PART 1

The Ancient Near East
War in Mesopotamian Culture

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War in Heaven: Nin-urta.k and Marduk

One of the best-known mythological poems is the one named after its *incipit*, “Lugal-e”. The oldest manuscripts date back to the end of the third millennium, and many more tablets have been found from the next two millennia. “Lugal-e” recounts the struggle between the warrior god Nin-urta.k, who was the son of the king of the universe, Enlil, and the demon Asag, who wanted to rule the world. Comprising over seven hundred verses, “Lugal-e” was one of the few Sumerian poems to survive from that abrupt, and not yet fully understood, change in the cultural tradition, which took place in the Kassite period.

The importance of this poem in Mesopotamian culture is not only evinced by its extensive circulation, but also by the operation the clergy of Marduk accomplished in eleventh century Babylon, when these priests incorporated elements of the Nin-urta.k myth into their own myth concerning their polyad god Marduk.1

It is worth noting that Marduk was a warrior god as well. He was the son of the demiurge god Enki.k / Ea, the god of subterranean fresh water and wisdom (which included magic and exorcisms).

Marduk had earlier assimilated the features of the exorcist god Asalluhi, who was also a son of Enki.k, and became the most important exorcist divinity. In this role, Marduk resembled Nin-urta.k, who was also an active fighter against the forces of chaos, such as the demon Asag. As a matter of fact, Asag epitomised the model for all the malefic powers, as the presence of Nin-urta.k in the healing cult of Isin, inside the temple of the healing goddess Gula, demonstrates.2

The culminating point of this operation by the priests of Marduk—a kind of ‘anointing’ to the hegemonic and unifying role Babylon was assuming in the political struggles of that period—was the composition of the poem in the Akkadian language “Enûma elîš”, “When above”, in which the clergy included


the fight between Marduk and the sea goddess Ti’amat, patterned on the clash between Nin-urta.k and Asag. In so doing, the clergy could also connect Nin-urta.k’s father Enlil to the story, in order to let this latter god offer the victorious Marduk lordship over the universe.

**Divine Order vs. Chaos: The Role of Humankind**

At the conclusion of the epic battle recounted in the poem “Lugal-e”, after Nin-urta.k had defeated his rival, he let the waters of the Tigris flow onto the plain, which would lead to the invention of agriculture. The god’s victory, therefore, not only enabled humanity to enjoy the prosperity brought about by a greater access to nutrition, but also allowed it to form a settled society, that is, as we shall see below, a city-state ruled by a king.

In “Enûma eliš”, as well, the victorious god Marduk devoted himself to arranging the universe, in a more consistent way than what Nin-urta.k accomplished in “Lugal-e”. Marduk not only created an orderly, liveable environment; he also fashioned the first man from clay mixed with the blood of the god Kingu, who was the chieftain of the monsters that formed Ti’amat’s army.

This theme stems from another tradition in which Enki.k plays a pivotal role, creating man to run the universe, thus replacing the minor gods in this role. The new creature has a divine element inherent in his constitution, since Enki.k / Ea moulded him not only with clay, but also with the blood of a murdered god.

**The Individual**

Man, therefore, is the only creature endowed with intellect, ṭēmu, “intellect, wit”, by virtue of this divine component. For this reason, the gods assigned him the task of running the universe in accordance with the divine principles. This task had earlier been assigned to the minor gods, hence it was a task for...

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gods, not for slaves. Man could replace the minor gods and as a consequence of man's partially divine status, there are some important features in the nature of this newly created being.

First of all, it must be observed that a person was individually generated at a divine level, before being generated as a creature in flesh and blood, born to its parents. The divinities from which the human being ensued were its tutelary divinities and represented the person's divine components.

This divine origin of human being is also clearly detectable in the everyday struggle of the ordinary person against the evil forces. In the celebration of the ritual “Maqlû”, to counter black magic the patient had to be transformed into a star after undergoing a trial in the presence of the gods, at which he was declared innocent and pure, while the warlock or witch who cursed him was convicted because he or she had violated the cosmic order. The aspect of the trial is of great relevance, as we shall see below.

