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Chapter 2

The Mesopotamians' Perception of Death in Metaphor

Dina Katz

'In my bedroom Death resides.'
(EG XI:245)

Introduction

The Old Babylonian myth of Atrahasis describes the creation of man from a mixture of clay¹ with the flesh and blood of the god We, who was executed for rebellion against the great gods.² His immortal divine remains were designated for the creation of a ghost, the everlasting memory of the events that led to the creation of mankind. The ghost is the quintessence of the afterlife. The efficacious divine matter also instilled in the ghost some power over the lives of his living kinsmen. During the lifetime, the divine matter is the fabric of the human spirit, the source of the human intellectual and emotional properties. The intrinsic immortality of the executed god kept the intellectual and emotional properties of the human spirit intact throughout the afterlife. The indestructible human spirit interlaces the two major existential phases into a linear sequence: life and afterlife, separated by dying, a short transitional phase. During this intermediary phase, funerary rituals put into motion the migration of the spirit from the corpse to the realm of death, where it will survive in an ethereal mode as a ghost. The transition took place in the sealed grave, hidden from human eyes. The

¹ The sources are texts and archaeological finds from Babylonia and Assyria, from mid-third to mid-first millennium BCE.

² Text editions: Wilfred G. Lambert and Alan R. Millard, *Atra-hasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); English translation: Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd edn (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2005), pp. 227–77. Style: *italics*: Akkadian words; regular: Sumerian words; capitalised regular: Sumerian logogram in Akkadian text.

funerary ritual was the prelude to the cult of the dead, the continual care for the ghost by and within his family unit.

After the last breath, the spirit escapes the human visual and audial senses. Except for visions in dreams and necromancy, there is no reciprocal communication with it. Death and beyond are mysterious and are a source of uncertainty, fears, and speculations, as noted in the editors' Introduction to this volume. The attitude towards death was conceptualised by the perilous journey of Gilgamesh to Utanapišti, the man who gained eternal life after the flood. After Gilgamesh experienced the passing of his closest friend Enkidu, the fear of death engulfed him: 'Shall I not die like Enkidu?' (GE IX:3).³ But Utanapišti could only emphasise that death is unknown: 'No one sees the face of death, no one hears the voice of death, although savage death is the one who hacks man down. [...] The abducted and the dead, how alike they are. They cannot draw the picture of death. The dead do not greet man in the land.'⁴ The subtext emphasises that man cannot oppose death, the unknown foe, but rather man should accept it. Indeed, by the end of the journey, Gilgamesh learned to accept his mortality. He acknowledged the value of routine everyday life, his own family, and community, who keep man's name alive through offspring and contribution to society. Gilgamesh is but a metaphor for the attitude of the ancient Mesopotamian to death and life.

The speculation that death was not the end of life had been actualised in burial practices long before the historical periods.⁵ The imageries of death, dying, and the netherworld are imprinted by the burial practices and the invisible mysterious reality thereafter.

The perception of death, the afterlife, and the netherworld is better conveyed in words than in images. Words are, therefore, our primary means of exploration, with emphasis on metaphors. The research material comprises of cuneiform texts of various genres, mostly literary texts, since the middle of the third millennium throughout the first millennium BC. But Mesopotamian literary texts of all genres were transmitted through scribal

³ A list of abbreviations is provided at the end of this chapter.

⁴ Andrew R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction, Critical Edition, and Cuneiform Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 697, ll. 305–07, 316–18.

⁵ Ritualised burials date from the Middle-Palaeolithic, mostly since c. 50,000 BCE. Supposedly few early examples from the caves of Qafzeh, Skhul, and Tinsmet in Israel and Shanidar in Iraq date to c. 100,000 BCE: e.g. Bernard Vandermeersch and Ofer Bar Yosef, 'The Paleolithic Burials at Qafzeh Cave, Israel', *Paleo, Revue d'archéologie préhistorique*, 30.1 (2019), pp. 264–67. For the date of Qafzeh XVII, see Erella Hovers, *The Lithic Assemblages of Qafzeh Cave*, Human Evolution Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 270. Against this early date, see Robert H. Gargett, 'Middle Palaeolithic Burial Is not a Dead Issue', *Journal of Human Evolution*, 37.1 (1999), pp. 27–90.

schools, usually resulting in some variations. Texts were updated when and where it deemed necessary.⁶ Highly poetic metaphors are rare, which seems to reflect the personal attitude and the experience of the occasional redactor. The believers perceived the fundamentally imaginary discourse as actual reality. This calls for caution regarding the definition of 'metaphor'. In the last decades the definition of metaphor was subject to a refining process. Generally speaking, according to the classical theory, metaphor is a figure of speech, novel poetic expression, distinct from literal conventional language, associated with literary figurative imagery. Contemporary metaphor theory emanated from the field of cognitive linguistics. Its proponents argue that poetic metaphorical expression is governed not by language but by thought. It is 'the way we conceptualise one mental domain in terms of another'.⁷ Indeed, a great deal of our conventional language consists of metaphor, though it is not poetic as e.g. 'dead-end street' or 'his plate is full'. Though I agree with the basic premise of the contemporary theory of metaphor, it seems to me that the classic definition of metaphor is still valid occasionally. In this essay I choose to apply both definitions in the reading of the textual sources.

