

# Section 6 – Devolution of the Goddess

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## Inanna's Mythology

### Inanna's Descent

Resurrection is at the core of the most significant story about Inanna, which deals with her descent into the Underworld.<sup>1</sup> In this story, Inanna dies, becomes Ereshkigal, and then, as Ereshkigal, gives birth to herself. The story is therefore a metaphor for the cycle of the year and the passage of time, and this identifies Inanna as a 'year' goddess – in other words, the Great Goddess.

Inanna decided to enter the Underworld knowing that, at least for everyone else, there was no return from it. She girded herself with her regal clothes, her turban, her measuring rod and line, egg-shaped beads and lapis lazuli necklace, a breastplate and a wig and make-up, which are the symbols of her power, and she set off with her minister Ninsubur, who was a woman. Before entering the Underworld, Inanna carefully instructed Ninsubur to mourn with great grief for her for three days. Then she was to seek, in turn, the help of three of the gods: Enlil, Nanna and Enki. She said that only Enki would help, but Ninsubur must go to all three.

Inanna arrived at the Palace Ganzir, the entrance to the Underworld. She 'pushed aggressively' and demanded of Neti, the doorman, to let her in. Neti asked who she was and why she wanted to enter. Inanna told him that she brought news that her sister Ereshkigal's husband, the sacred Bull of Heaven had died, and she wished to honour him at the funerary rites. This is important, as it may be a reference to the ritual sacrifice of a bull, which would have been the moment when the annual ceremonies to ensure the rebirth of the year would begin; this contextualises the rest of the story.

Neti told Inanna to wait and went to tell Ereshkigal what had happened. Ereshkigal 'slapped her thigh and bit her lip'. She eventually told Neti to let Inanna enter. At each of the seven doors she had to pass through, one of her divine powers was to be removed, and when she was delivered before the throne without them, all her clothes and jewels would be taken away.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The original version is at: ETCSL translation; t.1.4.1: *Inana's Descent into the Nether World*. <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.4.1>

<sup>2</sup> This is the origin of the famous *Dance of the Seven Veils* in which a female dancer removes seven items of clothing to end up, at least in earlier times, naked.

Inanna found herself before her sister's throne, crouched and naked. Then something strange happened: she caused Ereshkigal to rise from her throne and sat there herself. The Anuna, who were the judges, looked at Inanna 'with the look of death'. She died, and her body was hung to rot on a hook on the wall.

After three days, loyal Ninsubur, who had been carrying out the rituals of grief, 'lacerating her eyes, cheeks and buttocks', set off as instructed to get help. As Inanna had predicted, the first two of the three gods she asked, Enlil and Nanna, refused to help. Her troubles were Inanna's own doing and they could not break the rules of the Underworld. Enki, however, agreed to help, showing his special relationship to the Goddess. Taking the dirt from his fingernails, he created two entities, the kur-ara and the gala-tura. To the kur-ara he gave the life-giving plant. To the gala-tura he gave the life-giving water.

Enki told them to go to the palace of the Underworld, to slip in like flies and phantoms, and there they would find Ereshkigal, lying in great distress. Enki warned the spirits that Ereshkigal would tempt them with offers of great gifts, including a river full of water, but they were to ask only for the corpse hanging on the hook and take nothing else.<sup>3</sup> Enki warned them that Ereshkigal would be reluctant, but they were to insist.

When the spirits arrive before Ereshkigal, the text tells us:

'The mother who gave birth, Ereškigala, because of her children, was lying there. Her holy shoulders were not covered by a linen cloth. Her breasts were not full like a šagan vessel Her nails were like a pickaxe upon her. The hair on her head was bunched up as if it were leeks.'<sup>4</sup>

Ereshkigal was suffering the throes of parturition and asked the spirits for help to relieve her pain.<sup>5</sup> As Enki predicted, she offered them great gifts in return, but they refused, saying they only wanted the corpse on the hook. As Enki had said she would, Ereshkigal released her sister's body. The spirits sprinkled the life-giving plant and water on it, and Inanna was reborn.

However, as she was leaving the Underworld, Inanna was seized by the Anuna, who had condemned her to death. They said that no one could leave the Underworld, and if Inanna was to break this rule, she must provide a substitute.

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<sup>3</sup> The theme of temptation established here is an important part of this and successor cultures. The underlying message emphasises the importance of loyalty and obedience.

<sup>4</sup> <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr141.htm>

<sup>5</sup> This is a metaphor for the human suffering of labour which can only be ended with the delivery of the baby into the world, or by death.