About man’s transformation into a star, it must be kept in mind that brightness is an expression of the Divine.

After his death, a king becomes a star (see: king Šulgi (Third Dynasty of Ur, 2094–47 BC)), and while a king is alive, the sovereign and his role are compared to the sun's brightness: cf. Amar-Suena's (Third Dynasty of Ur, 2046–38 BC) title Utu-kalam-ma-ni “(god) Sun of his own country”; some 280 years later, in his famous stele of the Codex Hammurabi, Hammurabi (First Dynasty of Babylon, 1792–50 (?) BC), after restoring justice, as he had been appointed to by the gods, referred to himself as kīma Šamaš, “as the sun-god Šamaš”, and, because of this accomplishment, he became šarrum gitmālum “the perfect king”.

The Community of Persons: The City

The texts clearly describe the close relationship between agriculture, which Nin-urta.k’s victory had made possible; the city, as the seat of the temples; and kingship.

A myth\textsuperscript{10} tells how the mother goddess Nin-tur elevated humanity from its beastly condition. To achieve this goal, she had men build cities, where they could celebrate rituals either for divination (that is to say: knowledge of the divine plan) or “for the worship of the gods” (that is: contact with the Divine).

The city was conceived as the seat of divinity, and in order for both worship and divination, agriculture and construction to run smoothly, (this last activity was a kind of Stichwort for the city’s inhabitants), the gods made kingship descend from heaven.

As every Mesopotamian city was the seat and dominion of a single divinity in the pantheon, all the cities together were a reflected image of the starry sky on the earth’s surface. This distribution of cities and relative divinities across space is grounded in a profound concept, because, as I have recalled above, light is the representation of the Divine and, as Bottéro explains, in mythology it is assumed to be an expression of being. Indeed, Bottéro describes the gods as creatures with a high ontological density with respect to man, and their “brightness”, melammû, indicates their quality.\textsuperscript{11} These two concepts, Being and the Divine, are not distinct from each other in Mesopotamian thought.

One of the Sumerian terms for “star”, mul, has a second meaning as “sign”, thus offering an image for the concept that expresses “determination” or “defined form”, such as a specific constellation compared with the dark vault of the night sky.

The spreading of the Divine throughout the human world takes on the appearance of this primary determination; by the same token, as a consequence of its impulse to conform to the divine will, time and again in history the human world itself generates unifying forces designed to protect this pantheon, which I would define as “territorial” (i.e. a pantheon reflected into a larger region), from tendencies that would disintegrate it. The unification of numerous city-states, if not all of Mesopotamia, or nearly, under the rule of the dynasty of a single city, constituted the realization of a celestial order, an order made visible by the revolution of the starry vault around the polar

\textsuperscript{10} See etcsl 1.7.4 The Flood Story—Segment A 1-10; Th. Jacobsen, The Harps that Once… Sumerian Poetry i Translation (New Haven ct, Yale University, 1987) 145–6.

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axis. On a historical level, the creation of wide-ranging territorial states that included more than one city-state in their domains is a defining characteristic of ancient Mesopotamia; not surprisingly, the reason for this may be found in the mythology.

Descending from heaven, as it does, kingship represents the axis connecting heaven to earth. Through kingship the divine force is spread through the universe, which is to say through the kingdom, which was considered to be the ordered world, as opposed to chaos. Through kingship humanity operates according to the divine will and can be connected to the heaven of the gods. Rituals such as divinization of the living sovereigns or the hieros gamos, dating to the mid-third and up to the mid-second millennium, express this same necessity in different ways.

To put the world in order according to the divine model—that is to say, the divine will—is thus humanity’s chief task, one it can accomplish only under the leadership of the king, who is the intermediary with the gods.

This complex subject is beyond the scope of the present paper; further references to it may be found in the accompanying bibliography.

The struggles of the god Nin-urta.k and later the god Marduk served as a paradigm for those that exorcists daily sustained at their patients’ bedsides, against the attacking demons. War fought in the heavens was thus transferred to the world of men.12 And at the same time as on this personal level, that celestial war also determined the relationships between human communities—cities and kingdoms—but with a particular meaning.

