty minas were handled by him like thirty shekels –
His “axe of the road” –

¹ Euhemerus, also spelled Eumeros or Evemerus; (Ancient Greek: *Εὐήμερος*, Euhemerus, happy; prosperous; late 4th century BCE), was a Greek mythographer at the court of Cassander, the king of Macedon.

² This refers to the common practice, when planting a tree, of compacting the soil around the roots with one’s foot.

³ The maid Lilith and the maid Inanna are not one; other versions of the poem make this clear, as does the subsequent text of this one.

Seven talents and seven minas – he took in his hand,
At its roots he struck down the snake who knows no charm,
In its crown the Imdugud-bird took its young, climbed to the mountains,
In its midst the maid Lilith tore down her house, fled to the wastes.
The tree – he plucked at its roots, tore at its crown,
The sons of the city who accompanied him cut off its branches,
He gives it to holy Inanna for her throne,
Gives it to her for her bed.⁴

The poem associates the Huluppu Tree with the Tree of Life, an ancient concept that appears across the world and in many religions. It connects the Underworld, through its roots, with Heaven and Earth, through its branches and so represents a cyclical conception of life. The fruit of the Tree of Life conveys immortality. Its counterpart is the Tree of Knowledge, whose fruit, amongst other things, confers the wisdom and authority of rulership. Both trees are powerful Goddess objects.

The Lilith Maid is a *lilitu*, a female demon who preys upon women and new-born children. The translation ‘Lilith’ here suggests that this is the same creature as appears in Hebrew tradition, with the same characteristics.⁵ Patai describes the Lilith-Maid as having no milk in her breasts and as unable to bear children.^{6, 7}

Lilith, the dark maid and she-demon who is constantly cackling at Inanna’s plight, is the fear of all women: of childbirth, of its terrible pain and of the possibility that it may result in the death of the woman or her child. She also represents the fear of sterility, the inability to conceive. Lilith cannot have her own children, so she kills mothers and takes theirs. Childbirth is difficult, dangerous, and extremely painful for humans. At this time in history, despite the fact that women would have had their first babies when their bodies were young and supple, fear of the pain and danger must have preyed on their minds. Conquering this fear is clearly a rite of passage, a step from the world of the girl-child to the mature mother. Parturition is a moment of death and rebirth: the death of the girl and her rebirth as a mother, alongside her newborn.

⁴ Kramer, Samuel Noah. *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character*. University of Chicago Press. 1963.

⁵ In that tradition, Lilith was the first wife of Adam, created as he was, from the earth. When she refused to be subservient to him, she was cast out of Eden and replaced by Eve, who was created from his rib. Enraged, Lilith transforms into the demon.

⁶ Patai, R. *The Hebrew Goddess*. Enlarged edition. Wayne State University Press. 1990.

⁷ In a fascinating hint that these oral traditions are indeed very ancient, in the Philippines there exists a belief in shape-shifting spirits called *Aswang*. One class of these, the *mananggana*, are self-segmenting winged female horrors whose torso separates from their lower bodies at the waist, leaving the legs standing and then, trailing their intestines, they fly onto the roofs of houses where pregnant women live and suck the foetuses from their wombs by passing their long prehensile tongues through cracks. Is there here an echo of the *lilitu*?

The Imdugud-bird is a reference to the storm demon Anzu who: ‘had a lion’s head and body, huge wings, and could walk on two legs like a man. Anzu was called Imdugud, and among other things was known for being able to create whirlwinds, thunder, and sandstorms with his wings, and for stealing the tablet of destiny.’

The Imdugud-bird is an elemental force of chaos, violence and destruction, which could raise desert storms and cause the rivers to flood the land. The catastrophic flood of the Old Testament may have its origin in one that occurred in Sumer around 3500 BCE, causing huge damage and almost certainly massive loss of life, and depositing a layer of mud nearly two metres thick. The menace posed to agriculture and civilisation by untamed nature is very real.

In the roots of the tree lives a serpent, the ‘snake who knows no charm’. Its presence is another indicator that this story is a precursor to the Biblical one of Adam and Eve. It is immune to Inanna’s attempts to evict it with the force of her magic, but Gilgamesh simply strikes down the snake with his axe. This is a statement that the masculine power of force of arms is greater than the feminine power of magic. It is the clearest indicator in the text that the warrior patriarchy is now ascendant.

