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Picturing Death: The Influence of Environmental Factors on the Mesopotamian Concept of Death

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Picturing death

The Influence of Environmental Factors on the Mesopotamian Concept of Death

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Introduction

Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun; I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be (...) an interpretive one in search of meaning.

Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (1973), 5

Throughout history people have tried to explain phenomena that were abstract to them, attributing to these events all kinds of reasons ranging from physical to supernatural ones. They have tried to understand the world around them by adapting to their environment to create understanding. A system of shared beliefs and norms develops, guiding and explaining to them how to act and respond to all kinds of events.[1] An inevitable part of life is death. It is something that transcends culture and religion and that every person throughout history has had to deal with. Grieving and bereavement are considered universal processes after a loved one had passed away.[2] However, beliefs and the ways people express these practices are diverse and depend on their concept of death, which is fuelled to a great extent by cultural beliefs: "Cultural variations in conceptions of death and dying (…) have significant implications on how people act in life, how they approach death, whether or not they fear death, and on their funeral and bereavement practices."[3] The concept of death is defined by what people believe happens when death occurs and if there exist something after one's sojourn on this Earth ended.[4]

Christianity believes that a person consists of a body and soul. When someone dies, the body returns back to earth, but the soul continues to lives on. Death was not considered a final event, but a transition from body to soul, which would live on either in heaven or in hell depending on his life on Earth.[5] The ancient Egyptians also believed in the existence of an afterlife and in the judgement of the heart. After one's passing, when the *ka* ("lifeforce") has left the body, the deceased went on his or her way to the realm of Osiris; the deceased's heart

[1] Darrin R. Lehman, Chi-yue Chiu, and Mark Schaller, "Psychology and Culture," *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 55 (2004): 692.
[2] Marjorie Kagawa-Singer, "Diverse Cultural Beliefs and Practices about Death and Dying in the Elderly," *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education* 15, no. 1 (1995): 101.
[3] James Gire, "How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2014): 5.
[4] Gire, "How Death Imitates Life," 4.
[5] Gire, "How Death Imitates Life," 4.

was laid on a scale against a feather to discover whether it was pure or not.[6] When it was, the spirit could enter the Field of Reeds, the society of the dead. However, when the deceased's heart was filled with sin and outweighed the feather, he or she experienced the consequence of the heart being eaten by Ammit, the Devourer of the Dead, a creature "having a crocodile head, the foreparts of a lion, and the rear of a hippopotamus."[7] Ceremonies were held to reunite the *ba* ("soul", "personality") with the *ka* in order for the spirit to use his or her new form in the afterlife. As a result, the spirit "became a 'living *ba*' and an '*akh*' (lit. 'effective one')", able to live on in a new, nonphysical form.[8] Although these spirits lived in a different realm, they wandered about among the living. Supported by spells,[9] the deceased was able not only to withstand the various dangers he or she might experience in the afterlife, but also to successfully undergo the judgement process.[10]

Like Christians, ancient Egyptians believed in the existence of an afterlife in which judgement was involved. The Buddhists on the other hand believe in *samsara*, or a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. When someone passes away, he or she will be reborn. Depending on how the person has lived his or her previous lives, the person can be reborn as a human, an animal or other being. However, when one escapes these cycles of rebirth, one will receive *nirvana*, or enlightenment, which makes the person see the true reality of the world. There is no afterlife where spirits go, because nothing is permanent and everything changes. When someone passes away, his or her spirit or energy changes into a new life.[11]

As can be deduced, death is an inevitable part of life; however, culture and religion elicit a diverse set of beliefs and responses towards the same event. How people behave after a death has occurred varies widely across cultures.[12] The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of death held in ancient Mesopotamia and to try to find answers of how it came to be. The perspective of the Mesopotamians differs from that of Buddhists, who believe in a continuation of life cycles, and it differs with regard to the afterlife from, for example, the ancient Egyptians and Christians, who believe(d) in a special place to spend the afterlife in

[6] James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian. An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 100-1; 118-9.
[7] Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 38.
[8] Allen, *Middle Egyptian. An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 100-1, 118-9.
[9] Elite sources: mortuary texts like Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, and Book of the Dead. For more information see, Kathryn A. Bard, *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).
[10] Bard, *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, 272.
[11] Carl B. Becker, "Rebirth and Afterlife in Buddhism," in *Perspectives on Death and Dying: Cross-Cultural and Multi-Disciplinary Views,* ed. Arthur S. Berger (Philadelphia: Charles Press, 1989), 109.
[12] Gire, "How Death Imitates Life," 10-11.

peace and happiness. The Mesopotamians imagined the Netherworld to be a gloomy place. Theirs has been termed the "pessimistic" view by some scholars, and it is described in *the Epic of Gilgameš*:

> *To the house of darkness (...): to the house which none who enters ever leaves, on the path that allows no journey back, to the house whose residents are deprived of light, where dust is their sustenance and clay their food, where they are clad like birds in coats of feathers, and see no light, but dwell in darkness. On door [and bolt the dust lay thick].*[13]

According to the Mesopotamian concept of death, during the funerary ritual, the ghost (*eṭemmu*) journeys to the Netherworld. As illustrated in three literary texts,[14] it was a dusty and dark place from which spirits could not leave; dust, clay and muddy water provided food and drink.

Figure 1: Charcoal sketch by Kantzveldt

Taking into account the previously discussed examples and other cultures, not mentioned here (i.e., existing and ancient ones), it is striking that a diverse set of explanations and practices was developed to find a response to the same events, in this case death. The answer is complicated: "Different environments produce different social systems (…) however, different environments can also produce similar systems, and similar environments can produce vastly different cultures."[15] The aim of this paper is to delve deeper into the interplay between environment and cultures to find answers regarding the creation or alterations to the concept of death by the Mesopotamians: How did the Mesopotamian concept of death come about? How did the Mesopotamians influence the image of the Netherworld and its functions? Based on the idea that a system of shared beliefs arises among a group of people, guiding them and

[13] *The Epic of Gilgameš* tablet VII lines: 184–91. In Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgameš* (Milton Keynes: Penguin Classics, 2020), 59–60.
[14] *The Epic of Gilgameš, Nergal and Ereškigal,* and *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld.*
[15] Dov Cohen, "Cultural Variation: Considerations and Implications," *Psychological Bulletin* 127, no. 4 (2001): 451.

explaining how to act and respond to their surroundings,[16] environmental factors are examined in the current study and associated with the Mesopotamian concept of death. The first two chapters will elaborate more on the Mesopotamian concept of death, while the final three chapters analyse several aspects, which can be related to the surroundings divided into three topics: “The realm of the dead”, “Death and burial”, and “Everyday life”. Only a specific amount of facets can be discussed due to the limited length of the paper. In addition, the available sources cannot account for every detail regarding the development of the concept of death.