War on Earth: Two Historic Wars

We are relatively well informed about two of the most ancient conflicts; they are the border war between the Sumerian cities-states of Umma and Lagaš and the long series of uninterrupted wars culminating in Hammurabi’s dominion over almost the totality of Mesopotamia. The former took place in the second half of the third millennium, around the twenty fourth century, the latter in the first half of the second millennium, ending with the destruction of the city of Mari by Hammurabi in 1759 BC.

The relative documentation is uneven, given that Hammurabi’s wars—only occasionally mentioned in this king’s monumental inscriptions—are described in detail in letters that the officers of the king of Mari, Zimri-Lim, who were stationed at Hammurabi’s court, sent to their sovereign to keep him abreast of diplomatic and military news. The war between Umma and Lagaš, on the other hand, is only recorded in dedicatory inscriptions.

However, the relative abundance of information is only one reason for my choice. Both the sovereigns of the First Lagaš Dynasty (among them, E’anatum, En-metena.k and Iri-kagina.k) and the First Babylon Dynasty (I will mention only Hammurabi) fight on the decision of their respective male polyad divinities, Nin-ĝirsu.k and Marduk, whose typology fully belongs to what we could call the Nin-urtu.k “paradigm”. I have earlier discussed Marduk, while Nin-ĝirsu.k was a Lagashite variant of Nin-urtu.k, albeit with slight differences.

A preliminary observation is in order. The cuneiform documentation on monuments is very often labelled as “propaganda”, as if the goal of its narrative were to impress and influence other people’s opinions. I, however, have elsewhere claimed that instead of the fossilised Latin word “propaganda” to describe the purpose of the monumental inscriptions, what should be used is its exact semantic opposite: “præservanda”.

As a matter of fact, a very limited public had access to these inscriptions, when it was allowed at all, and their intention was to preserve—“præservare”—by means of words, and in this case, the written word—the deeds the king performed in order to fulfil his role as tutor and guardian of the cosmic order, in accordance with the gods’ will. This is not the place to discuss the ontological notion conveyed by the word, which Bottéro and Michałowski studied in depth; I will simply recall that, paradoxically enough, Bottéro quoted the Latin phrase “nomina sunt essentia rerum”, with which an Ancient Mesopotamian would have perfectly agreed.

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The War between the Cities of Umma and Lagaš

At the moment twelve documents devoted to this ancient conflict are at our disposal. They consist of epigraphs of unusual shapes, engraved on a variety of materials; unfortunately, we can determine neither their original placement nor their function. In any case, their use as propaganda may be ruled out. Moreover, considering their exterior shapes (that of the Stele of the Vultures, above all) I tend to believe they served as præservanda.

The story begins with the violation of the border agreement between the two cities, a border Enlil had determined in heaven and the king of Kiš Mesalim accordingly established on earth by placing a stela on the spot. The king of Umma destroyed this stela when he trespassed the border to occupy the disputed borderlands, the Gu-edena. The role of Kiš will not be discussed here in any detail, as it probably involved a different kind of kingship.

Of the twelve texts mentioned above, two provide a thorough report of the events:

a) the “Stela of the Vultures,”

b) the “Cones of En-metena.k”.

A short synthesis of these two follows, in order to recall the most important facts.

“Stela of the Vultures”

Unfortunately in fragmentary condition, the text begins with the violations committed by Umma, to which the god Nin-ĝirsu.k reacted by generating E’anatum, whose name was imposed by the goddess Inana.k. The infant E’anatum was nursed by Nin-hursaģ.k, which explains his extraordinary height: 2.75 m (lines 40°–104°).

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18 CDLI P222399, P431075 = RIME 1.09.03.01 = FAOS 05/1, Ean 01.