The imagery of death, dying, and the netherworld consists mostly of conceptual metaphors, which probably functioned as euphemisms more than for poetic embellishment. The sources are organised according to the vocabulary that was used. Some of the ancient Mesopotamian vocabulary is in use today, e.g. 'depart', 'lie', and 'rest'. Evading explicit expression benefits the deceased, whose emotional and cognitive faculties, as they believed, remained intact. Euphemisms are privileged also by the bereaved, who were confronted with death and had to come to terms with the new reality.

Not surprisingly, the imagery is usually close to the actual reality. The eye of the mind saw what the eye of the flesh did. The written sources show that the appearances of the corpse, the image of the open or sealed grave, and the social organisation of the city-state were the raw material. The perception that the ancient Mesopotamian spun from it is a mirror image of life itself, in a remote and inaccessible place beyond the horizon.

Death and Dying

Death was universally accepted as an integral part of being human: 'When the gods created mankind, for mankind they established death, life

⁶ Authorship was usually anonymous. In very few occasions, scribes added their names to their composition, though never straightforwardly. Colophons bear the name of the copyist.

⁷ G. Lakoff, 'The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor', in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. by A. Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1993), p. 203.

they kept for themselves.⁸ One's date of death, the Babylonians believed, was determined at birth. Thus, the shadow of death accompanied man throughout lifetime, stirring emotions, mostly of fear and grief. The verbal expressions of the image of death vary from emotionally tinted metaphors to unambiguous terms.

Death

A major source for the imagery of death and netherworld are the lamentations over the young dying gods, whose death metaphorised the changing agricultural seasons. It was commemorated in seasonal cults. Until the second millennium several local incarnations of young dying gods represented various agricultural domains. The lamentations describe their death by the hand of netherworld agents and their journey to the netherworld. Since the second millennium, the images of the local dying gods merged together in the shepherd god Dumuzi. The Sumerian wails over him are usually almost literal: 'lives no more' (til 'live'), 'How you lie down, how the ewe (and) its lamb sleep' (nú 'to lie', u-ku 'to sleep'), 'who eats no more ... who drinks no more'.⁹ The poetic feeling of these laments was achieved by other rhetoric means. An exception is 'In the Steppe in the Early Grass', a long cultic lament in Sumerian and Akkadian. It commemorates the death of different dying gods; it was transmitted in writing for over 2,000 years. A short passage describes the dead in conceptual metaphors that highlight the vegetational aspect of the god. Envisioned as these trees, the god is the south Mesopotamian fauna, domesticated and wild:

My Tamarisk which will never drink water in its garden bed
Whose top formed no foliage in the steppe;
My Poplar which will never empty its canal
My Poplar torn out at its roots
My wine which will never drink water in its garden bed.¹⁰

The Akkadian *mūtu* literally means 'death'. In the epic of Gilgamesh a direct address attained metaphoric sense through personification,¹¹ objectification of death, and in the combination of 'death' with verbs as qualifiers.

⁸ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 279, iii:3–5.

⁹ Mark E. Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 2 vols (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1988), pp. 90–92.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Canonical Lamentations*, p. 691, 14–18.

¹¹ Irene Sibbing-Planholt, 'Visible Death and Audible Distress: The Personification of Death (*Mūtu*) and Associated Emotions as Inherent Conditions of Life in Akkadian Sources', in *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*, ed. by S. Hsu and J. Llop Radua (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 225–89.

Gilgamesh pictured death (*mūtu*) lurking as a thief, waiting for the right moment to snatch the person: 'The Thief has taken hold of my flesh. In my bedroom Death resides, wherever I may look there is Death.'¹² An elegy over an Assyrian woman who died in labour draws on the same image: 'Death crept stealthily into my bedroom. It brought me out of my home, separated me from my husband, and set my feet toward a territory from which I shall not return.'¹³ Old Babylonian letters employ the same image as metaphor: 'May death carry me off, away from you!' and another: 'Death, the lord of mankind, has carried his son away' (AbB 14, 25:6–7 and 83:16–18 respectively). The Assyrian king Assurbanipal (669–631 BCE) describes the premature death of his enemy, the Elmite king Urtaku: 'Death called him on a day that was not his lot' (RINAP 5, 06 v:73–78 + 07 v:17–21). In Sumerian, the verb *dab₅*, 'to seize' and 'to take away', alludes to the myth of Dumuzi's death by the agents of the netherworld. It is attested in laments over him: 'her spouse who was seized'.¹⁴ The image of Dumuzi's death was applied to Urnamma, the king of Ur, who in life has been ritually identified with Dumuzi: 'The good shepherd was caught (*dab₅*)' (ETCSL 2.4.1.1:21).

Enkidu, the dear friend of Gilgamesh, saw his own death in a dream as a monstrous young man his head like a bird of prey, with lion's paws and claws like an eagle's talons. The horrifying paws and claws symbolise the grip of death. Death turned Enkidu into a dove, which is a symbol of mourning.¹⁵ Utanapišī, who survived the flood and gained eternal life, asserts that, although man meets death regularly in daily life, it remains unknown: 'No one ever sees Death, no one sees the face of Death, no one hears the voice of Death, (although) angry Death is the one who hacks man down.'¹⁶

Personification turns death into an animated entity and reduces it to the capacity of human imagination. In personified form, man could deal intellectually with death and think up strategies to postpone it. Incantations and rituals had been used against looming death as, for example, the ritual that transferred imminent death from the terminally ill to a substitute who will die instead of him.¹⁷

¹² George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 719, 244–46.