[16] Lehman, Chiu, and Schaller “Psychology and Culture,” 692.

Chapter 1: The concept of death: the Netherworld

Ghosts were perceived as real entities, not just a belief. They "were part of normal life in Mesopotamia."[17] Their lives and the lives of their living descendants were closely intertwined.[18] But what happened after death struck? Why did the gods impose death on mankind? The answer lies in a literary text called *Atraḫasīs*, which is discussed in the following. Next, the question of what happens after death is elaborated, and finally the geography and terminology with regard to the Netherworld is touched upon.

§1.1 The creation of mankind

Death they dispensed to mankind, life they kept for themselves.[19]

The reason why mankind was created was to serve and honour the gods, but most importantly it was to remove the burden of (hard) labour from the gods, as we are told in *Atraḫasīs*. Before humans set foot on Earth, the three main gods, Anu, Enlil, and Enki, inhabited the universe after it was created. The world was divided into several layers. From top to bottom, it consisted of three layers of heaven, followed by the Earth, the *Apsu*, and the Netherworld. The first heaven was ascribed to the sky god Anu. As the father of all gods, he was deemed important. In addition, in some myths[20] he is regarded as the creator of the universe, who separated heaven and Earth which were previously unified, and he inhabited the former.[21] The second layer was attributed to a group of gods known as the Igigi, who comprised the principal gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon, for example, Ištar, Šamaš, and Adad. The third heaven, as the sky containing the heavenly bodies and a rich amount of stars, was visible to the human eye. The fourth layer was occupied by humans and animals; the Earth's surface was surrounded by bitter or salty seas. After the universe's creation, Enlil took up his residence here. Beneath the Earth's surface lay the domain where Enki, the god of wisdom, resided. His residence was called the *Apsu*, which was a large subterranean place filled with fresh water. Because the god of wisdom is associated with the *Apsu,* it was

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[17] Irving Finkel, *The First Ghosts. Most Ancient of Legacies* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2021), 55.
[18] Finkel, *The First Ghosts. Most Ancient of Legacies*, 55.
[19] *Gilgameš at the end of the World, iii 4–5.* George, *The Epic of Gilgameš,* 194.
[20] Francesca Rochberg, "Mesopotamian Cosmology," in *A Companion to the Ancient Near East,* ed. Daniel C. Snell (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 306–7. There are more myths regarding the creation of the universe. See for example, W. G. Lambert, "The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon," in *Ancient Cosmologies,* eds. C. Blacker and M. Loewe (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975): 42–62. and Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998).
[21] Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London, British Museum Press, 1992), 30.

believed that his realm was the source of wisdom and knowledge. Below these depths was a layer where the Netherworld was situated.[22] A stairway connected the heavens and the Netherworld.[23]

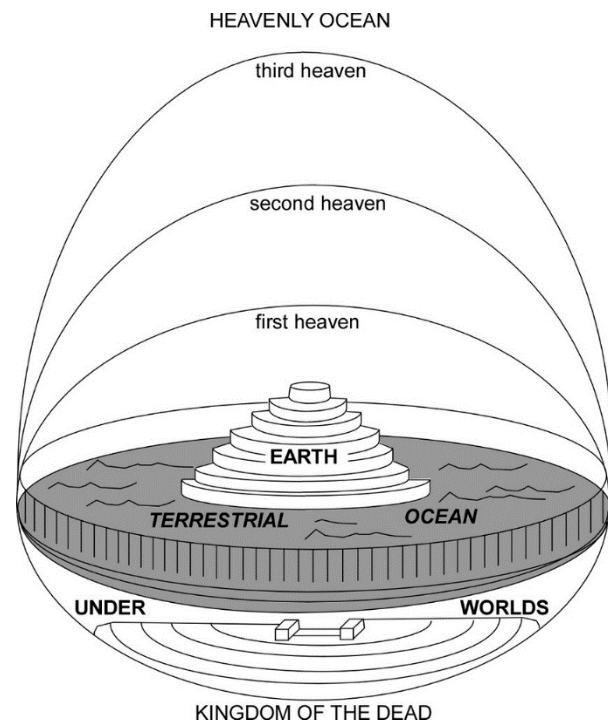

Figure 2: From José-Javier Alvaro (2019), 16. Based on Horowitz (1998).

After the universe was created, Anu took up residence in heaven, Enlil stayed on Earth, and Enki inhabited the *Apsu*.[24] For these gods to sustain themselves, minor deities were created to do all necessary work. Heavy labour was imposed on them and they had to work on Earth, digging canals to fertilize the land. However, the labour became unbearable over time, and the inferior gods started to complain. Tension rose among the minor deities and eventually resulted in a rebellion. The inferior gods dropped their work tools, set them on fire, and marched to the house of Enlil at night. Awoken by his subordinates and thus in need of help, Enlil requested a meeting with Anu to discuss matters and actions against the rebellious gods. However, Anu sympathized with them, and solved the problem by creating mankind to take over the labour. In doing so, the leader of the rebellion was sacrificed; from his blood and flesh mixed with earth mankind came into existence.[25] The humans were put to work; however, over time the Earth became crowded with people because they could live for centuries.[26] After several attempts to decrease the human population by plague and famine which were of no avail, the gods imposed a flood to wipe out the human race.[27] With Enki's help, Utnapištim escaped the flood by building a boat. The flood wiped out mankind, except for those aboard the boat. After seven days the flood ended, and Utnaptištim released every being on the boat back into the world. Subsequently he made an offering to the gods, who had

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[22] Rochberg. "Mesopotamian Cosmology," 312–5.
[23] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia. An Illustrated Dictionary*, 180.
[24] Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 126.
[25] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1976), 117–8.
[26] Before the flood, people lived long years as described in the Sumerian King List. For an overview and an assessment of the list, see: Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939).
[27] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, 118-9.

become hungry after not receiving offerings for seven days. As a reward for his humbleness and loyalty to the gods, Utnaptištim and his wife were given immortality, the only people to receive eternal life, making them like the gods.[28] Now the gods' substitutes, who had replaced the gods to work the land and create fertility and food, were gone. The gods had to do the hard labour again themselves, much to their dislike. A solution, however, was proposed, which entailed that mankind would still perform their duties on Earth, but several attributes were assigned to the newly created human race to slow the growing population. Unfortunately, the text is badly preserved at this point except for one part, which describes how some women were created who could not bear children.[29] From another literary work, *Enuma Eliš¸* it becomes clear that death was imposed on mankind, because the gods wanted to keep immortality to themselves.[30]

§1.2 What happens after death?

