Conceptual Metaphors and Social action. Divine Sex as Political-Economic and Gender Paradigm in Ancient Mesopotamia

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[Divine love is the central theme of many ancient Mesopotamian compositions. Both Sumerian and Akkadian texts poetically describe the love and sexual relationship between gods. The object of this study is to analyse, through a gender and anthropological perspective, the metaphorical language used to describe divine love relationships, focusing on the use of images from agriculture, pastoralism, and the plant world. Such metaphors contribute to the creation and at the same time to the reinforcement of a sexual imaginary, not only divine but also human. Divine sexuality and the metaphors used to describe it become, over the millennia, paradigms for understanding and thinking about human sexuality: male power and vigour, female desire, and sexual intercourse. Moreover, these texts certainly have a ritual implication, probably linked to the celebration of the so called 'Sacred Marriage,' whose aim is the political legitimisation of the rulers. It is divine sex that guarantees not only the political but also the socio-economic regeneration of the community, renewing the alliance between the human and divine spheres.]

Keywords: divine sex, agropastoral metaphors, goddess' sexual body, sex as political paradigm, gender and sexuality construction in Mesopotamia.

1. *Introduction*

Divine love is the central theme of many Sumerian and Akkadian[1] compositions from ancient Mesopotamia. To describe divine love relationships, these texts use a metaphorical language from agriculture, pastoralism, canalization process, and plant world. Such metaphors contribute to the creation and at the same time to the reinforcement of a sexual imaginary, not only divine but also human. Divine sexuality and the metaphors used to describe it became, over the millennia, paradigms for understanding and thinking about human sexualities and genders: male power and vigour, female desire, sexual intercourse. I will consider the Sumerian divine love literature of the late 3rd-early 2nd millennium, as well as the Akkadian literary and magical-medical compositions of the 2nd and 1st millennium that have as their object not only divine love but also human one. I will show how Sumerian figurative language intended to describe divine sexuality provides a metaphorical apparatus for describing female and male, divine and human, sexuality in later millennia. In other words, it reinforces what the two medical anthropologists Nancy Scheper-

1. Sumerian is expressed in expanded spacing, Akkadian in italics.

Aula Orientalis 41/1 (2023) 109-131 (ISSN: 0212-5730)

Recibido/Received: 05/09/2022
Aceptado/Accepted: 27/02/2023

Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987: 23-28) defined as 'politic body,' referring to the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies regarding reproduction, sexuality, gender, work, etc. Mythological texts, as well as human and divine love songs and therapeutic texts (incantations and rituals) reproduce representations of the body and sexuality that conceal an invisible, highly male-oriented form of power, what Pierre Bourdieu (1979) calls 'symbolic power.' In my view, mythological texts, as well as therapeutic practices, using this metaphorical imagery, convey normative ideals of sexuality and gender and organizes them through *citational processes* (see Butler 1990), contributing to a construction and transmission of *normative ideals* of male and female sexuality, capable of performing gender subjectivation processes.

The sex of the gods not only provides gender paradigmatic models, but also has a fundamental political-economic function: it innovates through the hierogamic or theogamic relationship the political-religious power and consequently the social and economic order connected, thanks to the metaphorical imagery used, to agro-pastoral activities.

2. *Sex as ploughing*

The sexual body of the goddess, metonymically designated by her vagina, is described by referring to a series of metaphorical mappings belonging to the domain of human activities for the control of nature: agriculture, pastoralism, and canalization (Couto-Ferreira 2018a: 10). This metaphorical language used to describe the sexual relationship between the gods has a clear gender normative function that should not be underestimated. This regulatory aspect of gender concerning sexuality and the body has been investigated by Michel Foucault in his books on the history of sexuality (1963; 1969; 1971; 1976), as well as by some exponents of Queer Theories. Judith Butler (1990; 2004) makes specific reference to the works of Foucault, focusing primarily on the relationship between power/knowledge and body. While the body is a place of symbolic references established by society, the gender is one of the criteria by which society distinguishes, puts in order, subjects, and normalizes the body. The power, therefore, according to Foucault, is not limited to act on a pre-existing subject, but creates it, giving rise to a process of subjectification. Quoting Butler, *doing gender* involves a process of subjectification: subjects are subjected since they are involved in a series of interpellations that reiterate continuously and create a 'naturalization' effect of the sex/gender system. The fact that this metaphorical language of Sumerian and Akkadian mythological texts is used in ritual contexts is of great importance. Some of these compositions of divine love, at least those involving Dumuzi and Inana, are associated with the royal ritual of 'Sacred Marriage,'[2] while others in which there is a more or less explicit allusion to this language, are performed by ordinary men and women, such as the incantations for recovering lost male sexual desire or those for a barren woman. By definition, the ritual *is socially performed*, allowing a process of *doing gender* socially recognized. Although this process is continuous at all times of life, ritual practice is a privileged place, since its social and collective

2. In the Sumerian world there are two ceremonies related to the so-called 'Sacred Marriage': Dumuzi and Inana's cycle and that of the couple Ninĝirsu and Bau. It must be noted that Inana assumes during the ritual a much higher position than that of her lover Dumuzi, personified(?) by the Ur III kings. The ceremony concerning the divine couple Ninĝirsu and Bau is *strictu sensu* a theogamy. In the first millennium theogamies, the gods such as Nabû, Marduk, Šamaš, etc. seem to be the main characters, whereas the goddesses ranked second, as the spouse of the male god. On 'Sacred Marriage' see Kramer 1963; Kramer 1969a; 1969b; Cooper 1972-1975; Cooper1993; Renger 1972-1975; Reisman 1973; Frayne 1985; Matsushima 1987; Matsushima 1988; Matsushima 2014; Sweet 1994; Steinkeller 1999; Nissinen 2001; Fritz 2003, 304-341; Fritz 2008; Lapinkivi 2004; Lapinkivi 2008; Pongratz-Leisten 2008; Teppo 2008.

nature, for a modern scholar studying ancient gender subjectivation and embodiment practices (Csordas 1990).

The body of the goddesses in Sumerian sources is a domesticable body, subject to the god's control processes, similar to what happens to nature, which must be worked on by the human community to be made fertile and productive. Scholars have already pointed out that the divine female body is described through a metaphorical language derived from the agricultural landscape and activities (Lambert 1987: 31-33; Sefati 1998: 90-92; Stol 2000: 1-2; Stol 2009: 137-138; Couto-Ferreira 2017a; Couto-Ferreira 2018a; Couto-Ferreira 2018b; Zisa 2021b). In the Sumerian love songs involving the divine couple Dumuzi and Inana (late 3rd-early 2nd millennium) sexual intercourse is described using the image of a ploughing field. If ploughing metaphorically represents the coitus, the vulva of the goddess is the field to be cultivated:

> 'I am the maiden, who will plough (my vagina) (a-ba-a ur_{11}-ru-a-bi)?
> My vagina, wet field (ki-$duru_5$) and abundant in water (a ma-ra).
> I, the young Lady, who will make the ox pasture (there) (gu_4 a-ba-a bi_2-ib_2-gub-be_2)?'
> 'Young Lady, may the king plough (the vagina) for you!
> Dumuzi, may the king plough (the vagina) for you!'
> (*Dumuzi and Inana P* ii 26-30, Sefati 1998: 220-221, 226)