¹³ Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, SAA 3 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989), no. 15, rev. 6–9.

¹⁴ Mark E. Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology: The Eršemma*, HUCA Suppl. 2 (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 1981), p. 73; Eršemma 97:10. Also pp. 84 (Eršemma 88:1–3) and 87 (Eršemma 165:1).

¹⁵ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 643, 168–82.

¹⁶ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 697, 304–07.

¹⁷ Dina Katz, "'His Wind Is Released' – The Emergence of the Ghost. Ritual of Passage in Mesopotamia", in *Life, Death and Coming of Age in Antiquity: Individual Rites*

Objectified, death is an attribute of Huwawa, the monster who guarded the cedar forest: ‘Huwawa, his voice is the deluge, his speech is fire, his breath is death.’¹⁸ In the standard Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh epic: ‘White cloud was turned to black, death was raining on them like mist.’¹⁹

Lot, Fate – Šimtu, Death, Dying, to Die

The Akkadian *šimtu* is a concept that denotes predetermined fate, decreed by the gods to define the essence of things.²⁰ Ultimately, *šimtu* is the mechanism that delineates and governs the world order through each and all its components: divine, human, and natural.²¹ On the human level, *šimtu* is translated as ‘predetermined fate’, ‘lot’. Configuring the essence of human life, ‘fate’ became a common expression for ‘death’ as the last moment in earthly life. The concept *šimtu* reveals that the ancient Mesopotamian mindset had been blind to coincidences. Human life from birth to death was written down in the book of the gods. Death became definitive when man entered the gates of the netherworld. This is important because supplications and incantations tend to describe the severely ill as dead. But dying is a process that the ancient Mesopotamians deemed could be stopped or reversed. At the gate of the netherworld, death was imminent but if one were still alive then his life could be saved. An incantation against evil spirits that brought a random victim to the gate of the netherworld asserts that, ‘Since Nin-geštinana the great scribe of the Arali is not there, he will not enter the foot of the “mountain”, he will not cross the path of the netherworld.’²² This assertion is, of course, a performative utterance, which means that the scribe who holds the list of spirits is not expecting a newcomer, and so the man is saved. Considering that the notion of paradise and hell is not attested in cuneiform texts, in my view, the epithet ‘judge of the dead’, given to Šamaš the god of justice, refers to this situation.²³

of Passage in the Ancient Near East and Adjacent Regions, ed. by A. Mouton et al. (Leiden: NINO, 2014), pp. 422–23. The substitute was, normally, an animal. The substitute for the Assyrian king Esarhaddon and his son Šamaš-šum-ukin was a person of the high echelon.

¹⁸ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 199, iii:110–11.

¹⁹ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 609, 135–36.

²⁰ Only by decreed fate things come into existence, concrete as well as abstract.

²¹ Mythological narratives describe ‘tablet of *šimātu* (plural)’ as the source of the actual control over the cosmos. It was held by the head of the pantheon.

²² Markham J. Geller, *Forerunners to UDUG.HUL: Sumerian Exorcistic Incantations*, FAOS 12 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1985), p. 37, 285–86.

²³ There is evidence, however, that in some (early) periods kings were deified after death, but then they ascended to heaven.

The impact of *šimtu* on human life was conceptualised aetiologically in the Old Babylonian myths of Atrahasis, which narrates the creation of humanity.²⁴ It appears that the gods did not put a limit to man's life span, which resulted in overpopulation and intolerable noise. After the deluge swept over to annihilate most of humanity, the birth goddess Nintu was appointed to decree '*šimtu*' to newborns, and thus to fix the boundaries of human life.

Akkadian *šimtu* 'fate' is a conceptual metaphor. It is attested as personified, objectified, or in combination with verbs of motion. Sumerian 'fate' (*nam*) occurs as personified in the god Namtar, whose name means 'to decree fate'.²⁵ Namtar is an agent of death and vizier of Ereshkigal, the queen of the netherworld.²⁶

Personified and objectified, *šimtu* is the subject of the verb 'to take away'. 'He who built a house saying: "this is my home, I built it and I shall rest in it, when fate will take me away, I shall sleep inside it"' (Erra IV:99–101); 'Fate took away my father' (BWL, 70:9b). 'Fate' as the object of the verb 'to go' is most common in administrative, legal, and historical texts, i.e. 'went to his fate' (*alāku ana šimti*): '(Enkidu) went to the fate of humanity'.²⁷ It is also the object of the verb 'to reach', 'to overtake', as in an answer of the oracle: 'The day of his fate (*ūm šimti*), the decreed evil end of his days, which he constantly dreads and fears, will not overtake him.'²⁸ Natural death is literally 'day of fate' (*ūm šimti*). Parallel expressions in the negative signify untimely death, usually translated as premature or unnatural death: 'not-destined day/death' (*ūm/mūt lā šimti*), and 'death by fate' and 'death by his god'. Mesopotamian scholars rationalised the apparent contradiction by arguing that the gods changed the fate of the deceased during his life. We find a salient example in the lament over the premature death of Urnamma, king of Ur (2112–2095 BCE). The goddess Inana accused the great gods of changing the king's fate (ETCSL 2.4.1.1 ll. 204–16).²⁹ Premature death is usually explained as retribution for sin, as in the case of the Assyrian king Sargon, who was killed in battle and remained unburied (SAA 3, 33).