The literary texts explain why death was allotted to humans, but according to the Mesopotamian view, what happened after someone had passed away? It was believed that a life existed beyond the one spent on Earth. After someone had died, the ghost of that person, called *eṭemmu,* would make its way to the Netherworld. As mentioned, humans were created from a mixture of clay and the blood and flesh of a god, named We-Ilu. The body was associated with the clay; the blood and flesh of the divine figure represented the *eṭemmu*. The slaughtered god had been blessed with the gift of intelligence (Akkadian *ṭēmu*), which humans now possessed. An Akkadian play on words illustrates the divine element that is part of the *eṭemmu*: We(-Ilu) together with *ṭēmu* equals (w)*eṭemmu.*[31] As these parts were divine, they would live on, but the body would return to Earth. Death was a transition from one form to the next. Life continued, but in a different manner and in a different realm.[32] So that ghosts would not to roam the world of the living, they descended to the realm of the dead, travelling the Road of No Return to reach their final destination, where they would spend their new "life" for eternity. The conditions and appearance of the Netherworld are described elaborately in literary texts, of which three describe it, namely *the Epic of Gilgameš*, *Ištar's*

[28] Johs Pedersen, "Wisdom and Immortality," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, eds. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 242. *Gilgameš XI.* In George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 116.
[29] W. G. Lambert, A. R. Millard, and M. Civil, *Atra–Ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 8–13.
[30] *Gilgameš at the end of the World, iii 3–5.* George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 194.
[31] Finkel, *The First Ghosts. Most Ancient of Legacies,* 15–6.
[32] Katz, "Death they dispensed to mankind," 55.

Descent to the Netherworld, and *Nergal and Ereškigal*. Apart from a few deviating details, in exactly the same way:

> *To the house of darkness (...): to the house which none who enters ever leaves, on the path that allows no journey back, to the house whose residents are deprived of light, where dust is their sustenance and clay their food, where they are clad like birds in coats of feathers, and see no light, but dwell in darkness. On door [and bolt the dust lay thick].*[33]

Upon reading the conditions that existed in the realm of the dead, many scholars have phrased it as a "pessimistic" view of "a gloomy place, shadowy, dark and dry."[34] It was a dark place with no chance of escape, where food was equated with dust and clay. Also in the Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 900–612 BC),[35] the depiction of the realm of the dead remains gloomy, as the literary text *Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Prince* relates that "the Netherworld was full of terror; a mighty silence lay before the crown prince."[36] It differs from Elysium in ancient Greek culture, heaven in Christianity, and the Field of Reeds in ancient Egypt. In the latter place, the prerequisite was to live truthfully and honestly, and one would be rewarded with an afterlife in a good and beautiful place. In Mesopotamian religion there was no such thing as a heaven for the good and a hell for the bad, nor a judgement where one's heart is eaten by a beast. There was simply one realm where the spirits of the dead would go once death took a hold of them, which the Mesopotamians defined as "going to one's fate" (Akkadian *ana šīmtim alākum*).[37]

Furthermore, the Netherworld was envisioned as an underground city. It was surrounded by a wall that consisted of seven gates, protected by Neti the gatekeeper.[38] The wall served not only to prevent everyone from outside from entering the realm of the dead but also, to keep the ghosts inside. Ghost were not allowed to leave, as the realm of the dead was, among other things, "the house which none who enters ever leaves".[39] It was dangerous to let ghosts run freely, as is illustrated in *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*. In this text Ištar threatens to

[33] *Epic of Gilgameš* tablet VII r. 184–91. Ibidem, 59–60.
[34] Jan Tavernier, "Elamite and Old Iranian Afterlife Concepts," in *Susa and Elam. Archaeological, Philological, Historical and Geographical Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 480.
[35] Dates based on: Marc Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East: ca. 3000-323 BC* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 385-8.
[36] SAA 3, line r.13. http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/saa03/P337164/html
[37] Jerrold S. Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions,* ed. Hiroshi Obayashi (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 21.
[38] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 180.
[39] *Epic of Gilgameš* tablet VII line 185. In George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 59.

release the dead and let them eat the living, who are greatly outnumbered by the deceased.[40] The underground city was also seen to include a palace enclosed by a wall, where Ereškigal resided.[41] She sat on her throne with a wide courtyard in front of her.[42] Ereškigal stood at the top of the hierarchy as queen of the Netherworld. At first she was in charge, but later during the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1600 BC) Nergal became her consort, and they ruled the realm of the dead together. They had several subordinates under their command.[43] For example, the scribe Geštinanna recorded the names of the deceased who entered the Netherworld. Upon arrival, the spirits were not judged with regard to their actions performed on Earth, but they were pronounced dead and Geštinanna wrote down their names. Geštinanna only spent six months a year in the Netherworld; the remaining time she passed on Earth, switching places with her brother Dumuzi, who spent the other six months a year in the Netherworld. Namtar acted as the vizier of Ereškigal, consulting with her when needed, but was also sent out to deliver messages. Neti was responsible for protecting the seven gates of the Netherworld.[44]

§1.3 Geography and terminology of the Netherworld

The location of the seven gates and the realm of the dead remains obscure and various interpretations have been deducted from the sources. One view is that the Netherworld was seen to be situated below our feet. Recall the Mesopotamian cosmology, in which the universe consisted of several layers; the Netherworld lay below the Earth, where the living resided. This is in accordance with some of the names used to designate the Netherworld. For example, KI.TA.MEŠ and KI.GAL, meaning respectively “The Regions Below” and “The Great Below”, indicate the Netherworld as a place below the surface.[45] There are, however, alternative versions regarding its location. Several terms describing the realm of the dead suggest that it was situated in the west, where Šamaš, the sun god, always sets. The accompanying term is either KI.U$_4$. ŠU$_4$ or KI.^{d}UTU. ŠÚ.A, meaning “the place where the sun sets”.[46] The usual term to describe the realm of the dead is KI (Akkadian *erṣetu*) or KUR

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[40] *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld.* In Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgameš, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 155.
[41] Jean Bottéro, “La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne,” in *Death in Mesopotamia. XXVIe Rencontre assyriologique international,* ed. Bendt Alster (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 30.
[42] *Nergal and Ereškigal.* In Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgameš, and Others,* 170.
[43] The main characters are discussed here. For more information about the inhabitants of the Netherworld, see: Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia. An Illustrated Dictionary.* London: The British Museum Press, 1992.
[44] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 72, 88, and 180.
[45] Bottéro, “La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne,” 30.
[46] Bottéro, “La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne,” 30.