The divine sexual act described using agricultural metaphors is confirmed by other compositions, such as *Balbale for Inana as Nanāya*:

> Do not plough a field (a-$ša_3$ na-an-ur_{11}-ru), let me be your field.
> Farmer (mu-un-gar_3), do not seek a wet field (ki-$duru_5$),
> my precious sweet, let this be your wet place,
> ... let this be your furrow (ab-sin_2),
> ... let this be your desire!
> (*Balbale for Inana as Nanaya* (*Inana H*), version A ll. 21-26, cf. Sjöberg 1977: 16-27, 39-43)

The goddess Inana invites the farmer, the god Dumuzi, to consider her vulva as a field to be ploughed (a-$ša_3$ ur_{11}-ru), a wet field (ki-$duru_5$) and a furrow (ab-sin_2). The Sumerian term a-$ša_3$ (Akk. *eqlu*) denotes the cultivated or to be cultivated field, while the term ab-sin_2 indicates the furrow produced by the plough. As noted by M. Érica Couto-Ferreira (2017a: 61), the term ab-sin_2 (Akk. *abšinnu*, *šer'u*) will be placed in association with womb in the 1st millennium as attested by the Antagal B lexical list in the section on terms for 'mother' and 'uterus,' where the Sumerian term ab-sin_2 'furrow' is rendered with the Akkadian *šassuru* 'womb' (ll. 85-88, Cavigneaux, Güterbock and Roth 1985: 192). As the furrow produced by the plough receives the seeds by hatching them until they germinate, the female womb receives the seed of man inside it until the birth of the offspring (Sum. numun; Akk. *zēru* 'seed, offspring'). If the uterus and vulva of the woman in the 1st millennium are placed in association with the furrow, the penis of the god is defined as plough (Lambert 1982; Lambert 1987: 33; Wilcke 1987: 70 and 84 fn. 1-2; Livingstone 1991: 6; Couto-Ferreira 2017a: 61 and fn. 33). An example is given by an erotic, albeit lacunose, passage in an Akkadian composition involving the god Marduk, who states ten times 'your vagina' (*rēmīki*) and later: '[Massage[?]] my plough with oil' (ii 5, Lambert 1975: 112). In the section of the Antagal B lexical list (ll. 80-84, Cavigneaux, Güterbock and Roth 1985: 192) listing

terms concerning fatherhood, we find at line 83 $ninda_2$ = *ittu*, terms which in both Sumerian and Akkadian designate the 'seed-funnel.' The male productive function is metaphorically understood as the act of ploughing by creating furrows and inseminating the soil. Consequently, if the goddess is metaphorically described as the land to be ploughed, and the penis of the god is compared to the plough (or a part of it metonymically) ploughing the soil, the god is defined as a farmer (engar, emesal: $mu\text{-}un\text{-}gar_3$):

> He is in truth the man of my heart! He is the man of my heart!
> The man (var. brother) who has spoken to my heart!
> He who does not hoe, (yet) piles of grain ($guru_7$) are heaped up,
> (and) grain (še) is delivered regularly to the storehouse.
> A farmer ($mu\text{-}un\text{-}gar_3$), whose grain is in numerous piles,
> A shepherd (sipa), whose sheep are full of wool.
> (*Dumuzi and Inana A* ll. 49-54, Sefati 1998: 123, 125)[3]

In another passage, the goddess, looking at the greenery/flower[4] in wonder, hopes that her future husband will be able to address her with the words of a 'farmer' and a 'shepherd' (*Dumuzi and Inana F* ll. 1-4, Sefati 1998: 171-172). Since the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur (end of 3rd millennium) personified within the so-called 'Sacred Marriage' ritual the god Dumuzi, the king Šusin is referred to as 'you are our farmer who brings much grain' (*Šusin C* l. 20), while Šulgi as 'farmer, plough the field, plant a garden!' (*Šulgi Z*, rev. 6).

Another passage in the above-mentioned composition *Dumuzi and Inana P* describes the vagina of the goddess as follows:

> M[y] (vagina is an) uncultivated land (kislaḫ), placed? in the steppe,
> M[y] field of ducks ($a\text{-}ša_3$ $uz^{mušen}$), where the ducks teem;
> my high field, which is full of water (a ma-ra),
> my vagina, an open high ground (for irrigation) (du_6 $du_8\text{-}du_8\text{-}a$) and full of water.
> (*Dumuzi and Inana P* ii 22-25, Sefati 1998: 220, 224)

The Sumerian term kislaḫ, used to describe Inana's vagina, indicates 'an uncultivated and uninhabited land' (Goetze 1936; Civil 1994: 93; Couto-Ferreira 2017a: 58-60). The still uncultivated land could also allude to the virginity of the goddess, while the waters, in which the land is said to be rich, to vaginal fluids testifying to female arousal (a ma-ra esemal for a gar-ra 'to irrigate,' Civil 1994: 68). In this field full of water ducks teem ($a\text{-}ša_3$ $uz^{mušen}$). Birds are often used, particularly in Akkadian love literature of the 2nd and 1st millennium, as a euphemism for

3. See *Inana H* version A l. 22.

4. According to Ludovica Bertolini (2020: 41), here the Sumerian term girim 'greenery, flower' refers to the god Dumuzi. I consider it, on the contrary, as a part of that poetic-erotic vegetal language expressed by female voices. In the following lines, in fact, the goddess states that she wants to run to the girim and lie down on it (ll. 5-6, cf. Bertolini 2020: 41), where girim can refer to the bed. On the bed in the temple cell where the amorous encounter will take place as covered with herbs or flowers see Bertolini 2020: 42-43. According to the scholar (2020: 46-47), some references to the gardens expressed by the goddess Inana allude instead to her lover Dumuzi: *DI B* ll. 28-29; *DI F* ll. 10-16; *DI Q* ll. 7-9, 13-15, 19-21.

the penis.[5] The goddess thus awaits her bridegroom Dumuzi for nuptial intercourse, expressed metaphorically by the practice of ploughing. As Couto-Ferreira (2017a: 53) states, the term kislaḫ can also designate the threshing floor.[6] The mention of the threshing floor in this passage would contribute to another metaphorical association, that between sexual intercourse and the act of threshing: threshing the grain on the ground and its repetitive rhythmic movements could thus be equated with sexual intercourse. Other terms qualify the body of the goddess: du_6, which not only indicates a hill, in the text qualified as open (du_8), but may also refer, particularly in the amorous compositions, to the processes of irrigation (Couto-Ferreira 2017a: 62).