²⁴ Text edition: Lambert and Millard, *Atra-ḥasis*; English translation: Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 227–77.

²⁵ Unlike Akkadian 'fate', the Sumerian 'nam' did not become a common metonym of 'death'.

²⁶ J. Klein, 'Namtar', in *Band 9: Nab – Nuzi, Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, ed. by E. Ebeling and B. Meissner, 15 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), ix, pp. 142–45. With this Sumerian name, he also features in Akkadian literature.

²⁷ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 279, ii:4.

²⁸ Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Oracle Questions* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), p. 4, 1:330–33.

²⁹ Urnamma was presumably killed on the battlefield.

Time

Time-based metaphors were inspired by the perception of predestined fate. These metaphors can be both positive and negative. ‘Day’ *ūmu* is an ellipsis that means ‘dying day’. ‘Appointed time’ *adannu* is the end of the lifetime, which was decided at birth and was the fulfilment of *šimtu*. Objectified as the subject of verbs of movement, ‘day’ and ‘appointed time’ convey a sense of progressive movement towards death. The Assyrian king Sargon describes the death of Daltaja, king of Ellipi, with three different expressions in one phrase: *adannu* + *kašādu*, *šimtu* + *abālu*, and *urhu* + *mūtu*: ‘The appointed time reached him (*kašādu*), fate carried him off (*abālu*), and he went the road (*urhu*) of death (*mūtu*)’ (RINAP, Sargon II, 007:117 + 2:456). An apodosis of a liver omen records a prediction for a sick man: ‘He will live until the appointed time (*adannu*), after his appointed time (*adannu*) he will die (*mūtu*)’ (CT 31, 36 r.19). In the personal name *Hadanšu-likšud*, which means ‘May he (the baby) attain the full appointed time’, the blessed baby is the subject of the verb and ‘the appointed time’ is the object. When ‘day’ and ‘appointed time’ signify premature death, they bear a negative sense. In the warning ‘before his day the curse of humanity will reach him’ (BWL 128:114), ‘day’ is the objectified subject of the verb of movement ‘to reach’ (*kašādu*).

Turn to Clay – Death as Return to the Origins

The creation of man from a lump of clay mixed with the flesh and blood of a slaughtered god lent inspiration to the expression ‘return to clay’. After the departure of the spirit to the netherworld, the lifeless corpse once again likened the original clay, and from there, the meaning ‘to die’. In the aftermath of the deluge, ‘all humanity turned into clay’.³⁰ ‘Turn to clay’ signifies the closure of life cycle, a classic metaphor. It is a conceptual metaphor, however, when expanded to non-human subject. In the mythological dialogue of Erra and Ishum, it was applied to animals: ‘He cursed the herd and turned them into clay’ (Erra IV:150). The redactor of the account of the flood in the epic of Gilgamesh went even further, using the expression to metaphorise bygone times, the antediluvian era: ‘Belet-ili, the sweet-voiced, wailed: “the old days have truly turned to clay”’.³¹

³⁰ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 711, 135.

³¹ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 711, 118–19.

The Afterlife – in the Realm of Death

‘The dead do not greet man in the land’, said Utanapišti to Gilgameš.³² The realm of death lies beyond the horizons of the human senses. After sealing the grave, the dead do not meet the living, for they are invisible and inaudible. Their whereabouts beyond the grave were subject to the imagination. The ancient Mesopotamians modelled the habitat of the dead after the only ways of life they knew, their own, though inversed in essential physical aspects. They visualised an urban community, a kingdom or city-state, governed by institutions like theirs, and yet far away from the land of the living. They conceived of a road that the spirit took from the grave, either walking or driven in a carriage, or sailed. Traditionally, the entrance to the realm of death was at the place where the sun sets, in the west.

Food offerings in the grave submit that they imagined a barren landscape, where basic necessities for survival do not exist. The grave goods correspond with the textual evidence concerning the dependence of the dead on living kinsman for food, drink, and clothes. Often grave goods also included other personal items of the deceased, such as jewellery, cosmetics, seals, weapons, and even clay tablets. The tombs of the rich contained treasures of gold, silver, and precious stones. It is very important to remark that, although the textual evidence portrays a mirror image of the living world, and although texts refer to judgement of the dead, the Mesopotamians did not envision division of the netherworld to separate the virtuous from the malevolent, the god-lover from the sinner, hell from paradise. The kingdom of the dead was a model of equality: ‘Go up on to ancient ruins and walk about, see the skulls of high and low. Who is the wicked and who is the virtuous?’³³ The textual sources do not resolve the seemingly inconsistencies. For possible explanation I look at the cult of the dead. Performing the cult at home with an icon of the deceased, while his ghost joined his ancestors in the netherworld for eternity, means that he continued his terrestrial life, though in different size and substance. The dichotomous existence in cross-temporal realities allows inclusive attitudes towards the conflicting realities.

The Afterlife – Land and Landscape

A direct line leads from life to afterlife, from actual historical reality to a mythological, imaginative one. Yet, the land of the dead was a geographical concept like any land on Earth. Whether it was also the same with regard

³² George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 697, 318.