(Akkadian *erṣetu*), literally meaning "place" or "earth".[47] KUR also bears the meaning of "mountain" (Akkadian *šadû*), which suggests that the Netherworld may be situated in the east, in the mountainous area of the Zagros.[48] However, this belief, dating to around the third millennium BC, lost its geographical meaning over time, and became only a neutral designation for Netherworld.[49] Beside location, the aesthetics can also be derived from various terms. For example, UNU_x.GAL/ URU_x.GAL,ERI/IRI_{11}.GAL (Akkadian *Irkallu*) describe the realm of the dead as "the Great City."[50] This phrasing is also in accordance with literary texts which characterize "the Great City" as an underground palace, where Ereškigal resides and which is situated in the centre of a citadel enclosed by a wall consisting of seven gates. In other words, the Netherworld was perceived as a great subterranean city. However, ghosts could not enter the building, just as temple complexes in the world of the living were not allowed to be entered by ordinary people.[51] This city had rules, the main one stating that once a ghost had entered the Netherworld, there was no possibility to return to the world of the living. As mentioned, the Netherworld is described in literary texts as "the House which none who enters ever leaves",[52] and in the designation of the Netherworld as KUR.NU.GI_4/KI.NU.GI_4 (Akkadian *erṣet (*or *ašar) lā târi*) as "the Land of No Return."[53] However, this phrasing only occurs rarely in texts indicating that it was not a commonly used term.[54]

§1.4 Conclusion

The gods created mankind to relieve themselves of hard labour. Humans fulfilled a subordinate role serving and honouring the gods. Death was dispensed to them because the gods wanted to keep immortality for themselves. Humans were destined to go to the Netherworld after their time on Earth had come to an end. They entered a dark and gloomy place, full of ghosts and without good quality food and drink. For an efficient rule, a hierarchical system was implemented in which gods occupied different offices, with Ereškigal at the top, later ruling together with Nergal. Myths use several designations for the Netherworld, based on location and the characteristics of the realm of the dead. The next

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[47] Bottéro, "La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne," 30.
[48] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 114.
[49] Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2003), 244.
[50] Bottéro, "La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne," 30.
[51] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 194-6, 237.
[52] *Epic of Gilgameš* tablet VII line 185. In George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 59.
[53] Bottéro, "La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne," 30.
[54] Dina Katz, "Death they dispensed to Mankind. The Funerary World of Ancient Mesopotamia," *Historiae* 2 (2005): 72.

chapter provides an elaboration of the concept of death in terms of mortuary practices and care for the deceased family members.

Chapter 2: The concept of death: burial and care for the dead

From a variety of sources, information can be gleaned regarding the funerary rites performed in Mesopotamia. Evidence from the third millennium BC has been preserved, but a large part of the funerary cult remains unknown, and the evidence regarding some aspects of the rituals remains scarce and obscure.[55] For example, as regards to burial rituals, type and location of burials, and the accompanying grave goods are known, but the duration of mourning or the length of time between death and burial are still ambiguous.

The Mesopotamians described death as "going to one's fate" (*ana šīmtim alākum*), but this phrasing only applied when a person was destined to die at that moment.[56] This is expressed in *the Epic of Gilgameš* in which Gilgameš felt his end approaching:

níĝ gig ak nam-lú-ùlu-ke$_4$ ne-en de$_6$-a ma-ra-du$_{11}$
níĝ gi-dur ku$_5$-da-zu-ka ne-en de$_6$-a ma-ra-du$_{11}$

"The bane of mankind is thus come, I have told you,
what (was fixed) when your navel-cord was cut is thus come, I have told you."[57]

The purpose of mankind was to serve the gods and fulfil its specific duties to them on Earth; from the moment they were born, these tasks were fixed. Humans knew that their time on Earth was limited and that they had to cross over to the Netherworld eventually. Although the latter was not a known date, they used terminology indicating that their fate was fixed; for example, Gilgameš, grieving over his late friend Enkidu, screamed bitterly: "He went to the doom of mortal men!"[58] This illustrates that humans were destined to die and that the gods were responsible: "When the gods created mankind, death they dispensed to mankind, life they kept for themselves."[59] Upon their creation, humans received a mortal existence indicating that their fate was sealed. Apart from a destined fate, death could also take someone before it was his or her time: *mūt lā šīmtišu*: "a death not of his fate."[60] This phrase distinguishes a natural death, which was destined to happen, from an unnatural death, which

[55] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," 24.
[56] Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 150.
[57] Transliteration from Antoine Cavigneaux, and Farouk N. H. Al-Raw, *Gilgameš et la Mort. Textes de Tell Haddad VI, avec un Appendice sur les Textes Funéraires Sumériens* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 2000), 17, 32; Translation from George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 155.
[58] *Gilgameš at the end of the World, ii 4'.* George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 194.
[59] *Gilgameš at the end of the World, iii 3–5.* George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 194.
[60] Jack N. Lawson, *The Concept of Fate in Ancient Mesopotamia of the First Millennium. Towards an Understanding of šīmtu* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994), 133.

took someone before it was his or her time to go to the Netherworld, for example, when someone was murdered or killed in battle.[61]