In an Akkadian incantation for a barren woman, the agricultural ability of a god is invoked so that he can make the woman fertile by ploughing:

> God […] cultivated the field,
> the barren woman makes the seed sprout.
> Let (the seed) be put into the furrow.
> Let her shape the offspring (or = the seed)!
> (No. 4001 ll. 8-11 // BM 51246 obv. 8-9, Steinert 2017: 317-318)

Metaphors taken from the agricultural world to qualify the genital organs of the goddess are present in the Akkadian love literature of the 2nd and 1st millennium, where the protagonists are not only divine entities but also human beings. In an Old Babylonian love text, the lover defines the goddess as a 'field of salt,' underlining the unproductivity of love, while later in the text he apostrophises her by saying that 'her field is all too well known,' a clear reference to the woman's amorous activities with other men:

> (You (fem.) are) like a field of salt (*eqel idrānim*),
> (can I) be happy with all this?
> I was happy with the fruit (*inbam*),
> (can I) be happy with all this.
>
> Your field is all too well known (*eqelki ḫukkum*)!
> (CUSAS 10:10 ll. 28-31, 39, Wasserman 2016: 95-98)

As the god in Sumerian sources is referred to as a 'farmer,' the man (or god) in a 2nd millennium love song celebrating the goddess Ištar is 'the one who *makes* the field *bloom*' (CUSAS 10:13 l. 8, Wasserman 2016: 101). The *Moussaieff Love Song* takes up the same imagery from the Sumerian mythological tradition. In the following passage the god, referring to the lover's

5. Note the use of animal names to refer to male sexual organs in Akkadian divine and human love compositions (Wasserman 2016: 40-42). Among the animals used to designate the penis, we find birds, as in the case of an *irtum*-song in which the male organ is euphemistically called 'dove': 'I have thrown my cage on the young man, / whom I know, [may I] catch the dove; / (the birdcage) of my delights Nanāya[?] will fill for m[e]' (16056 MAH ll. 16-20, Wasserman 2016: 105).

6. Note that the threshing floor is mentioned as one of the places, together with the garden, where the ritual of the 'Sacred Marriage' between Nabû and Tašmētu took place in the 1st millennium. According to Nabû-šumu-iddina, on the 11th day, the god Nabû comes out from the bed chamber to the 'threshing floor' (*adru*) of the palace and from there to the garden (*kirû*): 'The god will set out from the threshing floor of the palace. From the threshing floor of the palace, he will come to the garden. There a sacrifice will be performed' (Cole and Machinist 1998, 70, No. 78 ll. 15-19).

pudenda, mentions agricultural activities and meadows: ‘The field is ploughed for you. You know its size; it is ploughed early for you; (you know) its meadows’ (r. 8-9, Wasserman 2016: 141-145).

3. *Lettuces, Fruits, and Gardens*

If the goddess/woman, or rather her vagina, is the cultivable field or the furrow, the god/man is the farmer and his penis is the inseminating plough, and thus sexual intercourse is represented as the act of ploughing. In Mesopotamian imagery, the goddess is also described by reference to the vegetable and floral world. She is the field to be ordered and at the same time the product of this work. For example, Inana is described as adorned with wheat:

> [M]aiden, variegated like piles of grain (še-zar-maš-gin$_7$ gun$_3$-/a\), fit for the king;
> Inana, variegated like piles of grain, fit for Dumuzi;
> Maiden, you are shocks of barley/naked emmer (še-zar gu$_2$-nida$^?$-a), abounding in charms,
> Inana, you are shocks of barley/naked emmer, abounding in charm.
> (*Dumuzi and Inana R*, version A ll. 5-8, Sefati 1998: 236)

In *Dumuzi and Inana B* (l. 3) the goddess is referred to as a ‘wet vine’ (ĝeštin duru$_5$), while in other compositions her vulva is referred to as a well-watered lettuce. An example is taken from the text *Balbale to Inana for King Šu-Suen* (*Šu-Suen C*):

> My wool (= pubic hair/hair) is a lettuce (siki-ĝu$_{10}$ ḫi-izsar-am$_3$), he will wa[ter] it (a im-/ma\-[an-dug$_4$]).
> It is the shoot of a lettuce (ḫi-iz gakkul$_3^{sar}$-am$_3$), he will water it.
>
> My charm, my (pubic) hairs, lettuce is the most beautiful of plants.
> (*Šu-Suen C* ll. 1-2, 8, Sefati 1998: 360-364)

In the lacunose text, which is difficult to translate, the preparations of the goddess before the arrival of the god for the wedding are described: the wet nurse combs and cares for the goddess’s hair/pubic hair on the model of a stag. According to Thorkild Jacobsen (1987: 94), ‘wool’ and lettuce refer to pubic hair, while watering the lettuce is a metaphor for sexual intercourse. The text continues with an invitation to the god, described as a ‘farmer who brings a lot of grain’ to enter and approach the goddess.[7]

Another text that mentions lettuce is *The Song of Lettuce: A Balbale for Inana* (*Dumuzi and Inana E*):

7. It must be noted that the trees can be associated with male figures. The rulers of Ur III and of Isin and Larsa are identified not only with the mes-tree and the juniper (eren), but also with the poplar (ildag) and the date palm (ĝišninbar). These trees, when metaphors for rulers, indicate their greatness, strength and unbeatability (while the vegetal and agricultural metaphors associated with the goddesses emphasise their sensuality and desire). See Sefati 1998: 86, 89-90; Bertolini 2020: 48-53; Verderame 2020: 22-26.

It sprouts, it blooms, it is a lettuce that he waters (ḫi-iz^{sar}-am$_3$ to ba-an-dug$_4$),
in the shady garden of the desert, bending his neck, is a lettuce that he waters,
my grain in the furrow (še ab-sin$_2$-ba), full of charm, is a lettuce that he waters;
my apple tree of first quality, bearing fruit, is a lettuce that he waters.
(*Dumuzi and Inana E* ll. 1-4, Sefati 1998: 165-170)

According to some scholars, the first lines of this composition uttered by Inana describe the god Dumuzi (Sefati 1998: 167). However, this identification is uncertain. Sumerian does not make a gender distinction between male and female, which means that this passage may refer to Inana and not to Dumuzi precisely because of the use of plant imagery, and in particular of the well-watered lettuce. The image of Dumuzi watering the lettuce fits well into the imagery, as we will see, in which it is up to the god to fill or pour water, understood in a sexual perspective. The act of watering by the god, in fact, allows the development of the seed planted in the body of the goddess (Wilcke 1975: 302; Jacobsen 1987: 94; Leick 1994: 122-123). The goddess, not incidentally, speaks of 'my grain in the furrow,' the metaphorical implications of which I have discussed above.

The text is set in the shady garden of the desert (^{ĝiš}kiri$_6$ ĝi$_6$-edin-na). In Sumerian mythological literature, the garden is the place designated for divine love affairs. The events of divine love take place, in fact, not only in the stable, but also in the meadows, near the rivers, in the gardens: 'I, the Lady (= Inana), let me go, let me go in the garden! In the garden the man of my heart dwells' (l. 4, Alster 1992: 46-47) The orchard (Sum. ^{ĝiš}kiri$_6$, Akk. *kirû*) is the place of sexual attraction, of erotic desire and pleasure.[8] In *Gudea's Cylinder B* the bride of the god Ninĝirsu, Baba, is compared to a beautiful fruit-bearing garden: 'She, the Lady, daughter of the holy An, was (like) a beautiful fruit-bearing garden' (v 15, Sefati 1998: 34, fn. 14). The garden is in Sumerian and Akkadian love literature, both divine and human, declined in the feminine. In most cases the orchard/garden is described by female voices, where the god or man is referred to as 'gardener.'[9] See, for example, in Old Babylonian love songs, as well as in first-millennium poems, the *topos* of 'going down to the garden' (*ana kīrim arādu*, Westenholz and Westenholz 1977: 212-113; Leick 1994: 191). This image of the orchard and garden is employed in compositions where the protagonists are the gods. The first example features the goddess Nanāya:

'She seeks your ripe garden of pleasures.'