³³ Dialogue of Pessimism, BWL, pp. 148–49, 76–78.

to the inhabitants is unknown, since the sources focus on deities, demons, and human ghosts. If they believed in an afterlife for animals, they did not write about it.³⁴

The landscape of the netherworld is characterised in a Sumerian lament over the young dying god Ningišzida. The god tries to dissuade his sister, who wants to accompany him to the netherworld. The roundabout negative style is typical of the Sumerian method of expressing void:

The river of the netherworld streams no water, no water is drunk from it,
would you still sail?
The field of the netherworld grows no grain, no flour is milled from it,
would you still sail?
The sheep of the netherworld grows no wool, no cloth is woven from him,
would you still sail?³⁵
(ETCSL 1.7.3:29–31)

Though not metaphor by any theory, playing on the domain of life necessities, the author emphasised that the netherworld is a false mirror of earthly life.

Proper names, geographical as well as personal, bear meanings that reveal something about the named. Designations of the netherworld tell much about the way it was perceived. The kingdom of death has more than one name, some of which are attested only in lexical lists and have certain hermeneutic value, such as *ammatu* (West Semitic ‘earth’, ‘ground’); *danninu* (West Semitic word referring to the sea monster crocodile).³⁶ In the following, I will focus on the standard names that were used in the extant literature.

The prevailing geographical terms for the netherworld are the logograms ‘KUR’ (mountain) and ‘KI’ (land and place). Their general sense gives away vagueness, which masks the obvious lack of concrete knowledge. As a result, we cannot know for sure whether it is a proper name, a geographical concept, a metaphor, or a metonym. The oldest known designation is the polysemic Sumerian word ‘kur’. The graphic form of the word is three open triangles, depicting a mountain range. The term encapsulates three different

³⁴ Our sources focus on issues that were of direct relevance to the people, and needed to be mentioned. Animals are referenced in allegories.

³⁵ Ningišzida was caught by the officers of the netherworld and was sailing with them to the realm of death. His sister wants to sail with him, but he tries to dissuade her. In detail: Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2003), pp. 219–20.

³⁶ Lexical lists are dictionaries of sorts. The creation of synonyms outside the living language was a field of knowledge limited to the circle of expert scholars, interested in hermeneutics and commentaries. For more appellations see Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), pp. 268–95.

geographical meanings: physical – mountain; political – land (hostile); and cosmic – netherworld. In view of the customary burial practice, the meaning ‘mountain’ is challenging.³⁷ Was it visualised as an actual mountain or was it a euphemism of an unknown origin? If it is actual, where is it? Moreover, an actual mountain implies that the netherworld did not stretch under the whole lower part of the cosmos but at a certain spot, and it entails different roads from all over Sumer as well as a variety of transportation means. Be that as it may, only the Zagros mountain range can be seen from the alluvial plain, stretching along the eastern border of Sumer (kalam) towards the north-east. An overlap would mean that the land of the dead was an actual mountain within the Zagros mountain range. Some Sumerian lamentations over young dying gods indeed describe the netherworld by visible parts of an actual mountain. These texts which transmit ancient cultic traditions suggest that in prehistorical times the Sumerians or other inhabitants of the alluvial plain believed that the netherworld was amid the Zagros mountains.³⁸ During the historical periods, ‘kur’ became a generic name of the netherworld. Its descriptions connote an underground place rather than a mountain. The Sumerian term ‘kur’ pervaded the Akkadian language as a Sumerogram, denoting merely ‘land’, *eršetu* in Akkadian.³⁹

In Akkadian texts, the term *eršetu* is the standard appellation of ‘netherworld’. This term is also a comprehensive geographical concept, both mythological and actual. *eršetu* signifies Earth (cosmic), land (polity), and ground (soil). These three meanings are also applicable to different aspects of the netherworld itself: *eršetu* is a cosmic region in binary opposition to heaven, the land of the dead, and the excavated grave. In the textual context, *eršetu* imparts a general idea of an existing place. We can at best classify it as a conceptual metaphor.

Essentially devoid of specific geographical markers, *eršetu* as meaning ‘netherworld’ is detected only in context, or when it is qualified by an adjective. Compound expressions such as ‘land of the dead’ (*eršet mītūti*) suggest that ‘land’ alone is an ellipsis. Three common compound expressions formulate the three principal geographical characteristics of the netherworld: ‘wide land’ (*eršetu rapaštu*), ‘distant land’ (*eršetu rūqtu*), and ‘deep land’ (*eršetu šaplātu*). The netherworld is a big and faraway underground

³⁷ Why ‘kur’? For the problem and a possible answer, see: Katz, *Image of the Netherworld*, pp. 105–09. It is not impossible that the forefathers of the Sumerians performed ‘sky burials’ or another provisional burial, but there is no evidence for that to date.

³⁸ Lamentations over young dying gods, who symbolised the changing seasons, Dumuzi, Damu. See Katz, *Image of the Netherworld*, pp. 63–84.

³⁹ The meanings ‘mountain’ and ‘land’ were translated *šadū* and *mātu* (respectively). Akkadian *mātu* had no cosmic or mythological aspect, as opposed to *eršetu*. In its cosmic mythological aspects, *eršetu* was written usually by the Sumerogram ‘ki’.

land. The Sumerian loanword *kigallu* (ki.gal) – ‘big place’ – imparts the same image. The qualification ‘no return’ (nu.gi₄.a/lā târi) metaphorises the very essence of death and the netherworld. It qualifies ‘kur’ in ‘kur.nu.gi₄.a’, ‘land of no return’, and the journey to the realm of death:⁴⁰ ‘journey from which there is no return’, ‘road which has no way back’.