§2.1 Caretaker of the dead

Upon departing from life and entering the world of the dead, it was important for the deceased to receive proper funerary rituals. If these rituals were not performed or not performed correctly, the deceased was unable to travel along the Road of No Return and reach the Netherworld. Consequently, the ghost was doomed to roam the world of the living for eternity and harass his or her living family members.[62] To keep this from happening, one member of the family was made responsible for carrying out the cult of the dead. Usually the eldest son or the appointed heir of the family performed this task, but it was possible, when someone did not have any male offspring, for a daughter to assume this responsibility. He or she was called *pāqidu,* which means literally "caretaker"; however, this did not mean that he or she was the sole one responsible, but the whole family took part in performing the necessary rituals.[63] A letter (AbB 8, 88) dating to the Old Babylonian period was written by a father to his daughter, whom he appointed as his caretaker to perform the obligatory rituals once he had gone to his fate. The appointment of his daughter indicates that he did not have any male offspring.[64]

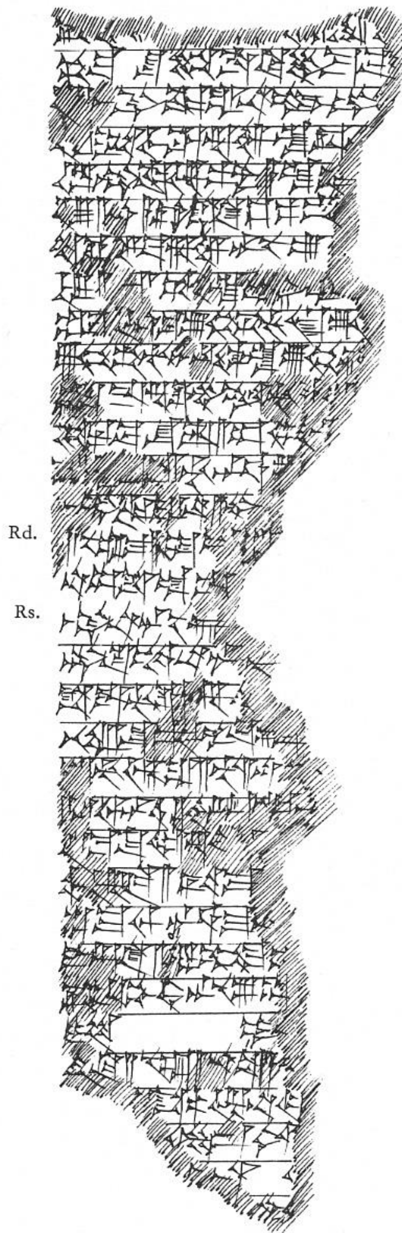

Figure 3: AbB 8, 88. Image from CDLI

[61] Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, 150.
[62] Miranda Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," *Iraq* 35, no. 2 (Autumn, 1973): 116.
[63] Renata Macdougal, "Remembrance and the Dead in Second Millennium BC Mesopotamia," (PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2014), 5.
[64] Renata Macdougal, "Ancient Mesopotamian remembrance and the family dead," in *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement. New Directions for Research and Practice,* eds. Dennis Klass en Edith Maria Steffen (New York; Londen: Routledge, 2017), 265.

AbB 8, 88[65]	
Akkadian	Translation
2) qá-ba-šu li-id-di-in-ma ba-x-[…..]	2) soll er versprechen und….
3) ⸢ù⸣ aš-šum ka-ra-na-tum aš-šum x […..]	3) Ferner betreffs Karānatum, weil….
4) ⸢ù⸣ i-na ši-iṭ-ri-im la uš-t[a-…..]	4) ferner in dem Schriftstück nicht….
5) ù aš-šum ka-ar-pa-as-sà la u[š-ta-…..]	5) weil sie ferner ihren Tontopf nicht …..,
6) ù a-na a-bi-ša ki-is-pa-am […..]	6)auch für ihren Vater das Totenopfer [nicht gebracht hat]

Another possible scenario was when someone did not have any children of his or her own. This was one of the least favourite possibilities, because this person had no one to provide for him or her after his death. To avert this unfortunate situation, it was not uncommon to adopt someone as a son or daughter:

AbB 9, 228[66]
Akkadian 24-27) ṣuḫāram ištēn lurabbīma umma anākuma ana qeberija lirbia
Translation 24-27) Now, I raised one boy, thinking "Let him be grown up at the time of my burial."

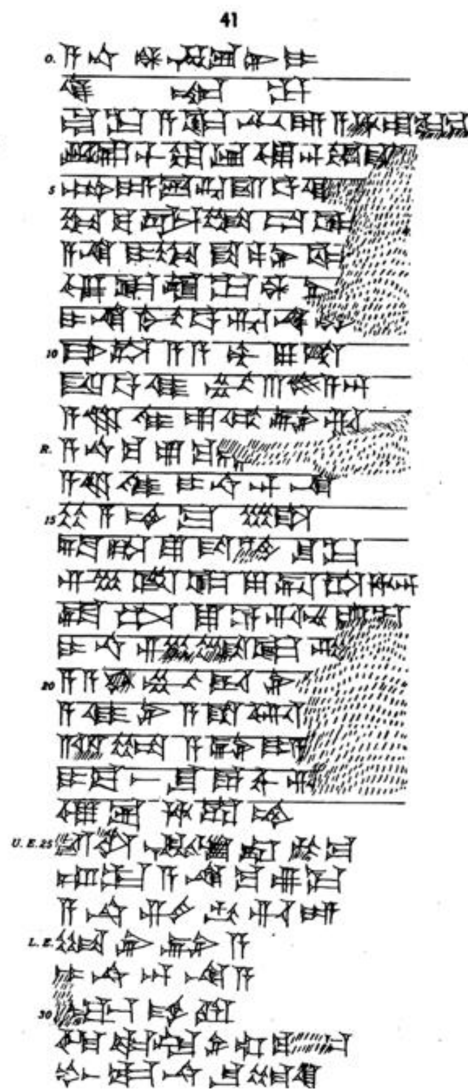

Figure 4: AbB 9, 228. Image from CDLI

This letter was written regarding the adoption of a child by a *nadītu,* a woman who devoted her life to a god during the Old Babylonian period. She was not allowed to have children and live a secluded life in an institution called a *gagûm* ("the locked

[65] Text and translation from: L. Cagni, *Altbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung. Briefe aus dem Iraq Museum. Heft 8* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 54–5.
[66] Translation: Marten Stol, *Altbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung. Heft IX. Letters from Yale* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 143.