'He who descends into the garden, O king, the cedar cutter.'

'Oh chief gardener of the date-palm garden, garden of delights.'

'Rejoice Nanāya in the garden of Ebabbar whom you love.'
(KAR 158 vii 26′, 28′, 35′, 38′, Wasserman 2016: 214)

In another Old Babylonian composition, the goddess invites her lover to 'make her beautiful' and 'make her greatly prosper,' who euphemistically asks her to show him 'the almond garden':

8. See Lambert 1987: 28-31; Leick 1994: 122-123; Paul 1997: 100; Paul: 2002: 492, Streck 1999: 218; Besnier 2002; Leick 2000; Couto-Ferreira 2013: 110-111; Rendu Loisel 2013; Bertolini 2020; Zisa 2021b.

9. See for example the composition *Enki and Ninḫursaĝa*, where the god defines himself as follows: 'I am the gardener. I bring cucumbers, apples and [grapes] for your (= Uttu's) *pleasure*' (l. 171).

(She[?]:) '[Make me beautiful! Make me greatly prosper! Make me happy!' (He[?]:) 'Show me the almond tree garden!'

(She:) 'A word of greeting (is) the cackling of the ducks. (As) the garden – its fruit, the field – its grain, (so) he made me grow.'
(*Moussaieff Love Song* r. 2, 5, Wasserman 2016: 133-134)

The composition picks up on a series of metaphorical expressions typical of the literature of divine love. The mention of the cackling of ducks recalls the passage in *Dumuzi and Inana P* ii 23 in which the goddess Inana calls her vulva the place where the ducks swarm. It also takes up agricultural and vegetal metaphors: the field and its grain, the garden, and its fruits which the god, as farmer and gardener, 'has made grow.'

In a late Assyrian divine love poem, *Nabû and Tašmētu* whose ritual performance we know,[10] the garden[11] is the place for the voluptuous encounter:

(Tašmētu:) '[Nabû], my lord, listen to me.
Let me give you pleasure in the garden.'

(Nabû:) 'For what, for what are you adorned, my Tašmētu?'
(Tašmētu:) 'So I can [go] into the garden with you, my Nabû.
Let me go to the garden, to the garden and [...].
Let me go alone in the beautiful garden.'
(TIM 9 54 ll. 13-14, r. 15-18, Livingstone 1989: 36-37)

In another composition it is stated that Marduk's paredra, Zarpānītu, goes to the garden to meet her spouse: 'As I [descended] into the garden of your(fem.) love. / Zarpānītu will descend into the garden' (BM 41005 obv. II 9, 13, Lambert 1975: 104). The orchard also becomes the site of human lovers' love encounters:

You, oh two beautiful girls,
are blooming!
Come down into the garden,
Come down into the garden.
(MAD 5:8 ll. 6-9, Wasserman 2016: 242, also l. 17)

In Sumerian divine love literature, the shade produced by the trees in the garden is part of the erotic imagery. See, for example, in the myth *Inana and Šukaletuda* (Volk 1995), the goddess, tired from her journey, falls asleep under the shade produced by the only tree in Šukaletuda's garden, a large poplar (ásal). The gardener Šukaletuda notices the presence of the goddess in his own

10. The Neo-Assyrian rite of Nabû and Tašmētu takes place in the city of Kalḫu and involves processions of the statues of the deities to their dwelling, in the bedroom located in the inner parts of the temple. After a sacrificial meal Nabû and probably also Tašmētu leave the bedroom and move to a garden (Nissinen 2001: 97-99). On the relationship between text and ritual see Matsushima 2014: 9.

11. See in the same text also r. 22-23 (Livingstone 1989: 36). See also *Banitu and Her Consort* (STT 366 l. 1, Deller 1983: 4-5).

garden, and while Inana sleeps, he sexually abuses her. As Lorenzo Verderame (2020: 36) points out, coolness is a metaphor for sexual gratification. In the cycle of Dumuzi and Inana, the god is defined as 'the one who refreshes (šed$_7$)' (*Dumuzi and Inana T* l. 1, Sefati 1998: 247), while in another text the goddess, anxious to meet her future husband, associates him with the 'poplar, the place of coolness (^{ĝiš}asá 1-(e) ki-šed$_{7/11}$)' (*Dumuzi and Inana R* A l. 24 // C l. 12′, Sefati 1998: 236-237). In the love literature of the 2nd and 1st millennium in Akkadian, too, the shade produced by the trees in the garden, such as cedar, cypress, and juniper, is charged with sexual values, see for example the poem *Nabû and Tešmētu* (ll. 9-11, Livingstone 1989: 35).

It is no coincidence that a relief by the king Assurbanipal in the Northern Palace at Nineveh depicts the king and queen feasting within a garden, the erotic valences of which have been highlighted by scholars (Albenda 1976: 61, 67; Collins 2004: 2-3; Gansell 2013: 410). An example of the use of the orchard in non-divine contexts and not related to love compositions is taken from a *nīš libbi* incantation for the loss of sexual desire: 'Incantation: May the wind blow! May the grove quake! / May the cloud gather! May the moisture fall!' (*nīš libbi* text No. A.1. ll. 33-34, Zisa 2021a: 239-240). The mention of the orchard and the rain lead us back to the sexual sphere and pleasure. The metaphors of the orchard refer to the female sphere and describe women's sexuality, whilst metaphors drawn from the weather, such as wind and rain, describe male sexuality. Wind (*šāru*) and penis (*ušāru*) in Akkadian, in fact, share the same consonantal roots (Helle 2020; Zisa 2021a: 147; Zisa forthcoming). The wind that shakes the orchard is a clear allusion to male sexual potency. It is perhaps possible to see a reference to sexual intercourse in which the woman (represented by the orchard) is subjected to extreme male sexual vigour.

Fruit (*inbu*) is also declined in the feminine in both Sumerian and Akkadian literature (Pientka-Hinz 2002: 510-513). An Old Babylonian hymn, which mentions the king Ammi-ditana, praises the goddess Ištar with the following words: 'The goddess of joy, dressed in love, / adorned with fruit (*inbu*), cosmetics and sensual charm' (Thureau-Dangin 1925: 170, ll. 5-6 = 7-8). In a 1st millennium love incantation to make a woman fall in love, Ištar is described as a 'lover of apples and pomegranates' (KAR 61 l. 2, Biggs 1967: 70).[12] Even ordinary women in later literature are defined as having 'fruit' (*inbu*), i.e. sexual attraction: 'Like a fruit of the garden come forth upon him' (VS 17, 23: 3, Wasserman 2016: 249). In *Maqlû*, the witch is depicted as a threat not only to the young man's vitality and virility, but also to the young woman's attraction-fruit (*inbu*) and sexual allure (*kuzbu*):