The netherworld was also visualised in urban terms. Most common is ‘big city’ (Sumerian irigal/urugal, Akkadian *Irkallu*). The model was the Sumerian city-states, the small kingdoms that typified the political landscape of Sumer in the third millennium. The distinct image is compatible with the general geographical terms ‘land’ and ‘place’. The image of city survived in the cultic, religious, and literary traditions long after the system of city-states ceased to exist.⁴¹ It is uncertain in periods of territorial states and empires whether scribes imagined the city literally, metaphorically, or copied traditions while diligently not giving much thought to the text.

‘Big city’ is attested in poetic texts since the third millennium. An interesting example is the description of the creation of the netherworld (irigal) from the corpse of Asag, a primordial creature which threatens the world order: ‘its body shall be the netherworld’ (‘Ninurta’s exploits’ ETCSL 1.6.2:329). This aetiology imparts the perception that the netherworld is an intrinsically evil and dangerous place like the material from which it was created.

The city Kutha was the cult centre of Nergal, the king of the netherworld. Kutha is attested in some first-millennium texts as a metaphor for ‘netherworld’.⁴²

The netherworld was also described as ‘house’ in a classic episode of descent to the kingdom of death:

To the dark house, the seat of Irkalla,
To the house whose comers do not leave
To the house whose comers thirst for light
On the door and bolt lies dust

(IsD:4–11; var: GE VII:184–91; N&E:149–56)

GE adds ‘House of dust’ (GE VIII:193). All three witnesses of this poetic description treat the netherworld as a kingdom. ‘Seat of Irkalla’ metaphorises the palace of the queen of the netherworld. The Assyrian king Sennacherib

⁴⁰ STT 73:38. *harran lā târi*; ID: Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 499, 6; GE: George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 644, 186; N&E 16:151. *harrāni ša alaktaša lā tājara*.

⁴¹ The perception of urban community is invested also in descriptions of architectural details. The mythological narratives visualise entrance through seven gates, with seven gatekeepers (ID, IsD, N&E), which lead to a courtyard and palaces of the netherworld gods.

⁴² e.g. ID:40, Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 500.

speaks in his royal inscriptions of 'palace of sleep' and 'palace of repose' as metaphors for his tomb.⁴³ References to dust draw on the image of an excavated grave. Darkness is more common: 'dark house', 'dark place' (ki-kukku₂).⁴⁴ Gilgameš' fear of death and his craving for the fullness of life is accentuated by playing on the theme of light, the opposite of darkness: 'Now let my eyes look on the sun so I am sated with light, is darkness far, how much light is there? When may a dead see the rays of the sun?'⁴⁵

Arali usually signifies mostly the cosmic aspect of the netherworld in binary opposition to heaven. Originally, Arali was the steppe between the cities of Uruk and Bad-tibira where the Sumerian mythology of Dumuzi situated his death by the 'galla', the agents of the netherworld. At the beginning of the second millennium, it was mythologised and became a name of the netherworld.

The Afterlife – Location and Journey

The location of the netherworld posed no smaller a problem than the images of the place. The inability to discern mythological reality from actuality affected also the descriptions of the passage to the netherworld.

The habitat of the dead was completely separated and seemingly far from the world of the living. Where was it, which direction, and how far? The common view was that the sun god (*Šamaš*/Utu) escorts the deceased to the netherworld at sunset. Accordingly, the entrance was on the western horizon. This belief entailed a long journey from the grave to the realm of death. Metaphors of 'journey' (*harranu*) and 'road' (*urhu*) conceptualise the departure of the spirit from the grave and instil a sense of distance.⁴⁶ But although the netherworld had to be reached from any site in the land, there is little to describe the road westwards. An incantation against evil spirits asserts that a road is laid for them from the netherworld to the grave and that they walk westwards.⁴⁷ In my view, their walk westwards recapit-

⁴³ As opposed to mausoleums. See the royal burials in vaults under the palace of the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal II in Nimrud (883–824 BCE). The vaults contained stone sarcophagi of Assyrian queens and clay and bronze sarcophagi of unidentified courtiers. For a comprehensive study, see Tracy L. Spurrier, 'Finding Hama: On the Identification of a Forgotten Queen Buried in the Nimrud Tombs', *JNES*, 76.1 (2017), pp. 149–74.

⁴⁴ Place qualified by adjective. For examples, see Katz, *Image of the Netherworld*, pp. 223–25.

⁴⁵ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 277: 13–15.

⁴⁶ Chariot harnessed to oxen was found in two royal tombs in Ur; this actualises the idea of distance: C. Leonard Woolley, *Ur Excavations II. The Royal Cemetery: A Report on the Predynastic and Sargonic Graves Excavated between 1926 and 1931* (The Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1934), pls. 29–30 and 36. Some tombs contained models of boats.

⁴⁷ Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, p. 72 g., UHF: 250–52.

ulates the statement that they walk from the netherworld to the grave. The concept of a western entrance mythologises the grave and, therefore, ‘west’ simply becomes a metaphor for grave. A Sumerian lament over the young dying god describes his mother crossing the marshes eastwards towards the mountains.⁴⁸ The secret of the journey is in the funerary ritual. A performative utterance – ‘his wind is released’ – magically transferred the spirit from the corpse further into the netherworld.⁴⁹ The duration of the ritual outlines the length of the journey, which traditionally lasted seven days.