house").[67] Usually these women came from elite circles or even the royal family. They were priestesses "engaged in business ventures, or indeed the ownership of profitable taverns"[68], and they engaged in cults associated with the institution, but little evidence is preserved regarding these duties. Based on the preserved archives from the temple of the Sun god Šamaš at Sippar it is known that *naditū* were working there. Because a *nadītu* was not permitted to have children of her own, she was without a caretaker. It was not infrequent for a *nadītu* to adopt a child, preferably a younger *nadītu*, to take care of her when needed in old age and after she had passed away.[69]

§2.2 Burial preparations

For a proper burial, several steps needed to be taken before the deceased could properly leave for the Netherworld. It was preferable for someone to die at home, in the presence of loved ones. As can be deduced from the literary text *Lulil and His Sister*, Ašgi has just died, and his sister performs the necessary steps in preparation for his burial*:*

> *After you have called my "his spirit is released" fetch me the bed! Set up a chair and seat the statue (on it)! Place the garment on the chair and cover the statue (with it)! Place the bread offering and wipe it! Pour out the water into the libation pipe, pour it in the dust of the Netherworld!*[70]

His body was placed on a funerary bed, after which a special ritual was recited to release the spirit from the body in order for it to be capable to travel to the Netherworld. A chair was placed next to the bed for the released spirit to sit on. The statue resembles the spirit, sitting on the chair and clothed in a fine garment.[71] Through the use of the figurine the spirit is ritually purified wiping it with bread.[72] This is analogous to the literary composition of *The Traveller and the Maiden*, the latter also wipes the late traveller with bread to purify him.[73]

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[67] CAD, N1, 63; Gwendolyn Leick, *Historical Dictionary of Mesopotamia* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 123–4 ; Lucile Barberon, "Adoptions involving Old Babylonian Women Dedicated to a God and their Husbands," *JEOL* 46 (2016-2017): 59.
[68] Leick, *Historical Dictionary of Mesopotamia*, 124.
[69] Leick, *Historical Dictionary of Mesopotamia*, 124. For more information about the involvement of *nadītu* women in adoption contracts, see: Barberon, "Adoptions involving Old Babylonian Women Dedicated to a God and their Husbands," *JEOL* 46 (2016-2017); Lucile Barberon, *Les Religieuses et le Culte de Marduk dans le Royaume de Babylone* (Paris: SEPOA, 2012).
[70] Translation Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 206–7.
[71] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 209.
[72] Andrew C. Cohen, *Death Rituals, Ideology, and the Development of Early Mesopotamian Kingship: towards a New Understanding of Iraq's Royal Cemetery of Ur* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 71.
[73] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 203. According to Katz, both literary texts describe the same ritual, but in different time periods. *Lulil and His Sister* describe the event just before burial, while *The Traveler and the Maiden* takes place after burial, indicating a monthly recurring *kispu*-ritual. See Katz, *The*

Thereafter she performs a libation ritual by pouring water into the grave. Not described in this text is that usually the body was cleaned, and anointed, and subsequently dressed. For a short period, the body was prepared to be seen by the public.[74] Thereafter, the body was buried. The deceased was provided with funerary goods and personal belongings, which could be used on the journey, during one's sojourn in the Netherworld, or as presents for the Netherworld gods. For example, in the literary text *The Death of Urnammu*, the Ur III king, Ur-Nammu, presents gifts and holds a banquet for the gods of the Netherworld as a sign of worship and possibly of hope for a good position in the afterlife.[75] In addition, he was buried with travel provisions, namely a chariot and a donkey, for his journey to the Netherworld. Other remnants of chariots and donkeys have been found in graves dating to the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900–2288 BC).[76] Additionally, vessels that contained food, such as "meat, fish, barley, and dates", were buried alongside the body to sustain the deceased on his or her journey to the Netherworld.[77] The amount and variety of personal belongings and grave goods depended on wealth and status. Whereas King Ur-Nammu could afford a chariot, a donkey, and an extravagant banquet, less fortunate people would provide their dead with "pottery vessels, stone beads, a copper pin, or the like".[78]

§2.3 Wealth and status

Wealth and status were also discernible with regard to burial. Rich families and the royal family could afford an opulent burial. For example, at Uruk the king and his family were interred in crypts, as were the kings of Assyria, who were laid to rest in sarcophagi and crypts in the palace at Assur. At Ur mausolea have been recovered where the Ur III kings Šulgi and Amar-Sîn were buried; "altars and libation facilities were constructed above the underground crypts."[79] Other individuals were buried alongside the kings, and it has been argued that this could denote human sacrifice, which is primarily attested in the Early Dynastic graves at Ur.[80] Unfortunately the graves have been disturbed and looted, but it is likely that they were filled

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Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources, 207–8; Cohen, *Death Rituals, Ideology, and the Development of Early Mesopotamian Kingship*,71.

[74] Jo Ann Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East,* ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan,1995): 1884.

[75] Katz, "Death they dispensed to Mankind," 66; Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Mesopotamia," 1884.

[76] Katz, "Death they dispensed to mankind," 73.

[77] Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1884.

[78] Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1884.

[79] Helga Vogel, "Death and Burial," in *The Sumerian World,* ed. Harriet Crawford (New York: Routledge, 2013), 425.

[80] Julian Reade, "The Royal Tombs of Ur," in *Art of the First Cities. The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*, eds. Joan Aruz, and Ronal Wallenfels (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), 95–6.

with lavish grave goods.[81] People of lower status could not afford such burials. Instead the body of the deceased was interred in a wooden or clay coffin or, alternatively, a cloth or reed mats were made to wrap the body in.[82] Ritual burial has been accounted for since prehistoric times, "signifying that the belief in life beyond the grave is ancient."[83] Inhumation instead of cremation was the standard in Mesopotamia. The latter was out of the question because the bones were seen as the important link between the ghost and its receiving of the proper rituals by living descendants. If the bones were destroyed the ghost would not be able to reach the Netherworld nor to receive the necessary offerings to sustain itself. According to Enkidu in the Sumerian literary text *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, the ghost would cease to exist when cremated.[84] Inhumation was thus desired.