19 CDLI P431117 = RIME 1.09.05.01 = FAOS 05/1 Ent 28 = cirpl Ent 28–9.

As instructed by Nin-ĝirsu.k in a dream (12I’–ff.), E’anatum started the war, and, although wounded by an arrow (153’–7’), he evidently—the relative passage is very fragmentary—continued the fight until victory. He then seized the opportunity to restore the original border, heaping high the bodies of the Ummaite warriors who had been killed, as portrayed on the stele. Before a group of divinities, the king of Umma swore by each of them that in the future his city would respect Nin-ĝirsu.k’s properties (230’–563’). In this latter section, Bauer noted particular features that recall the Sumerian epic.21 The text ends listing the favours showed E’anatum by many divinities, who granted him further conquests (564’–635’). The stela itself portrays a gigantic Nin-ĝirsu.k, dwarfing the human figures, while triumphing over the heap of fallen enemies. On the back of the stela E’anatum’s army is shown, along with what are probably funeral rituals after the battle.22

“Cones of En-metena.k”
The “Cones” di En-metena.k (together with other integrating epigraphic material) describes the origin of the border decided by the god Enlil and, on his command, traced on the ground by the king of Kiš, Mesalim (lines? 1–12). By trespassing that border, therefore, the prince of Umma violated a divine decree, and the god Nin-ĝirsu.k unleashed a war against Umma, which concluded with the heaping of the bodies of Umma’s dead warriors (13–31). En-metena.k’s uncle, E’anatum, is mentioned as the figure responsible for restoring the former border (32–68), but the new prince of Umma, Ur-Lumma, once again violated the agreement (69–88). Although En-anatum I (En-metena.k’s father, as well as E’anatum’s brother), fought in the ensuing invasion (89–94), it was En-metena.k who would win on the battlefield, erecting mounds of corpses. When Ur-lumma was killed in battle inside Umma itself, an Ummaite, Il, seized power and claimed the disputed lands, but now the gods themselves held him back, although the text does not elucidate exactly how (95–159). The text concludes by enumerating En-metena.k’s merits as a builder and the favours showered on him by the gods, before ending with a strong curse on all those who should dare to trespass the border in the future.

From this brief summary, and in light of the information provided in the other ten texts, it seems clear that the sovereigns of Umma encroached the

22 Ibidem, 460.
border more than once. One constant in the narrative is the god Nin-ĝirsu.k, the true owner of the disputed region, whose rights had been reasserted by the sovereigns of Lagaš. Despite their repeated intervention, however, their efforts would have been fruitless without the direct presence of the divine power on the battlefield.

A sacrilegious violation, therefore, triggers an event which alternates between two extremes:

A) An act of divination that shows the king which way to follow. It might not always be directly expressed, given that in the narrative pattern of the text the mere mention of the divine will suffice to indicate its existence.

B) The victorious outcome, which ends in oaths or curses, both being discursive forms capable of influencing future behaviour by means of the divine presence invoked.

Both extremes pertain to the celestial and not the human world, and for this reason, I believe, the texts do not refer to the military campaigns in any detail. This peculiar aspect seems to be the rule, considering that the most ancient document on the outcome of battles, recently edited by Steinkeller, appears to omit the very name of the king (unless it is mentioned in a lacuna), crediting the warrior Zababa, the Kiš polyad god, with each and every victory.²³

The general context of the inscriptions is so manifestly focused on the religious aspect that the descriptions of the gods’ predilection for the sovereign acquire a particular significance, culminating in the “divine birth” of E’anatum in the “Stela of the Vultures”.²⁴

To conclude the present section, I would like to underline the fact that the corpus of the texts omits those very details which most interest the majority of modern historians. The texts pass over military exploits, or political and economic records, or make just slight allusions to them, while entire sections are dedicated to describing or enumerating ritual acts, including the building of temples, or events which took place between the gods in the heavenly sphere.

All these aspects puzzle the modern researcher, whose impulse would be simply to cut away all the oracles, oaths, curses, and göttliche Abstammung, and confine himself to examining just the data that he feels he can call

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“objective”. A misleading tendency, in my opinion, and in order to discuss it further, by way of example I have chosen the conflict Umma vs. Lagaš. As a matter of fact, besides the relative wealth of inscriptions, there was another reason for my choice: this border war is the paradigm Jacobsen studied in his seminal paper “The Historian and the Sumerian Gods”, 25 where that scholar discussed this problem thoroughly.