Roads were referenced when texts required it.⁵⁰ Much like ‘land’ and ‘place’, ‘journey’ and ‘road’ are attested alone as ellipsis, or qualified by ‘netherworld’, ‘death’, or ‘fate’ (*šimtu*). The road leading to the netherworld is the hinge of a multi-part parallelism in a diviner’s prayer to a healing goddess on behalf of a sick man: ‘... he is prematurely sent on his road (*urhu*) to the netherworld. The Anunaki who set the boundaries of the spirit of man carry him to the road (*uruh*) of the netherworld. His god and his goddess forgot his day and his fate, he sets off on a road (*urhu*), and departs on the journey (*harrānu*) which has no way back.’⁵¹ ‘Journey from which there is no return’ and ‘road which has no way back’ emphasise the absolute termination of life. ‘The journey of whole humanity’⁵² metaphorises the universal aspect of death. ‘Road’ (*urhu*) requires verbs of movement. Most prominent is ‘to walk’ (*alāku*). ‘Walk the road’ and ‘walk the road of death’ (literally ‘fate’, *šimtu*) is a euphemism which generates a sense of dynamic process. The verb ‘to walk’ is comparable to the modern euphemism ‘to depart’. It is attested alone as ellipsis, qualified by ‘road’, in combination with ‘fate’ (*šimtu*) and with ‘fate of humanity’ (*šimāt awilūtim*). It is also attested with the euphemism ‘departure’: ‘walked to his departure’ (*ana nammušišu*) means ‘death’.⁵³ These metaphors were indeed widely used in non-poetic texts as euphemisms rather than for literary embellishment.

Life in the alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia was made possible by the two big rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, and by a network of irrigation canals that also served as waterways. As it was in everyday reality, so also the journey to the netherworld involved crossing watercourses. Models of boats that were found in mid-third-millennium burials are

⁴⁸ Katz, *Image of the Netherworld*, pp. 19–20, 22–23. The early second-millennium versions undoubtedly hark back to an old oral tradition from early third millennium.

⁴⁹ Katz, ‘Emergence of the Ghost’, pp. 419–37.

⁵⁰ Assorted vehicles among grave goods testify to a belief in an actual road.

⁵¹ Divination. See Erica Reiner, ‘Fortune-Telling in Mesopotamia’, *JNES*, 19.1 (1960), pp. 23–35.

⁵² Katz, *Image of the Netherworld*, pp. 318–19 c., 4R 30 no. 2:30.

⁵³ CAD N/1, 235.

indisputable evidence.⁵⁴ The 'Babylonian map of the world' (sixth century BCE) shows a perfect circle of water bordering Babylonia. Beyond it we see triangles that represent mountains (*kur*), as if on the outer edge of the world.⁵⁵ This image is reminiscent of the description of Gilgameš crossing the waters of death on the last expanse of his epic journey to the immortal Utanapišti.⁵⁶ An elegy to a woman who died in labour likens her to a boat:

Why are you cast adrift like a boat in midstream,
Your crossbars broken, your tows cut; your face veiled,
You cross the river of the Inner City.⁵⁷

The mythological narrative of Enlil and Ninlil describes the journey of Enlil, the king of the gods to the netherworld. On his way, Enlil crossed the 'river of the netherworld' (*id₂-kur*), whose name is 'The man-eating river'. Since the late second millennium, scholarly texts name the river of the netherworld *Hubur*. Crossing the river into the periphery of the netherworld means death: 'Our fathers are gone, they walk the road of death (*illikū uruh mūtu*); "they crossed the river *Hubur*" is an old saying' (BWL 70:16–17). This couplet has three metaphors: 'gone', literally 'given', signifies death in parallel to 'walk the road of death', and 'cross the river *Hubur*'. Just as crossing the river means death, being pulled out of the river means being rescued through a prayer to the god of justice: 'You pull out of *Hubur* him who is caught in law suit' (BWL 128:62). The same metaphor appears in personal praise of the god Marduk: 'he pulled me out of *Hubur*' (BWL 58:7). A unique attestation as synecdoche references *hubur* in binary opposition with heaven: '(Marduk) who has explored the height of the remote heavens, who knows the depth of the wide *Hubur*'.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Woolley, *Ur Excavations* vol. II pl. 16, 19, 20, 85, i68.

⁵⁵ Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, pp. 12–22.

⁵⁶ George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 683:78ff. Two mythological narratives describe sailing to the netherworld: the lament over the dying god Ningishzida (ETCSL 1.7.3) and the god Enki sailing (perhaps on sea) to the netherworld in the introduction to Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the netherworld (ETCSL 1.8.1.4:14–28).

⁵⁷ Livingstone, *Court Poetry*, p. 37 (15:1–3). The 'inner city' describes the realm of the dead.

⁵⁸ Marduk's address to the demons, Afo 17 (1954–56):312 A, 9. The unique use of *Hubur* in the cosmic formula is particularly interesting because *Hubur* alludes to Tiamat, whom Marduk vanquished and from whose body created the world in *Enūma eliš*. The epithet *hubur* means 'din'. See CAD H, 220, s.v. *hubūru*. Usually this formula employs conventional names of the netherworld: *ki*, *arali*, *kigallu*.

