NECROMANCY, FERTILITY AND THE DARK EARTH: THE USE OF RITUAL PITS IN HITTITE CULT

Billie Jean Collins
Emory University, American Schools of Oriental Research

Hittite dankuš daganzipaš, the “dark earth,” refers to the realm of the chthonic deities, the “land beneath the Earth.”¹ Thus, it may reasonably be translated “Dark Underworld,” or simply “Underworld.” Ruling this realm was the Sun Goddess of the Earth, identified in later periods with Mesopotamian Ereshkigal and Hurrian Allani (Haas 1994, 132). She is a solar deity by virtue of representing the sun’s cycle at night, after it dips below the horizon in the evening and before it rises again in the morning. Thus, rituals performed in order to communicate with her tend to occur at night, in the early morning, or the late evening.

The Sun Goddess of the Earth is also the psychopomp who transports the souls of the deceased to their new abode in the Underworld. A mythological text composed in the period of the Old Kingdom describes the voyage of the human soul to this place: “The soul is great. The soul is great. Whose soul is great? The mortal soul is great. And what road does it travel? It travels the Great Road. It travels the Invisible Road. ... A holy thing is the soul of the Sun Goddess, the soul of the Mother” (after Hoffner 1998, 34). A Hittite Death Ritual describes how the “Mother,” i.e., the Sun Goddess of the Earth,² comes for the soul of the deceased:

A patili-priest who stands on the roof of a building calls down to the house. Who(ever) the deceased (is), he keeps calling his name to those gods among whom he (the deceased) finds himself, (saying) “Where has [he] gone?” The gods answer (from) below and above, “he has gone into the šinapši-building.” ... He (the patili-priest) calls down from the roof six times. Six times [he] calls upward. The seventh time when he calls down “where has he gone?,” they answer him from above and below, “the Mother [came?]) to him [and] took him by the hand and led him away.”³

¹ Oettinger has argued that this phrase is not in fact original to Hittite, nor indeed to Greek, where it also appears, but is a loan translation from Hurrian (1989/1990, 83-98).
² For this identification see Otten in Bittel (1958, 84), Beckman (1983, 236).
³ KUB 30.28 rev. 1-12 is edited by Otten (1958, 96-97), and Beckman (1983, 236), whose translation is provided here.
Also dwelling in the Underworld were the Primordial Deities (Archi 1990, 114–29), called either by the Hittite karaileš šiuneš, or by the Akkadian Anunnaki. They are eight in number and with the Sun Goddess of the Earth, the total number of chthonic gods comes to nine. Their names vary, but in the Ritual to the Underworld Deities for Purifying a House (2), they are named as follows: Aduntarri the diviner, Zu̲kUl̲i̲k̲i̲ the dream interpretess, Irpitiga Lord of the Earth,⁴ Narā, Namšarā, Minki, Amunki, and Api. Their connection with magic is apparent in the titles they bear. Elsewhere, for example, the Ritual of Drawing Paths (1), the inhabitants of the Underworld appear to be the goddesses of birth and fate (DINGIR.MAḪMEŠ and the Gulšeš). Still elsewhere (4) the companions to the Sun Goddess of the Earth are referred to as the “Male Deities.” In all cases cited below, however, their total number, when determinable, is nine.⁵

There was no established cult for these deities. Instead, rituals directed toward them were reactive, that is, carried out in response to a specific problem. Their rituals were performed out of doors and communication achieved by means of pits dug into the ground. A number of words are used in the texts to refer to these pits: Ḥatteššar and ḫatteššar are Hittite, in fact the same word except for the interchange of the initial consonant. Hitt. wappu- is used specifically of clay pits dug along the river banks. The other frequently attested term is ḥu-pi-, for which Hoffner attempted to demonstrate a connection with Hebrew ṣōb (1967, 385–401). The Sumerogram ARAḪ “storage pit” also appears.

Semantically, these terms are for the most part interchangeable (with the possible exception of ARAḪ), however close examination confirms what Hoffner suspected based on the absence of cognates in Hittite, that ḥu-pi is a Hurrian terminus technicus and appears only in rituals that can be shown to have absorbed many Hurrian elements. The inclusion of the Pit (dApi) among the gods of Underworld (as in [2]) is not so much a testimony to its divine status in the proper sense as it is a recognition of its extra-human power to connect the realm of the gods with that of man. How we understand Hitt. dApi affects the interpretation of the necromantic episodes in Isa 8:19–23 and 1Sam 28:3–25. Hoffner’s consideration of the Hittite term in connection with Hebrew ṣōb has been criticized on linguistic grounds (see

⁴ Or “Lord of Justice”; for this understanding see Otten (1961, 146), and Archi (1990, 118 n. 14).
⁵ But see Archi (1990, 120) who refers to the canonical list of twelve found in most Hittite treaties.