Having examined the methodology for the study of this class of texts, the Bau- und Weihinschriften, Jacobsen adopts a middle way, dismissing the idea of being able to “to think like a man from antiquity” (as Croce suggested), but opting to suspend judgement: it is no accident that he uses the Greek term epochē, 26 which Husserl borrowed from ancient Greek philosophy and which constitutes a tenet of phenomenological thought.

The example Jacobsen discussed is precisely the Umma vs. Lagaš war examined in this paper. He interprets it, however, not as the history of a military conflict, as it is held to be today, but as a form of lengthy legal proceedings culminating in the conviction of the criminal. 27 Indeed, the polyad god of Umma, the god Šara, is never charged with any offence whatsoever, nor offended in turn; it is men who are exclusively to blame: the Umma sovereigns, whose behaviour was a violation of the cosmic order, albeit limited to a specific region.

After the conviction, the champion of the gods, Nin-ĝirsu.k, is given the task of entering the battlefield to restore order. The god operates on two levels. Besides his direct involvement, he also works indirectly, by generating sovereigns such as E’anatum or En-metena.k, who are attributed with having a divine birth.

In this regard, it should be remembered that much later, in the maqlû ritual for countering black magic, the gods were invoked to deliver judgements, and the sentence damned a witch or warlock who had violated the world order to disappear from the universe.

**Hammurabi’s Wars**

From a variety of sources covering the ten years (from 1770 to 1760 BC) of almost uninterrupted military campaigns that led Hammurabi to rule the whole of Mesopotamia, including monumental inscriptions, year names and letters reporting news to the sovereigns, we learn that divination was held

26 *Ibidem*, 149.
27 *Ibidem*, 149–150.
in very high esteem. The Ancients used it not only to seek to understand the
divine will on crucial points, but also turned to it for minor matters. They used
it in wartime to locate as yet invisible enemy troops or to learn the outcome of
a battle in advance. In civilian life divination was deemed to be documentary
evidence in law suits to regain properties or possessions.

As far as major issues are concerned, I have earlier recalled E’anatum’s incu-
bation rite in the Nin-ĝirsu.k temple, an event that would trigger off the war
against Umma. What follows is a passage from a letter to the king of Mari,
Zimri-Lîm, from one of his emissaries, who is reporting on Hammurabi’s
decisions.28

Frequent raids and looting of troops by the king of Larsa.m, Rîm-Sîn, have
exasperated Hammurabi, who tells the unnamed emissary:

Now I urged (the sun-god) Šamaš and (the polyad god) Marduk and they
answered me with «yes»; I would not have risen to this offensive without
(consulting) a god.29

Nonetheless, the most important documents for interpreting the meaning
attributed to war during Hammurabi’s reign are nonetheless the stelae, lost to
us, with the outstanding exception of one that is almost intact and kept in the
Louvre, called Codex Hammurabi. It is well known that the corpus of the 280
laws is included between a Prologus (I 1–V 25) and an Epilogus (XL 1–XLII 44).
In these two sections, the king, who had just accomplished the mission the gods
assigned him, elucidates the nature of this mission. Through the polyad god of
Babylon, Marduk, the greatest gods ordered Hammurabi to restore justice in
his reign. Indeed, the conclusive line asserts that this is the task of the king:

To make justice (mīšarum) prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and
the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to rise like the
sun-god Šamaš over all humankind, to illuminate the land (I 40–8).30

This incipit is followed by a sequence of 25 strings, each of them mention-
ing a city, its polyad divinity, the name of the main shrine and other standard

28 D. Charpin, Hammu-rabi de Babylone (Paris: PUF, 2003) 84 = D. Charpin, Archives
30 M. Roth, Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor (Atlanta GA: Society of
information. So, there are 25 units that bring together various manifestations related to one and the same cosmic force, the polyad divinity. Over these 25 cities Hammurabi, for the people’s good, \((ana\ ūr niši ūtubim\) I 49), extended his rule.

This is the list of cities added to the Babylonian kingdom after their conquest by Hammurabi, who “freed” them, in order to bring them back into the celestial order.