§2.4 Location of burial

The commonest place to bury recently deceased family members was beneath the floors of their descendants' houses; however, the number of burials that have been found beneath houses is not believed to account for the total number of burials that would have been the case. There is evidence for the use of cemeteries, but not in great number; however, this may be the result of excavation methods which failed to include cemeteries outside of cities.[85] Laneri explains that during the third millennium BC, cemeteries were in use, in which people were buried either in a funerary grave, a cist grave, or in *pithoi*. The cemeteries were located inside or just outside the city gate centre. During the course of the third millennium BC entering the beginning of the second millennium BC, a transition is noticeable. Instead of extramural burials located in one place, deceased family members were buried beneath the floors of private houses, belonging to their living family.[86] Laneri ascribes this to a change in political, economic and social factors that occurred during this period.[87] Burials were accompanied by mourning "in which mourners expressed grief through lamentations and changes in their modes of dress and grooming".[88] Lamentations could be performed by the

[81] T. M. Sharlach, *An Ox of One's Own. Royal Wives and Religion at the Court of the Third Dynasty of Ur* (Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter, 2017), 184–6.
[82] Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1884.
[83] Katz, "Death they dispensed to mankind," 56.
[84] George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 144.
[85] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," 23.
[86] Based on a case-study: the city of Titriş Höyük. See Nicola Laneri, "A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E," *American Anthropological Association* 20, no. 1 (2011): 125.
[87] These factors will be touched upon in more detail in chapter 4 of this paper.
[88] Cohen, *Death Rituals, Ideology, and the Development of early Mesopotamian kingship*, 15.

family of the deceased or specialized people could be asked to recite lamentations.[89] Distinct outfits were worn during this period of mourning. Based on the literary text *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, Gilgameš instructs Enkidu to wear dirty garments and to walk into the Netherworld barefoot to appear as a mourner instead of a newly arrived ghost; the deceased were dressed in fine clothes and anointed during the preparations for burial.[90] Besides wearing dirty clothes, "weeping, beating the breast, pouring dust on the head and/or body, sitting on a stool or the ground, and falling to the ground" are common mourning gestures described in texts or depicted in art.[91] The duration of the mourning period remains obscure, however. An inscription dated to the period of the Neo-Babylonian King Nabonidus informs us that seven days of mourning were announced regarding the death of his mother.[92] This is the only preserved attestation to the duration of the mourning period. Because the inscription refers to a royal and dates to the first millennium BC, it cannot be related to mourning in general. It is possible that variations in mourning duration existed throughout time, and between people of different status.

§2.5 The *kispu*-ritual

The involvement of the family in burying their loved ones contains another important ritual, namely the *kispu* (Sum. KI.SÌ.GA). Tsukimoto has provided a great deal of research on the topic, and he defines the ritual as "*Totenpflege*", which means "care for the dead". Possibly the Sumerian term is derived from the verb *kasāpu,* which means "to break apart". It has been suggested that it refers to the "breaking of bread together at a common meal", which was part of the KI.SIG (i.e. *kispu*).[93] The ritual involves three important aspects, the first two of which were to provide the dead with food (*kispa kasāpu*) and water (*mê naqû*); the latter was poured onto the grave or through a libation pipe, which was inserted into the ground and connected to the grave.[94] Irrespective of being a ghost, it depended on its family members for food and water, because it "continued to feel hunger and thirst."[95] The third aspect involved

[89] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," 24.
[90] Nikki Zwitser, "The Mesopotamian Netherworld through the Archaeology of Grave Goods and Textual Sources in the Early Dynastic III Period to the Old Babylonian Period," (PhD diss., Ghent University, 2017), 31.
[91] Myer I. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 401.
[92] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," 24.
[93] Akio Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im alten Mesopotamien* (Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukrichener Verlag, 1985), 24–5.
[94] Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," 116; Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege*, 230.
[95] JoAnn Scurlock, "Mortal and Immortal Souls, Ghosts and the (Restless) Dead in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Religion Compass* 10, no. 4 (2016): 77.

calling the names of the deceased forebears (*šuma zakāru*)[96]. This way the family members were ritually called from the Netherworld to accompany the living descendants and enjoy a meal, which in turn, not only strengthened the family ties between them but ensured that the deceased would live on in the minds of family members, because invoking the name signified calling someone into existence.[97]

Care for the dead was a recurring event; the *kispu* was performed each month during the time of the new moon, during which the moon was invisible to the human eye.[98] The darkness of the sky was perceived as a period when the world of the living and the realm of the dead stood in close proximity to each other, making it easier for the ghosts to arise from their dark subterranean dwelling into the world of the living. The *pāqidu* was expected to ensure the performance of the ritual; however, when he or she neglected the duties, he or she could expect the anger of the deceased forebears, who would come and haunt him or her until the necessary rituals were realized. Ghosts without a caretaker or family, who as a consequence had not received a (proper) burial, were responsible for inflicting disease upon the living or for causing trouble.[99] To counter this, the inflicted person performed a *kispu* for the restless ghost, who in turn transitioned from a non-existent entity to a commemorated and existing being.[100] An alternative was to ask protection from one's deceased forebears to combat the harasser:

> *You are the ghosts of my family who have created all: my father, my grandfather, my mother, my grandmother, my brothers, my sisters, my family, my kith and kin, as many as lie in the ground. I have performed your memorial rites, libated water for you, cared for you, glorified you, and honoured you… Grab and bring down into the grave the evil spy-demon, the evil-doer who has attached himself to me and evilly persecuted me! May he not approach, come near or get close to me! May he not waft over to me or spy on me! May, I, your servant, live and get well!*[101]

[96] Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," 116.
[97] Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," 117; Cohen, *Death Rituals, Ideology, and the Development of Early Mesopotamian Kingship*, 106.
[98] At Mari, the *kispu* was performed twice a month: during the full moon and new moon. In Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege*, 62–4.
[99] Not only restless ghosts, but also demons were capable of inflicting disease upon the living. They were sent by the gods. See Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 63.
[100] Macdougal, "Ancient Mesopotamian Remembrance and the Family Dead," 263–5.
[101] Cited from Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind," 29. See: Walter Faber, *Beschwörungsrituale an Istar und Dumuzi. Attī Ištar ša Ḫarmaša Dumuzi. Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission. Band xxx* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977), 151–3.