The snake can be interpreted as Enki, the Lord of Craft and Knowledge, who was Inanna’s greatest ally. The implication is that Gilgamesh has overwhelmed even this mighty deity. Enki may have given Inanna the *Mes*, the gift of civilization, but war could take it away. The Goddess must now depend on the military power of kings.

Snakes are associated with knowledge and with the Goddess. Through the phenomenon of shedding skin, they represent growth, transformation and rebirth, and snakes were identified with magic and shape-shifting. Snakes, along with dragons, represent the Goddess’ untamed natural forces. In earlier times, these forces were recognised as powers of the Goddess. While her other qualities may be represented by other manifestations, snakes, serpents and dragons are always the most dangerous, chaotic and destructive aspects.⁸

As a consequence of their refusal to be tamed by the power of men, snakes and the Goddess are represented within patriarchal cultures in the worst light as, again, in the Hebrew myth of the Garden of Eden.⁹

The wild and destructive elemental power of nature is as much a part of the Goddess as her ability to create. Inanna must find a way to reconcile these two parts of her own nature if her city

⁸ In a later myth-cycle the Goddess transforms into the Serpent of Chaos, which is killed by a later god-hero, Marduk, in a clear restatement of the theme here: by strength and force of arms, men rule over nature, the Goddess and women.

⁹ The original suspicion of snakes likely derived from the dangers of their venom, but mythology frequently dramatises. Interestingly, in some cultures, spiders are invested with the same qualities as snakes, probably for the same reasons.

is to prosper. In order to do this, the Goddess and the Hero must come together to form a partnership of woman and man. Just as women need men to fertilise their bodies and the land needs the sun to bring forth crops, the Goddess needs the Hero to make civilisation. Inanna cannot charm the snake – the wild and destructive force of creativity that is central to her being – but Gilgamesh, with his great axe, can smite it and bend it to his will.

Inanna's reliance on Gilgamesh to rid the Huluppu tree of the demons and her pleas for someone – some man – to 'make her a bed' indicate that, far from being a strong independent female force, she had been tamed and put under the control of a male hegemony. Or at very least, that the effort to do so was under way.

The Tree of Life is connected by its roots to the Underworld; it connects the cycles of death and life. By cutting down the tree, Gilgamesh severed that connection. Johanna Stuckey says:

'Inanna was now goddess only of the heavens and the Earth, and the cycle of life had suffered irreparable damage. The destroying of the Huluppu tree meant that human beings could no longer count on Inanna and the World Tree to maintain the cycle of life and death. Instead, they were now facing a terrifying, linear world. The old cyclical understanding of death as merely one stage in the eternal round of birth, death, and renewal, symbolized by the tree, had been replaced by a linear perception of life with death and the underworld as the end.

'The seemingly innocent poem "Inanna and the Huluppu Tree," then, constitutes an androcentric account of the reasons for Inanna's involvement in the "Sacred Marriage, both as herself and as furniture. It shows well how myth can be remade to serve ideology! A powerful goddess subject, the sacred World Tree, had, over the centuries, been reshaped into limited goddess objects, a bed and a throne, while the goddess herself was co-opted into seeing this limited role as powerful. Independent Inanna had become feminine, a woman reliant on males to get her out of trouble. The extant poem probably echoes an earlier story, one in which Inanna and the World Tree had very different roles.'¹⁰

Stuckey suggests that the story describes a point at which a cyclical understanding of the life and death cycle was replaced by a linear one. That would place much greater authority in the hands of the priestly class, who would define how a person would fare after death.

The shift in cultural practice and belief from a cyclical model of existence to a linear one could not have happened without argument, nor quickly. We know that the pace of social change in

¹⁰ Stuckey, J. "Inanna and the Huluppu Tree": *One Way of Demoting a Great Goddess*.
<http://www.matrifocus.com/LAM05/spotlight.htm>

early civilisations tended to be far slower than that to which we have become accustomed in the modern world. There would have been a period, perhaps many centuries long, where the two sides were in opposition.

In a linear model, a better after-life is possible only through approved behaviour in this one. In a patriarchal theocracy that would mean obedience to the king and his laws: spiritual and political subservience. Once again, we see the intimate relationship between belief and power. Individuals had specific roles and had to obey laws that were no longer agreed, but were imposed. Social stratification was a natural, perhaps inevitable, consequence of this.

The struggle for ultimate authority would become focussed on the spiritual and political elites who would gain temporal power. The spoils of this power were rich and tempting: there were going to be winners and losers.