HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sumeria Liturgical Chant
INANNA (3rd millennium B.C.)

The Descent of Inanna The *Descent of Inanna* is an ancient Sumerian liturgical text, discovered on shattered clay tablets in Sumer, today's Iraq. The oldest of the tablets date from the early second millennium B.C., but are presumed, from such internal evidence as their line and syntax structures, to derive from oral works created in the 3rd millennium B.C. That would make this Sumerian text older than even the Indian Vedas, which are otherwise the oldest sacred literature, and date mostly from the second millennium B.C.

Mother Goddesses Inanna herself was a mother goddess figure, and as such was venerated widely through the ancient Near East. (The worship of her as cult figure brings to mind ancient cultic worships such as those of Artemis, the ancient Cycladic mother goddess figures, Kwan Yin, The Virgin Mary or Fatima.) Many texts touch on Inanna, yet her most famous—and well preserved—appearance among us is 'documented' in the *Descent of Inanna*, which describes the passage of the goddess into the underworld, which her recently widowed sister rules; Inanna's brutal death there, as she attempts to join her sister; Inanna's rescue by earth-sent forces; her return to earth; her steps toward finding the man and woman who would henceforth share between them the challenge of spending half the year with the forces of hell and darkness, half the year in the sunlight, and whose mutual alteration would assure the continuation of the major cycle of the seasons.

Agriculture The ritual-agriculture themes of this poem abound, and we should probably avoid the word *poem* in describing the material. One might rather say, *liturgical text to be recited*, danced and sung to, and created for the purpose of promoting the agriculture sequence of the seasons, and the reliable richness of the harvest. Sympathetic magical thinking lies heavily on this kind of work, the very narration of which is conceived as a means of promoting the productivity of the land.

Challenges to understanding The modern reader of this text will face fundamental challenges of understanding. Among the challenges of understanding are the abundant use of repetition—what is its function?—and the profusion of such concepts as the *me*, or the curious presence of figures like the *galatur* or *kurgarra,* who collaborate in the operation to rescue Inanna from the underworld. We cannot easily grasp these elements of text construction, from a world whose traditions were shaped five millenia before ours. If we are comfortable with the discomfort, which such an alien discourse can bring us, we can embrace the foreignness of such a work for the violence it exercises against what, in western literary criticism, was for a while thought to be the supreme achievement of poetry, the well turned artifact, the well-wrought urn in the formula of Cleanth Brooks, during the American New Criticism. The literary historian in us may scratch his/her head, when trying to explain Inanna to his class, while the poet in us may revel in the boisterous language and provocative verbalism of this archaic jewel.

Reading

The Descent of Inanna, translated by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, in *Bedford Anthology of World Literature: The Ancient World, Beginnings-100 C.E.,* pp. 23-39.

Discussion questions

1 Inanna's husband, and the individual chosen to make the annual trip between the Underworld and the sunlit Overworld, is a farmer. What is significant about that occupation, for this ritual figure? What special

relation do you see between this ritual text and the fertile agricultural setting of Uruk, and of the rich alluvial plain of the Tigris Euphrates river valley?

2 The annihilation of Inanna, as she attempts to visit her evil sister in the Underworld, assumes what is (to us) grotesque form, when Inanna's corpse is shrunken and hung up on a nail on the wall. 'Inanna was turned into a corpse, a piece of rotting meat, and was hung from a hook on the wall.' How do you explain this treatment of Inanna, which we have to consider abusive? How would the original reader of the text have understood and interpreted the present passage?

3 Inanna herself goes through trials and tribulations in the present text, before she becomes the mother goddess again—after her dreadful trip to the underworld. How does she get out of the underworld? What kind of demons attempt to prevent her escape? Why does she so brutally beat her husband Dumuzi, when she first emerges from the underworld?