Just as Gilgameš, with his brightness \((me-lam)\), forced his besieger Agga to surrender by the walls of Uruk, when Hammurabi achieves his goal he also shines over the conquered cities like a beneficial sun belonging to a divine order, which recalls Bottéro’s “beings with a high ontological density”, which I mentioned earlier.\(^{31}\)

**Conclusions**

The connection between the mythological level \((Lugal-e, Enūma eliš)\) and that of the celebrative narration of military exploits \((E’anatum, En-metena.k; Hammurabi)\) can be made only if the cosmological meaning of the former is explored more fully. The safest way to do this is a comparison with analogous mythological material from corresponding narrative contexts in other cultures.

To make this comparison, I now turn to a seminal study by Ananda Coomaraswamy.

Coomaraswamy broadly outlined such a comparison, gathering material from various mythological traditions to elucidate the cosmological meanings of the Indian myth of Indra and Namuci, which strongly resembles both \(Lugal-e\) and \(Enūma eliš\).\(^{32}\) He assumed that the myth of Indra and Namuci was one of many manifestations—including the epic tale of the Round Table cycle *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—of what he described as a hidden framework common to the mythological heritage of several other cultures from around the globe. That myth therefore becomes the paradigm of the expression of concepts which are common to the majority of humanity.

\(^{31}\) J. Bottéro, *Religion…*, 38.

Elsewhere\(^{33}\) I have discussed Coomaraswamy’s study of the Mesopotamian material at length; here I will confine myself to examining those points that illuminate our understanding of the religious concepts underlying warfare.

Theme a)

A world ruler god, who intends to impose order on the universe, and whose paradigm is Indra, beheads a titan (Namuci), whose head rolls on the ground or, alternatively, becomes the sun. As a consequence of this feat, the victorious god can release the pent-up waters, which must be understood as the source of all things.\(^{34}\) In fact, the sun, which indicates the passing of days and months, is the symbol of time, which devours its own offspring. Even if no beheading is reported in either *Lugal-e* or *Enûma eliš*, it very likely appears in some as yet undocumented variation, where the solar nature of the severed head is evident, as the iconography shows.\(^{35}\)

Theme b, c)

The two contenders are not strangers to each other: they might even be brothers\(^{36}\) (theme b), or they may have been friends in the past, or the Titan may even have spontaneously offered himself as a victim to the god. I have discussed elsewhere the affinities between Asag and Nin-urta.k.\(^{37}\) Any reference to the struggle between Good and Evil is out of place, because Coomaraswamy mentions Puruša, the divine figure who, when split in half, gives rise to Heaven and Earth. The defeated god lends his body in order to form the cosmos, the parts of which are fashioned from his limbs\(^{38}\) (theme c). This latter variation is documented by the dismemberment of Ti’amat by Marduk.

Theme g and h)

Coomaraswamy further examines the topic of the bisection—such as that of Heaven and Earth—broadening his analysis to include the ‘body of death’ which Saint Paul exhorts man to cast off.\(^{39}\)

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After his victory over his enemy, Indra becomes ‘Indra the Great’ and
assumes the role that Namuci (Vṛtra) once held, before being beheaded.40
Not only does decapitation symbolize here the liberation of the sun from the
darkness; it also stands for the production of multiplicity out of One. Beings
can realise their own potential once they are “released from Varuṇa's bonds”. It
is important to observe that this realization is possible only between Heaven
and Earth, that is to say, between Time (which is started by the regular rota-
tion of the starry vault) and Space (which is expressed by the Earth's breadth)41
(theme g). With this pivotal event, the course of time and becoming is set in
motion, the symbol of which is the flowing of the waters. In figurative terms:
The sacrifice of the One in order to repopulate the ‘wasteland’42 (theme h).
Following Coomaraswamy's cosmological interpretation, if the metaphysi-
cal “transition” from Unity to Plurality by means of the “creation” of Space and
Time, and the return to Unity, constitute the universal meaning of the myth,
this meaning forms the underlying principle of the more specific interpreta-
tion that Sumerians and Babylonians assigned to war.