Conclusions

Sightings of dead people in dreams rationalises the belief in the afterlife and the anthropomorphic image of the spirits. The belief that the ghost was created from the remains of a slaughtered god merited the dead with certain superhuman powers that determined their status as family deities and generated the cult of the dead. Although the cult of the dead was an important part of the Mesopotamian's family life, death and the afterlife do not really take a central place in the ancient Sumerian and Akkadian Mesopotamian writings. The cultic practice was routine 'family religion'; the literati were more engaged with issues of life, primarily the (poor) condition of mankind.

Speculations about the netherworld are usually embedded in mythological narratives where the focus is on deities. Human beings have no role in the mythological narratives. The netherworld was deemed actual and, in terms of the world of the living, was presumably the image of Babylonia. Unlike living conditions and needs which gods and men shared, death and dying is exclusively the lot of humanity.⁵⁹ The textual division between the divine and the human realms is comparable to the picture that the texts draw concerning the world of the living. The division is *between* the realms not within them. The gods form the ruling echelon, but the laws of the netherworld apply to all, gods and humanity alike. The general sphere beyond the boundaries of life is a gloomy reality for the divine no less than for human beings.

Apparently, the belief in the afterlife did not raise positive expectations among the Mesopotamians. Life was not a corridor for a glorious afterlife, and no one waited with anticipation for death. The deceased was left in a dark dusty grave, with food, drink, and personal belongings that mark his identity. Grave goods connote belief or hope in a sort of existence. But what can man expect from a place where the sun does not shine and nothing can grow or be produced.⁶⁰

A representational perception of the universe led the Mesopotamians to attribute death to agents of the netherworld, carriers of deadly diseases, and any evil under the sun.⁶¹ The image of these agents getting a hold of

⁵⁹ Creation myths make unavoidable exceptions. The creation of the world from primordial material in a gender-defined biological process involves the death of divine beings, like Tiamat in the creation myth of *Enūma elish*. The ghost was created from a slaughtered god. Vanquished divine beings were sent to the netherworld, although they were not killed like human beings.

⁶⁰ Compared with other religions, their pessimistic view of afterlife is intriguing.

⁶¹ Described in anthropomorphic terms in the lamentations over the young dying gods and in the incantations against evil spirits.

their victims objectified the process of death. It developed into the belief that the netherworld is the origin and habitat of evil creatures. This image grew grimmer over the periods as the number of mixed fearsome creatures increased.⁶² Iconographic representations indeed show monstrous scary beings with eagle talons. Incantations against evil spirits and prayers to appease gods illustrate this fear, while the discourse over death mainly shows acceptance. The fear of death is translated into metaphors and euphemisms, disclosing an inclination to avoid explicit statements. The spoken and written words were loaded and confrontational and deemed performative.

Figurative language seems to distance the actors from the factual and thus lessen the pain of direct confrontation with death. The personification of death was another practical means to face reality. Personification concretised death, turned it into an agency, thus into an operative target of incantations and rituals that healers manipulated to save the lives of their patients.⁶³

The perception of the netherworld becomes apparent as we examine the cult of the dead, a ritual designed to provide the deceased with food, drink, and garments. The cult entails that the landscape is barren and unproductive, and actualises the mutual dependence of the living and the dead. Hungry ancestors can be dangerous. The performance is in the hand of the family, usually the responsibility of the eldest son and heir.⁶⁴ The deceased participated in the procedure in his clay image. The ritual actualised the idea that the deceased reincorporated with his family, from whom he departed at death.⁶⁵ Thus, the cult unfolds a dichotomous existence of the dead in two different modes: as a ghost in the netherworld and as a clay image in his earthly family home.⁶⁶ Textual evidence, incantations, and rituals against evil spirits show that dead family members up to three generations were mentioned by name during the ritual. Afterwards they were mentioned as a group.

The afterlife was the continuation of life on Earth in an ethereal form and in a different place. Therefore, the imagery of afterlife had to imitate real life, adapted to the presumed ecological conditions under the ground, e.g. living in a grave. It is interesting, however, that rather than a promise

⁶² The Underworld Vision of an Assyrian prince. See Livingstone, *Court Poetry*, no. 32, rev. 2–15.

⁶³ For example, the ritual that transferred the mortal danger to a substitute. The protocol of this ritual assigns a lamb as substitute. See Katz, 'Emergence of the Ghost', pp. 422–23.

⁶⁴ Administrative texts record adoption of children for the performance of the ritual when the time comes. Very instructive are cases of adoption of girls as sons.

⁶⁵ Katz, 'Emergence of the Ghost', on the rite of passage as model.

⁶⁶ We can compare this concept to the belief that gods lived in their statues.

of a blissful afterlife, the Mesopotamians envisioned a gloomy and hollow netherworld, that their fantasy extended to the portrayal of the monstrous creatures rather than a glorious paradise.

Abbreviations

AbB	Altbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung (Leiden, 1964 ff.)
BWL	Babylonian Wisdom Literature (Lambert, <i>Babylonian Wisdom Literature</i>)
Eršemma	(Cohen, <i>Sumerian Hymnology</i>)
ETCSL	Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literatures (https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk)
FAOS	Freiburger Altorientalische Studien
GE	Gilgamesh Epic
ID	The myth of Inana's descent (ETCSL 1.4.1)
IšD	The myth of Ishtar's descent (Foster, <i>Before the Muses</i> , pp. 498–505)
N&E	The myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal (Foster, <i>Before the Muses</i> , pp. 506–24)
RINAP	Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period
SAA	State archives of Assyria
UHF	Udug-Hul Forerunners

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