> She (= the witch) is the one who has deprived the refined young man of his virility,
> took away the refined young woman's attraction,
> with her malevolent gaze she took her charm.
> She has looked at the young man and deprived him of his vitality,
> she has looked at the young woman and taken away her attraction.
> (*Maqlû* III 8-12, Abusch 2016: 82-83)

The male sexual organs are called 'fruit' (*inbu*) in the 1st millennium Akkadian compositions in which the goddess invites her lover to join her. It should be noted that the term fruit defines the penis of the god because it is the goddess who speaks. This is an all-female erotic language. In the

12. The ritual consists of reciting the incantation on the apple or pomegranate three times and giving it to the woman so that she sucks its juice.

late Assyrian divine love poem, *Nabû and Tašmētu*, the goddess addresses the following words to her consort: 'Let my eyes see the picking of thy fruits, / May my ears hear the twittering of your birds (TIM 9 54 r. 20-21, Livingstone 1989: 35-37); while in the *Epic of Gilgameš*, Ištar addresses the mythical king of Uruk as follows: 'Come, Gilgameš, you are the bridegroom, / Give me now your fruit! / You are my husband, I want to be your wife' (VI 7-9, George 2003: 168-169).

Both Sumerian Dumuzi and Inana compositions and Akkadian love texts, such as *Nabû and Tašmētu*, often take place in the garden, a place of amorous delights and luxurious pleasure. In sources, the garden and its fruits are described in feminine terms. Moreover, the goddess is described using a vegetable universe, wheat, vine, lettuce, i.e. the product of agricultural work that the god has made sprout and watered. In other words, it is the god who, through his work, allows the regeneration and fertility of nature. This happens through sexual intercourse with the goddess, who assumes the passive task of incubating the god's power. It is the god who assumes the task of the ordinator,[13] who allows, through the working of the divine female body, fertility, and abundance, with cosmogonic and cosmological implications that should not be underestimated.

4. *Sex as grazing and breeding*

In Sumerian mythological texts, the body of the goddess/woman is described also as a wet land on which the ox grazes, whereas the god/man as shepherd. Couto-Ferreira (2017a: 60) studied the term ki-duru$_5$ and its metaphorical implications, showing that it not only indicates a 'wet field' and an 'irrigated land' before it can be ploughed (*Dumuzi and Inana P* ii 27; *Inana H* r. A 22, Akk. *ruṭibtu*), but also a pasture. This second meaning contributes to the metaphorical association between the sexual act and grazing. In *Dumuzi and Inana P*, the goddess asks herself: 'I am the Lady, who will graze (there) the ox?' (l. 28). The practice of grazing the ox is a clear reference to sexual intercourse: animals are often used in Mesopotamian literature in metaphorical images of clear sexual significance (Zisa forthcoming).

The relationship between animality, normativity, and gender represented by animal metaphor has been subject of investigation by anthropologists (see Leach 1964; Wijeiewardene 1968; Tambiah 1969; Brandes 1981; 1984; Tapper 1988; Baker 1993; Ingold 1994; Willis 1994; Descola 2005). Animal metaphors play in promoting social control and reinforce the social and moral order. They constitute an important domain for talking about disapproved or undesirable attributes and

13. The ordering action of the god during the cosmogonic act is also present in the *Babylonian Creation Poem*, *Enūma eliš*, in which it is the god Marduk who creates the world by acting and ordering the chaotic body of Tiāmat, primordial goddess of the salt waters. Jerrold S. Cooper (2017) has emphasised how much the work testifies to an androcentric view of creation and the new order established. The gender binarism established by the composition is based on the description of the superiority of Marduk, as warrior god and model of manhood, and the defeat of Tiāmat, which qualifies the female gender as weak and controllable, but at the same time frightening. The absence of female figures in the composition is a proof of the creation of a purely homosocial space. On the depiction of the female body as constantly restless and impossible to dominate absolutely, and on the creation of an all-male discourse, see also Helle 2020. On the gender perspective in Mesopotamian cosmogonic myths, see Verderame 2022. The scholar stresses that the three main cosmic regions marked as feminine, Earth, Sea, and Mountain, in Sumerian and Akkadian sources, need the action of the masculine cosmic entity, such as Heaven and Sweet Underground Waters, in order to give birth to positive offspring (= gods or *realia*). Cosmogonic act depends on the sexual relation between male and female cosmic entities (sweet – salty waters, Abzu/Apsû – Tiāmat; Heaven – Earth, An – Ki). Earth and Sea are unproductive without male fecundation, as the Mountain, which does not take part to the cosmogony. However, those female cosmic regions can bear by themselves, but the result of this all-female birth is chaotic and monstrous, as it is described in *Ninurta and Anzud* or *Enūma eliš*. Those births from only female entities will be defeated by the gods Ninurta and Marduk respectively.

remind people of human behavioral norms and physical ideals. They show, based on how the animal sexual practices *are*, what human ones *should be like*.

The ox stands in conceptual opposition to the aurochs in ancient Mesopotamia. The two animals convey different conceptions of sexuality: the domestic animal's sexuality is linked to reproduction and thus fertility, while the wild animal's one is untamable and unrelated to reproduction. While the ox (Sum. gu$_4$, Akk. *alpu*) is used in the description of the sexual relationship between god and goddess and between man and woman, alluding to the reproductive sphere, the wild bull (Sum. am, Akk. *rīmu*) is not only an epithet of deities, including the god Dumuzi, but refers to male sexual power and vigour in the documentation of the 2nd and 1st millennium. The presence of the ox in *Dumuzi and Inana P* alludes to sphere of fertility and the metaphorical image of ploughing (Watanabe 2002: 105).[14]

In the Sumerian mythological work *Enki and the Order of the World*, the god confers vitality on man and woman, where the former is compared to a domestic bull (gu$_4$) with thick horns:[15]

> Your word fills the heart (ša$_3$) of the young man with strength (usu),
> he rams in the courtyard like a bull (gu$_4$) with thick horns.
> Your word gives sexual attraction (ḫi-li) to the face (lit. head) of the young woman,
> they look at her with astonishment in the cities.
> (*Enki and the Order of the World* ll. 32-35, Benito 1969: 87)

In Sumerian literature, the goddess is called šilam 'mother cow' (Heimpel 1968: 204ff.; Cohen 1988: 508), while in one text the Earth, impregnated by god An/Heaven's seed, is called 'good cow' (ab$_2$-zi-de$_3$, Heimpel 1968: 195-196). In the 1st millennium incantation known as *The Cow of Sîn*, the moon god falls in love with the cow because of its beauty (Veldhuis 1991). The cow is also used to describe female sexual attraction in love incantations (Heimpel 1968: 196). The image of the cow is also used to indicate the woman in labour in incantations to ease childbirth (Steinert 2017: 223-227). This image has a very long history from an archaic incantation from Fara to a series of Sumerian texts from the Third Dynasty of Ur and Old Babylonian texts (van Dijk 1975; Krebernik 1984: 36-47 fn. 6; Cunningham 1997: 69-75; Stol 2000: 60-61). A Sumerian incantation compares the human reproductive practice with the bovine one:

> My father, in the (pure) stable, in the pure sheepfold, the bullock has mounted (the cow),
> he has deposited in her womb the righteous seed of humanity.
> (UM 29-15-367 ll. 19-20, van Dijk 1975, 55 and 59; Cunningham 1997: 70-71; Stol 2000: 60)