War, therefore, does not only enable both the restoration of a violated cos-
monic order (Lagaš vs. Umma) and the realization of the divine plan to revive
justice (mīšarum) in the country (Hammurabi), but makes the defeated, and
his mortal remains, part and parcel of the reorganization of the cosmos. Nin-
urta.k unleashes the waters of the Tigris, but, even more explicitly, Marduk
organizes the world around the carcass of Ti'amat, whom he has defeated
and killed.

This, then, is the crucial element: not just the battle in itself, but, above all,
the rituals performed upon the victorious outcome of that battle. And these
rituals take two forms.

The contraposition of two armies is not a deviation from the mythologi-
cal pattern: the former army fights on behalf of Nin-urta.k, alias Nin-ĝirsu.k /
Marduk, and the latter may consist of a multitude of beings, as documented in
the mythology.

The enemies defeated and killed by Nin-urta.k / Nin-ĝirsu.k, besides Asag,
are well known, although the respective tales are lost to us. The Enūma eliš
tells how Marduk could only confront Ti'amat after overcoming her army of eleven
monsters, led by Kingu.43

41 Ibidem, 109.
42 Ibidem, 109, fn 2.
The first ritual outcome of the battle concerns the remains of the fallen enemies. The heaps of corpses are more than just a macabre warning; they constitute the core of a religious ritual intended not only to pacify the ghosts (gidim / etemmu) of the enemies killed, but also to achieve this pacification by lifting their corpses on high, toward the heaven of the gods, as a sort of “raw material” snatched from the jaws of chaos.

Unfortunately, the passage is fragmentary, but a heap of corpses can be found in Lugal-e. The following is the description of the conclusive phase of the battle between Nin-urta.k and Asag:

“Nin-urta.k’s splendour covered the Land, he pounded the Asag like roasted barley, he . . . . . its genitals (?), he piled it up like a heap of broken bricks, he heaped it up like flour, as a potter does with coals; he piled it up like stamped earth whose mud has been dredged. The hero had achieved his heart’s desire. Nin-urta.k, the lord, the son of Enlil, . . . . . began to calm down”.44

Similarly to the act of heaping high the bodies of fallen enemies, in the erection of a ziggurat earth was lifted towards the sky (in the form of clay bricks), and the ziggurat became more and more slender towards the top, the point or the cella at which it touched the sky.

This brings us to the second ritual outcome of the battle.

Just as the defeated monster (Anzu) becomes the god’s helper in another tale from the Nin-urta.k myth,45 in the same way the defeated entered the winner’s orbit. Indeed, the oaths at the conclusion of the “Stela of the Vultures”, and likewise the erection of the copies of the stela of the Codex Hammurabi in cities across his empire, reflect the conclusion of the path taken by the vanquished lower forces, symbolically raised by the victors who had gained control over them.

Another analogy is the story of how the king of Kiš Agga became Gilgameš vassal, when the latter defeated the former by appearing in all his brightness (me-lam) on the walls of Uruk. To highlight the overwhelming significance of this episode, I recall how Achilles’ shout caused the Trojans to retreat,


when the hero appeared before them at the Achaian trench, after learning of Patroclus’ death in Book 18 of the *Iliad*. This episode clearly echoes the one in the Sumerian poem, and its borrowing through the ages and different cultures clearly demonstrates its expressive power.

Incidentally, it should be remembered that in the Lagaš inscriptions the diverting of canals is also mentioned as one of the violations perpetrated by Umma. Wu Yuhong, in fact, has put forth the theory that the mythical war between Agga of Kiš and Gilgameš of Uruk was the paradigm for real wars over access to irrigation.

The triumphant brightness of the *melammû* of Nin-urta.k in *Lugal-e*, and Gilgameš himself in *Gilgameš and Agga*, as well as Hammurabi’s solar glow (*kīma Šamaš*), after he has restored justice, are powerful images, because they express the assertion of a principle which succeeds in reintegrating the vanquished, and thus restoring the cosmic order to the wasteland.

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46 Ent. 28–9 lines 70–7.


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