The demons of the Underworld accompanied Inanna,

‘the one in front of her, though not a minister, held a sceptre in his hand; the one behind her, though not an escort, carried a mace at his hip, while the small demons, like a reed enclosure, and the big demons, like the reeds of a fence, restrained her on all sides’<sup>6</sup>

First they came across Ninsubur, waiting outside the gate, and the demons would have taken her, but Inanna refused this, because of Ninsubur’s loyalty. Then they went to the city of Umma, where Sara threw himself at their feet. Again Inanna refused the demons, saying ‘Šara is my singer, my manicurist and my hairdresser. How could I turn him over to you?’<sup>7</sup>

So they went on to Bad-tiriba, where Lulal presented himself.<sup>8</sup> Once again, Inanna refused to let him be taken, saying that he was her loyal follower. She told the demons to proceed to the great apple tree in the plain of Kulaba. Here they found Dumuzi, draped in finery, surrounded by wealth and riches, sitting on a great throne and, apparently, not in the slightest concerned about his bride’s death.

‘(Inanna) looked at him, it was the look of death. She spoke to him, it was the speech of anger. She shouted at him, it was the shout of heavy guilt: “How much longer? Take him away.” Holy Inanna gave Dumuzi the shepherd into their hands.’<sup>9</sup>

Inanna appears to have immediately had a change of heart, for she was distraught at the death of her husband, tearing her hair and clothes. Eventually, ‘a sister’, possibly Dumuzi’s, agreed to take his place in the Underworld for six months of the year. This allowed Dumuzi to return to the world in the spring and go back to the Underworld in the fall. In this telling, Dumuzi would be married to the Queen of Heaven for half the year and the Queen of the Underworld for the other half.<sup>10</sup>

This story expresses the annual resurrection of life. Inanna, the Earth as Maiden, enters the Underworld at the end of the year. There she meets Ereshkigal, who is another aspect of herself: the Mother, the source of life, death and rebirth. Through Ereshkigal, Inanna is resurrected, born again, and rises once more to the world of the living, as the year passes its nadir and the sun begins to rise in the sky again.

The relationship between Inanna and Ereshkigal is established: they are two aspects of the same goddess. Inanna became Ereshkigal to mount her throne, and as Ereshkigal, gave (re)birth to

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<sup>6</sup> <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr141.htm>

<sup>7</sup> In some versions, Sara is described as Inanna’s son, but whether this is meant in an honorary or a literal sense is not clear.

<sup>8</sup> As with Sara, Lulal is sometimes referred to as Inanna’s son.

<sup>9</sup> <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr141.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Inanna, Ereshkigal and Dumuzi bind together life and death, and fertility and resurrection, the foundations of the culture.

herself. At the same time, Ereshkigal is Ki (Ninhursag) the Earth-Mother-Goddess, the giver and taker of all life.

The Goddess as Inanna determines when she will die, and as Ereshkigal, when she will rise again. While the Winter Solstice, the marker that determines the exact point at which the regeneration of the annual cycle happens, is a solar event, it is not the sun, typically viewed as a male deity, nor the sky that causes this to happen, but the Goddess. The Sumerians were not sun-worshippers; the sun was just the calendar they used. The Sumerians worshipped the Goddess and considered the movements of the sun, moon and stars to be under her control.

Inanna (as Ereshkigal) gives birth to herself. We do not know when the part of the story that concerns Enki was introduced, but it is probably a later overlay on an older myth in which the power of life, death and rebirth was entirely within the gift of the Goddess. This later version of the story requires the approval and assistance of a male god, Enki, for the Goddess to resurrect herself.

At this early point, male power is tentative; two male gods are powerless to help and only Enki, ever the champion of the Goddess and closest to her, can. He does not storm the Palace Ganzur with the terrible demons at his disposal, however, which must indicate that they are powerless against the Goddess. Instead, he creates two meek little beings, from the body of the Goddess herself (the earth under his fingernails) and sends them to beg Ereshkigal for Inanna's resurrection. Power remains with the Goddess.

The fact that Inanna spends three days in the Underworld is an expression of triplism. This concept derives from the three days when the sun appears to be still at the Winter Solstice, before rising again, and the three dark days of the lunar cycle.

In the conclusion to the tale, the familiar pattern of seasonality is re-established, which is what the story was probably originally meant to convey. Inanna controls her own resurrection, the cycle of the year, marked by the Solstice, as well as that of Dumuzi, the cycle of the seasons.