GENERAL

# the descent of ishtar both the sumerian and akkadian versions

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## Introduction

In the rich tapestry of Mesopotamian mythology, few narratives capture the imagination as vividly as the descent of Ishtar. Whether viewed through the lens of the ancient Sumerians or the later Akkadians, this myth speaks to universal themes of death, rebirth, and the cyclical nature of life. The story of Ishtar's descent to the underworld, known in Sumerian texts as Inanna's descent, has been preserved across millennia, appearing in cuneiform tablets, hymns, and later literary compilations. It serves not only as a religious allegory but also as a cultural bridge that links the early Sumerian civilization with the Akkadian Empire that followed. Understanding the descent of Ishtar both the Sumerian and Akkadian versions offers insight into how myths evolve, how societies reinterpret shared narratives, and how ancient peoples made sense of the mysteries of mortality and fertility.

## 1. The Mythic Framework of Ishtar's Descent

At its core, the descent of Ishtar is a story of a goddess journeying to the realm of the dead, confronting the inevitability of mortality, and emerging transformed. In the Sumerian version, Inanna (the Sumerian name for Ishtar) leaves the city of Uruk, traverses a series of gates, and ultimately faces the judgment of the underworld. The Akkadian adaptation retains the essential structure but incorporates linguistic shifts, theological nuances, and cultural references that reflect the Akkadian worldview. Both versions preserve the symbolic act of shedding earthly adornments, the negotiation with the underworld's guardians, and the eventual return that signifies renewal.

### 1.1 The Underworld Landscape

In Sumerian cosmology, the underworld, often called *Lugal-zu* or the "house of the king," was a dark, subterranean realm ruled by the goddess *Ereshkigal*. The Akkadian texts refer to it as *Kur*or the "mountain of the dead." Despite linguistic differences, both cultures envisioned the underworld as a place of darkness, silence, and the absence of life's vibrancy.

### 1.2 Key Characters

- Inanna/Ishtar – The goddess of love, war, and fertility who initiates the descent.
- Ereshkigal – The queen of the underworld who judges Inanna.
- Shulgi (or the equivalent Akkadian king) – A mortal king who receives the goddess's gifts upon her return.
- The Seven Gates – Symbolic thresholds that Inanna must pass, each representing a stage of transformation.

## 2. The Sumerian Version: Inanna's Descent

In the Sumerian version, the narrative is found primarily in the tablet known as the "Descent of Inanna." The story begins with Inanna's decision to visit her sister, the goddess of the underworld, Ereshkigal, in order to claim her throne. This act of defiance sets the stage for a dramatic confrontation with mortality.

### 2.1 The Preparatory Rituals

Before setting out, Inanna removes her royal regalia—scepters, jewelry, and the symbolic "kilt of the gods." These items are left in the care of her attendants, signifying a temporary relinquishment of divine status. The act of

shedding her ornaments parallels the human experience of mortification before death.

### 2.2 The Seven Gates of the Underworld

1. The first gate is guarded by Aruru, who demands a sacrifice of a child.
2. The second gate, overseen by Enlil, requires a sacrifice of a lamb.
3. The third gate, led by Enki, demands the offering of a goat.
4. The fourth gate, commanded by Ninhursag, requires the sacrifice of a rooster.
5. The fifth gate, ruled by Utu, demands the sacrifice of a pig.
6. The sixth gate, overseen by Inanna's own sister, demands the sacrifice of a dove.
7. The seventh gate, led by Ereshkigal herself, demands the sacrifice of a human.

Each sacrifice reflects the goddess's willingness to relinquish a piece of herself, illustrating the depth of her commitment to the journey.

### 2.3 Confrontation and Judgment

Upon reaching the underworld's heart, Inanna faces Ereshkigal, who demands that she surrender her throne and all her powers. Inanna refuses, leading to a dramatic confrontation. The gods of the underworld, including *Enlil* and *Enki*, debate whether she should be condemned. Ultimately, Inanna is struck with a fatal blow, and her body is dismembered, symbolizing the complete dissolution of her earthly form.