14. See also *Dumuzi and Inana W* l. 19, Sefati 1998: 261.

15. Ulrike Steinert (2017: 225) summarises the relationship between domestic bull (gu$_4$), kings (particularly of the Third Dynasty of Ur), the god Nanna (god of the city of Ur) and the sphere of human, socio-economic and political fertility. For the moon god as bull or calf, and as the divine herdsman responsible for the fertility of the cow pen, see Hall 1985: 615ff. He is also the guarantor of human sexual desire in the hymn to the god *J* ll. 28-32. In Early Dynastic seals, the bull symbolises the moon god, while the rulers of Ur III and Isin-Larsa relate to the moon god through the image of the bull in their personal names, such as Amar-Sîn, Būr-Sîn ('Calf of Sîn'), as guarantors of the god's fertile action. It is no coincidence that Šulgi is referred to as 'a calf born in the pen of plenty' (amar tur$_3$-ḫe$_2$-galla$_2$ tu-da, *Šulgi D* l. 3, Selz 2010: 199) and 'sired by a breeding bull (gu$_4$-ninda), the king, born from the cow, the calf of a white cow, ..., reared in the cow pen' (*Šulgi C* ll. 4-6, see Heimpel 1968: 179; Watanabe 2002: 59). For other references, see Steinert 2017: 255 fn. 10.

The association between human fertility and that of the domestic bull is also expressed in the Akkadian composition *Descent of Ištar to the Netherworld*, according to which the goddess' journey to the underworld caused a fertility crisis, resulting in an absence of sexual relations, in the animal world as well as in the human one:

> Ištar went down to the 'Earth' and never came back up again,
> from the moment she descended into the 'Land of No Return,'
> the ox does not mount the cow, the donkey does not impregnate the female one,
> the young man does not impregnate the young woman in the square,
> the young man lies down on his own side,
> the young woman lies down on her own side.
> (*Descent of Ištar to the Netherworld* ll. 85-90, Lapinkivi 2010: 19)

On the contrary, in the Akkadian documentation, only the wild bull is used in regal metaphors, since it represents strength, vigour, pride, indomitability (Streck 1999: 174), as opposed to the domestic animal which seems to acquire the negative value of docility and subordination.[16] The idea of strength and power, linked to royalty and military campaigns, symbolized by the wild bull, is reinterpreted in a sexual sense in the incantations for the recovery of male sexual desire (*nīš libbi*, lit. 'the raising of the "heart"') of the 2nd and 1st millennium in the Akkadian language (Zisa 2021a: 101-194). The wild bull (*rīmu*) represents sexual vigour *par excellence* (often in association with the deer). A text of *nīš libbi* corpus offers a ranking of animals relative to their sexual value. In this list, the lowest ranking animal is the ram, which copulates 11 times, then it is the turn of the sheep with its 12 times, followed by the partridge and the pig, which copulate 13 and 14 times, respectively. However, wild animals top the list, with the wild bull and the deer copulating fifty times: '[Like a ram eleven times], like a weaned ⟨sheep⟩ twelve times, like a partridge thirteen times. / [Make love to me like] a pig fourteen times, like a wild bull fifty (times), like a s[ta]g fifty (times)!' (*nīš libbi* text No. E.3 ll. 48-49, Zisa 2021a: 316-317). This incantation shows us how much in Mesopotamian imagery wild animals embody concepts related to virility and sexual strength. It should be noted that in Sumerian compositions relating to the cycle of Inana and Dumuzi, both the wild bull and the stag are epithets of the god. Of the god it is stated that he 'copulates' (lit. 'makes tongue') as many as fifty times, as the two animals do, in *Dumuzi and Inana D* ll. 12-18, Sefati 1998: 151-152).

In an Old Babylonian love incantation, the (love) impetuosity (*uzzum*) is compared to a wild bull: 'Impetuosity, impetuosity, come to me like a wild bull (*rīmāniš*)' (Wasserman 2016: 269, ll. 85-86). From the examples given here, in both Sumerian and Akkadian compositions, the wild and domestic bull, although employed in literary imagery related to sexuality, convey very divergent notions. The first is in fact present in the *nīš libbi* incantations for the recovering of the male desire to normalize male sexual practice, which is intended to be active, vigorous, indomitable, not connected to the reproductive sphere. The latter, on the other hand, reiterates ideas related to fertility and reproduction and is also connected with images of an agricultural nature, such as ploughing.

16. For the image of weakness and defeat conveyed by the domestic bull in Assyrian royal inscriptions, see Marcus, 1977: 91.

In Sumerian mythological literature, the god Dumuzi is, by definition, the 'shepherd' (sipa or lu_2-sipa). In addition to the above-mentioned texts in which the god was defined as both 'farmer' and 'shepherd,' the divine love affairs between Inana and Dumuzi take place in the places of the pastoral man-made landscape, such as the stable and the sheepfold, as in *Dumuzi and Inana R* (version A ll. 26-28, Sefati 1998: 236-239) and *Dumuzi and Inana V* (ll. 4-5, Sefati 1998: 256) in which it is stated that the goddess heads or knows the way to the stable of the future divine bridegroom. Since the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur III practiced the 'Sacred Marriage,' a ritual that actualized the sexual and marital relationship between the goddess Inana and the god Dumuzi, and personified the god, one of the appellations used for the ruler is precisely that of shepherd (sipa) (see *Šulgi G* ll. 60-62, Klein 1991).

Sumerian texts reinforce the association between woman (uterus) and cow/animal pen by means of the sign tur_3 indicating the cow pen, but also metaphorically the uterus, called $ša_3$-tur_3 (Akk. *šassūru*), literally 'the inside ($ša_3$) of the cow pen (tur_3).' Another Sumerian term for uterus is arḫuš$_2$ (Akk. *rēmu*), formed by the signs TUR_3 (cow pen) and MUNUS (woman). This association also emerges in the divine list An : *Anum* in relation to the name of the goddess Nintur, lit. 'Lady of birth/cow pen/uterus':[17] ^{d}nin-tur_3, $^{d}ša_3$-tur_3 = *šassūru* (Litke 1998, 78 II 101-102; see Jacobsen 1973; Steinert 2017: 205-206, 223-227, 247 fn. 2 and 3). Niek Veldhuis (1991: 22) in his edition of *The Cow of Sîn* pointed out the phonetic similarity between the words *littu* 'cow' and *ālittu* 'pregnant woman.'

Where metaphors from pastoralism are employed in love divine and human compositions, the body of the goddess/woman is described as a pasture full of water and grass, sexual practices are expressed by mentioning domestic animals, such as oxen, and the god/man is qualified as a 'shepherd.' It is evident that if the female body is defined as a domesticated space or a space to be domesticated, the organising work is up to the god/man. On the contrary, anthropized landscape metaphors are absent to qualify the god and man's sexuality, which is instead described by referring to animal wildness: his sexuality is untamable and not subject to limits and control processes.