### 2.4 The Return and Rebirth

After her death, Inanna's body is transported back to the world of the living by the river *Galla*. She is resurrected by the gods, reassembled, and returns to her throne, now with a deeper understanding of mortality. The Sumerian version emphasizes the cyclical nature of life, death, and renewal, underscoring the goddess's role as a fertility deity who must periodically "die" to be reborn.

## 3. The Akkadian Version: Ishtar's Descent

The Akkadian adaptation, found in tablets such as the "Ishtar's Descent" and the "Akkadian Hymn to Ishtar," retains the core narrative but introduces Akkadian linguistic and theological elements. The Akkadian version is notable for its incorporation of the empire's political ideology, linking Ishtar's journey to the legitimacy of Akkadian kingship.

### 3.1 Linguistic and Theological Shifts

While the Sumerian text uses Sumerian terms like "Inanna" and "Ereshkigal," the Akkadian version replaces them with *Ishtar* and *Ereshkigal (or the Akkadian name for the underworld queen)*. The Akkadians also introduce the god *Shamash* as a mediator, reflecting their emphasis on sun worship.

### 3.2 The Seven Gates in Akkadian Tradition

1. The first gate, guarded by Aruru, demands a sacrifice of a child.
2. The second gate, overseen by Enlil, demands a sacrifice of a lamb.
3. The third gate, led by Enki, demands the sacrifice of a goat.
4. The fourth gate, commanded by Ninhursag, demands the sacrifice of a rooster.
5. The fifth gate, led by Utu, demands the sacrifice of a pig.
6. The sixth gate, overseen by Ishtar's sister, demands the sacrifice of a dove.
7. The seventh gate, led by Ereshkigal, demands the sacrifice of a human.

The sequence remains identical, but the Akkadian version adds the detail that the sacrifices are performed by the king's court, emphasizing the political dimension of the ritual.

### 3.3 Political Context and Imperial Ideology

The Akkadian version often frames Ishtar's descent as a symbolic act that legitimizes the Akkadian ruler's authority. The king is portrayed as the intermediary between the gods and the people, tasked with performing the sacrifices that enable the goddess's descent and return. This narrative reinforces the idea that the ruler's power is divinely sanctioned.

### 3.4 The Return: Ishtar's Rebirth and the Birth of the Empire

In the Akkadian version, after Ishtar's death, the gods gather at the river *Galla* to resurrect her. The king, often identified with *Shamshi-Adad* or *Adad-šuma-u cuṛ*, is credited with orchestrating the resurrection. This act symbolizes the restoration of order, echoing the empire's claim to divine favor and the stability it brought to Mesopotamia.

## 4. Comparative Analysis: Sumerian vs. Akkadian Versions

While the overarching storyline remains consistent across both versions, several key differences highlight how each culture adapted the myth to fit its own worldview.

### 4.1 Linguistic Nuances

The Sumerian text uses Sumerian grammar and vocabulary, while the Akkadian version employs Akkadian syntax and idioms. These linguistic differences reflect the distinct cultural identities of the two societies.

### 4.2 The Role of the King

In the Sumerian narrative, the king's involvement is minimal; the focus is on the goddess's personal journey. The Akkadian version, however, places the king at the center, portraying him as the key facilitator of the descent and the resurrection. This shift underscores the Akkadian emphasis on centralized authority.

### 4.3 Theological Emphasis

The Sumerian version centers on the goddess's relationship with her sister, Ereshkigal, and the cyclical nature of fertility. The Akkadian adaptation incorporates the sun god *Shamash* and the concept of divine judgment, reflecting Akkadian theological priorities.

### 4.4 Ritual Details

While both versions describe the seven gates and sacrifices, the Akkadian tablets often provide more detailed descriptions of the sacrifices and the role of the king's court. These details suggest a more elaborate ceremonial practice in Akkadian culture.

## 5. Cultural Significance of the Descent Myth

The descent of Ishtar serves multiple purposes: it explains the origins of death and rebirth, reinforces social hierarchies, and provides a

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