5. *Sex as canalization activities*

Associated with agricultural activities are those of canalisation, which were of fundamental importance for the development of agriculture and the subsequent process of urbanisation in Lower Mesopotamia. The canalisation activities that contribute to the irrigation of arable land provide metaphorical images with which to think about and describe the sexuality of goddesses in the Sumerian mythological literature of the late 3rd-early 2nd millennium (Couto-Ferreira 2013), but also human sexuality in the Akkadian love compositions of the 2nd and 1st millennium. Even though waters in fields and pastures are equated with female fluids, understood as a manifestation

17. Jacoben (1973) argues that while the goddess Ninḫursaĝa (lit. 'Lady of the mountains') oversees the birth of wild animals, the goddess Nintur oversees the birth of domestic animals. The name of the goddess Nintur, lit. 'Lady of birth/pen' is usually written with the sign TUR_5 (= TU), whose archaic sign is a pictogram for a reed hut, similar to the sign TUR_3 'cow pen,' and has a close similarity to representations in Mesopotamian art of huts located in sheepfolds and cow pens. In fact, it is possible to argue that these huts are the places where lambs and calves are born. Jacobsen (1973: 279) also showed how the phonetic value /tur/ indicates, among other things, 'child' (Sum. tur, akk. *šerru*), 'to be small, young' (Sum. tur, tur_5; Akk. *ṣeḫēru*), 'stable for animals, cow pen' (Sum. tur_3, Akk. *tarbāṣu*). Furthermore, the sign tur_5, can also be read du_2 or tu(d), with the meaning of 'to give birth' (Akk. (*w*)*alādu*) and 'to shape, to create' (Akk. *banû*).

of sexual arousal, Sumerian mythological texts rarely mention the direct association between water, female body, and sexuality. In fact, the female body, and its genitals, are associated with canals and rivers, or more precisely with the moats and riverbeds of irrigation systems. Conversely, water is associated with male sperm and the procreative action of the god/man. If the vulva of the goddess is the soil dug for the realization of the canal, it will be the god who will make the water/seed flow into it. The relationship between sperm, eros and the irrigation system has been highlighted by Cooper (1989) in Sumerian literature in his study of Enki's penis, where he emphasises the reproductive, though violent, value of the god's phallocentric action (Leick 1994: 48-54). An example is provided by the Sumerian mythological work *Enki and Ninḫursaĝa* in the passage in which the sexual relationship between the god of sweet waters and the goddess is narrated. Here the expression a dug$_4$ 'to irrigate' is used, indicating the flowing of water into the canal. This expression is used to describe Enki's ejaculation in the womb (ša$_3$) of the goddess:

> Enki irrigated with his sperm intended for Damgalnuna (a mi-ni-in-dug$_4$).
> He poured the sperm into the womb of Ninḫursaĝa,
> and she took the sperm into (her) belly, the sperm of Enki (a ša$_3$-ga šu ba-ni-in-ti a ^{d}en-ki-ka$_3$-ka).
> (*Enki and Ninḫursaĝa* ll. 72-74, Attinger 1984)

There is a semantic reason behind the association between sex and water: the Sumerian word /a/ denotes not only water, but also sperm, emphasising, as Gwendolyn Leick states, 'the fertilising power of sperm' (1994: 49).[18] In Sumerian mythological literature many of the divine love scenes take place near waterways. For example, in *Enlil and Ninlil*, despite her mother's prohibition, the goddess Ninlil goes to the river to bathe. There Enlil sees her, falls in love with her and with the help of his adviser Nusku reaches her in the canal. After the girl's initial refusal, he lies down with her and rapes her into the reeds, making her pregnant with their first child, Sîn.

Penetrating the earth to dig the riverbed is also a reference to sexual penetration. In doing so, the penis of the god Enki is the protagonist. As Cooper states, in fact, 'Enki glories in his penis as Inana in her vulva' (1989: 88), as 'lord (i.e., productive manager) of the soil, reflects the role of water in fructifying earth' (Jacobsen 1976: 111). In the mythological composition *Enki and Ninḫursaĝa*, the god is presented in the act of digging the banks of the canals with his penis:

> (Enki) was digging the banks (ĝiš$_3$-a-ni eg$_2$-a ba-an-ši-in-dun-e) with his penis,
> he was dipping his penis among the reeds (ĝiš$_3$-a-ni gi-a gir$_5$-gir$_5$-e ba-an-ši-gir$_5$-gir$_5$-e)
> (*Enki and Ninḫursaĝa* ll. 65-66, Attinger 1984)

Jacobsen (1987: 183) interprets this passage as Enki's attempt to make love to the goddess Ninḫursaĝa by dipping his penis into the reeds, to be understood metaphorically as the pubic hair of the goddess. A confirmation of this interpretation is the oft-quoted *Balbale for Inana as Nanāya* where the goddess states: 'Do not dig a canal, let me be your canal!' (l. 21, Sjöberg 1977). The act of digging a canal (id$_2$ ba-al), associated with the act of ploughing, clearly alludes to sexual

18. Filling the canal with water is a metaphor for ejaculation inside the female womb. In *Enki and the Order of the World*, the god fills the Euphrates and Tigris rivers with his sperm and gives birth to them (ll. 251-154, 257-258, Benito 1969).

intercourse (Tinney 1999: 35-36 and fn. 26). It is no coincidence that one of the most important rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Ur-Namma, in a hymn is described as a 'canal digger': 'Who will dig it? Who will dig it? Who will dig the channel of sacred joy? The channel whose (small) stream is clean, who will dig it? Ur-Namma, the wealthy one, will dig it!' (*Ur-Namma D*, Nippur version ll. 1-4, Tinney 1999: 32).[19] As Stephen J. Tinney reminds us, in this text 'the act of canal-digging must be taken as a metaphor for sexual intercourse' (1999: 35).

In the Early Dynastic text AO 4153, which narrates the time before the cosmogonic act, it is stated that most probably An/Heaven lowered the inlets (i.e. mouths) of the irrigation canals in Ki/Earth, whose hollows were full of water, to make it appear lush and become a garden (kiri$_6$) a wet and cool place (duru$_5$-am$_6$ te-me-nam). This is a clear allusion to the sexual relationship between Heaven and Earth from which the process of creation will begin:

> [(An/An the Mighty[2])]
> lowered the inlets (lit. mouths) of the irrigation channels in it,
> to make Earth appear lush:
> a garden, a wet and cool place;
> the hollows of the earth were filled with water.
> (AO 4153 i 1-5, Lisman 2013: 230)

In Old Babylonian love literature, the metaphor of canalisation persists, albeit applied to human sentimental affairs. In the composition in which the woman is referred to by the disappointed lover as a 'salt field,' she is also defined as a 'channel': 'To your channel – no one will come near him!' (CUSAS 10.10: 36, Wasserman 2016: 96-98).

The association between sexuality and water, and more specifically between water and male sperm/desire present in the divine-themed Sumerian literature, then flows into the description of human male sexuality in later millennia, particularly in the corpus of incantations for the recovery of male sexual desire (*nīš libbi*; see Zisa forthcoming). An example is the following incantation in which the image of 'filling the channels' appears:

> May the wind blow! … […]
> May the stables fill up! … […]
> May precisely the canals fill up! […]
> May NN, son of NN, mate! … […]
> (*nīš libbi* text No. H.1 ll. 6-9, Zisa 2021a: 364-365)

In another text from the same corpus, man's sexual desire is compared to constant river water (*mê nāri ālikūti*). It is possible that also here the reference to water indicates sperm, not intended for reproductive purposes, but as a representative sign of the male orgasm, a metonymy of the enjoyed sexual intercourse.

> May the wind blow! May the grove quake!
> May the cloud gather! May the moisture fall!
> May my sexual desire be constant river water!
> (*nīš libbi* text No. A.1 ll. 33-35, Zisa 2021a: 238-239)

19. In later millennia, the god Marduk is also referred to as a 'canal digger.' For a detailed analysis of the relationship between Marduk and waterways, see Oshima 2006.

In another incantation of the same group, the patient who has lost sexual desire is asked: 'Who has blocked you like the opening of the *dilûtu*-water system?' (*nīš libbi* text No. D.2 l. 11, Zisa 2021a: 286-287). A similar metaphor is found in the incipit of an incantation from the catalogue of *nīš libbi* texts: 'Incantation: "Why are you blocked up like a canal?"' (LKA 94 obv. i 5, Zisa 2021a: 217). It is no coincidence that among the deities invoked for the restoration of male sexual desire is the storm god Adad, referred to in a text as the 'keeper of the canals' (*nīš libbi* text No. B.2: 30, Zisa 2021a: 265).

6. *Conceptual metaphors as social action: political-economic implications*

Divine sexual intercourse, as it emerges in Sumerian sources, such as the cycle of Dumuzi and Inana, as well as in Akkadian texts, such as *Nabû and Tašmētu*, has a ritual implication linked to the celebration of the so called 'Sacred Marriage.' During the Third Dynasty of Ur, the king personified the god Dumuzi during the ritual, which is why in the texts the ruler is referred to as a 'farmer, shepherd, gardener or canal digger.' In the case of the 'Sacred Marriage' ritual whose protagonists are Inana and Dumuzi/king, the function of the sexual relationship (rather than marriage) is the political legitimisation of the rulers of Ur III, the renewal of the descent of kingship on earth, guaranteed precisely by the sexual intercourse with the goddess Inana. It is sex that permits the restoration of the political and consequently socio-economic order, of which the fertility of agro-pastoral activities is a central aspect. It is the king, in fact, who is responsible for guaranteeing the socio-economic order, and thus the prosperity and abundance of the earth, whose products are indispensable to the very existence of the city (Couto-Ferreira 2018a; 2018b). The king reiterates the cosmogonic work of the god, not only based on sexual intercourse (think of the sex between Heaven and Earth that will initiate creation), but also the god's organising abilities (*Enki and the Order of the World*; *Enki and Ninḫursaĝa*; *Ninurta and Anzud*; *Enūma eliš*, etc.). The mythical king of Uruk, Gilgameš, whom the kings of Ur III considered a paradigmatic model, is a perfect example. As the anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber argue: 'Kings are imitations of gods rather than gods of kings […] In the course of human history, royal power has been derivative of and dependent on divine power. Indeed, no less in stateless societies than in major kingdoms, the human authorities emulate the ruling cosmic powers – if in a reduced form' (2017: 3).

I do not therefore see, as on the contrary some scholars suggest, the need to separate the political-royal dimension with that of the fertility and abundance (Steinkeller 1999).[20] The Mesopotamians kingdoms, from the 4th to the 1st millennium, are doubtless 'Agrarian States.' Cross-culturally, the close dependence of men and plants in agricultural societies leads a religious-metaphorical association between fertility and fecundity, woman and earth, coitus and sowing as it emerges in rituals and religious ceremonies where seasonal-economic and socio-political order coincide (Lanternari 1959: 436). In fact, the Assyrian rulers, millennia later, also define themselves, thanks to the privileged relationship they enjoy with the divine polyad couple, as providers of abundance for the land. In the inscriptions and palatial art, the Assyrian rulers explicitly express their function, as blessed by the gods, as guarantors of the abundance of water (as male) for agricultural activities and/or of agricultural products (as female) (Winter 2003).

20. On the importance of the sexual orgy in the so-called 'New Year Ceremonies' in agricultural civilisations, see Lanternari 1953-1954; 1959: 43-274.

7. *Conclusions*

Conceptual metaphors should not be understood only as representational means, capable of transferring concepts from one domain to another, but above all, as anthropological and gender studies have shown, as material structuring of *social action*. Metaphors function thus not only underpinning the process of ordering, conceptualising, and knowing the world and the life, but also as means for acting in the world. The Sumerian and Akkadian agro-pastoral metaphors, therefore, manifest and justify gender asymmetries (active male role in the ordering of the world and life *vs*. passive female role). The body of the goddesses in Sumerian sources is a domesticable body, subject to the god's control processes, similarly to what happens to nature, which must be worked on by the human community to be made fertile and productive. If the goddess/woman, or rather her vagina, is the cultivable field or the furrow, the god/man is the farmer and his penis is the inseminating plough, and thus sexual intercourse is represented as the act of ploughing. At the same time, if the body of the goddess/woman is a wet land on which the ox grazes, the god/man is the shepherd. Furthermore, if domestic animals, such as the ox and the cow, convey a notion of sexuality linked to the reproductive sphere, wild animals, such as the aurochs, qualify the god/man, emphasising his power and indomitable sexual vigour that is not subject to control. And again, if the goddess/woman is compared to a canal, it is the god/man, the canal digger, who makes water flow into it, a metaphor for sperm. This vision of the goddess's body is not exclusive to the divine world: the metaphors used to describe both the sexed body and the arousal of the goddess become gendered normative models for thinking about and objectifying the female body in later millennia of Mesopotamian history, as confirmed by magical and medical sources, as well as by human Akkadian love literature of the 2nd and 1st millennia BC. These figurative imaginaries also shape the expression of human love feelings in Akkadian love songs, as well as female fertility and arousal, and male sexual desire and vigour.

These metaphors also testify to the importance of agro-pastoral and channelling activities in the political, social-economic, and religious order of the Mesopotamian states. They show how the ritual of 'Sacred Marriage' not only entails the political legitimation of rulers and the renewal of the alliance between divinities and city community, but likewise guarantees the abundance and prosperity of agro-pastoral activities, fundamental from the Neolithic revolution and the urban one for the ancient Near Eastern political formations. It is possible, therefore, that this metaphorical imagery testifies to a 'primary' reason at the basis of these hierogamic/theogamic rites, which in any case has persisted over the millennia, despite attempts of resematization and re-functionalization in political-ideological key (such as the practice of deification carried out by some kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur). It is evident, as the metaphors used in the compositions illustrate, that the fertility and abundance of agricultural and pastoral activities depend on the political order guaranteed by the hierogamic relationship. In the case, on the other hand, of the more properly Sumerian and Akkadian theogamies involving divine polyad couples, divine sex guarantees not only the political (Nissinen 2001: 110-113) but also the socio-economic regeneration of the community, renewing the alliance between the human and divine communities (Pongratz-Leisten 2008). Through the sexual relationship between the god/sovereign and the goddess, the political, social, and economic *cosmos*, with its gender implications, is renewed.

8. *Bibliography*

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