Apart from protection, forebears could also be magically invoked through necromancy to be consulted about specific matters or asked for advice. Necromancy was usually performed by a specialist on behalf of the troubled person: "the typical method was to use magical salves smeared on the practitioner's face or on the ghost figurine or skull used to manipulate him."[102]

§2.6 Conclusion

Interment was the proper way to put a person to rest. The family decided who would act as the *pāqidu* to take the responsibility for the performance of the necessary funerary rituals and to properly bury the body to ensure safe passage and admittance to the realm of the dead. Usually this was done by the eldest son, but in his absence also daughters, or adopted sons or daughters, could take on this responsibility.[103] Depending on the family's financial situation and status, grave goods, travel provisions, and gifts to the Netherworld gods were placed in the grave next to the body. People in the third millennium BC were generally buried in cemeteries; however, more residential burials have been attested at the turn of the third into the second millennium BC.[104] Libation pipes have been discovered that were connected to the grave to feed the dead every month during the new moon. This *kispu* ritual also involved invoking the name of the deceased forebears to magically invite them into the presence of the living and to reinforce the family bonds. The parties were mutually dependent: the forebears depended on receiving the *kispu,* but the living could ask their advice through necromancy or for protection against demons.[105]

[102] Scurlock, "Mortal and Immortal Souls, Ghosts and the (Restless) Dead in Ancient Mesopotamia," 80.
[103] Macdougal, "Remembrance and the Dead in Second Millennium BC Mesopotamia," 5.
[104] Laneri, "A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E," 125.
[105] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind," 28-9. Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege*, 230.

Chapter 3: The realm of the dead

According to the Mesopotamians, the ghost of the deceased would enter the Netherworld after death, where it would reside for eternity, if it had been given a proper burial including the necessary rituals. It would be cared for and remembered by its kin, who performed the *kispu* each month. This chapter focusses on a small number of environmental factors that could explain the creation of the concept of death or, more specifically, the concept of the Netherworld.

§3.1 The image of the Netherworld

The characteristics and conditions of the Mesopotamian Netherworld are formulated in three literary texts, namely *The Epic of Gilgameš, Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld,* and *Nergal and Ereškigal.* It is striking that these passages are almost identical, apart from minor details: the Netherworld is a dark and gloomy place where ghosts remain for eternity without escape back to the world of the living. Good food and clear water are nowhere to be found; only clay and muddy water were there to be consumed by the ghosts. However, the deceased forebears could not sustain themselves by eating dust and clay; instead, they depended on their living kin. Many incantations are directed to restless ghosts who did not receive a proper meal and would escape the Netherworld to haunt the living, demanding food and water. Looking at these conditions and the portrayal of the realm of the dead, they do resemble the appearance of a grave.[106] A grave is a hole in the ground consisting of dirt and dust; as the grave is closed, no light enters it, and the body rests in darkness.

Interment was the only way to dispose of the corpse, while still allowing the ghost to receive the *kispu*. The bones formed the connection between the ritual and the ghost. Cremation or burning the bones would be devasting, and the ghost would cease to exist. Leaving the body unburied was also considered detrimental, as it made the ghost unable to receive the ritual.[107] The bones needed to be left in peace and were required to be placed below the ground in a ritual manner. Interment has been practised for millennia in Mesopotamia since the pre-pottery Neolithic phase (ca. 10.000–6500 BC),[108] which could be a good reason for its continuation until the Persian invasion by Cyrus the Great. In addition,

[106] Katz, "Death they dispensed to mankind," 68.
[107] F. Dorie Mansen, *The Unremembered Dead. The Non-Burial Motif in the Hebrew Bible* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2018), 80.
[108] *RIA 3*, "Grab," 581–593: The first attested evidence is at Ali Kosh (Iran).

the provision of grave goods also dates to prehistoric times, indicating that the existence of an afterlife was deemed real.[109] The continued use of interment for millennia likely created the concept of the essentiality of burial, as mentioned in the literary texts above, along with the taboo against cremation and leaving the corpse to decompose in the open air.

§3.2 Location

The Mesopotamians believed in an existence beyond their current lives, but where was this realm of the dead located? Sources have mentioned several options regarding its whereabouts. According to Mesopotamian cosmology mentioned earlier, the Netherworld was believed to be the lowest layer, situated below the Earth where the people and animals lived and subsequently below the *Apsu,* the residence of Enki.[110] The realm of the dead was accessible by the gods via a stairway that led to the heavenly layers. For the recently departed, their next abode was reached via the Road of No Return, which started at the grave. The association of the grave with the Netherworld is mentioned in sources such as *Lulil and His Sister,* where the latter was asked to pour water into her late brother's grave*:*

Pour it into the libation pipe, to the dust of the Netherworld.[111]

To sustain the dead, family members poured water on top of graves or through a pipe stuck into the ground and connected to the grave. As a result, the water could be directly channelled through the pipe to the bones and, therefore, to the ghost residing in the Netherworld. The pipes and graves dug into the ground throughout Mesopotamia indicate that the Netherworld was believed to be situated beneath the ground. However, the Netherworld was not considered to be directly below their feet. The Road of No Return implies that the Netherworld was located some distance apart, as the ghost had to travel to its final destination.[112]

Next to the location of the Netherworld somewhere deep below ground, there are mentions of other locations as well, for example, in the west:

For Ereškigal, queen of the place of sunset.[113]

[109] *RIA 3,* "Grabbeigabe," 606.
[110] Rochberg, "Mesopotamian Cosmology," 306–7.
[111] *Lulil and His Sister.* Translation from Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 207.
[112] Katz, "Death they dispensed to mankind," 71.
[113] CDLI P462101, line 1–2. Translation by Daniel A. Foxvog.
https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/archival_view.php?ObjectID=P462101

This text, dating from around the Old Akkadian period (2288–2111 BC), was written in honour of Ereškigal, for whom a temple was built. The governor of Umma, called Lu-Utu, erected this monument for her and poured a libation in front of the building. Ereškigal is addressed in the above quotation as queen of the place of sunset, symbolizing the realm of the dead and alluding to the idea that its location lies in the west. Another source dating from the Old Babylonian period also hints at a relationship between the Netherworld and the west:

In the Arali the path is laid out for them, in the grave the gate is open for them, they leave toward the gate of sunset.[114]

The above is part of an incantation directed towards evil spirits, explaining where they were coming from. The road and gate leading to the world of the living were opened so the evil spirits could set forth to their intended victim. *Arali* is associated with the Netherworld; however, it originally denoted the land area between the cities of Uruk and Badtibira. Over time, the name transitioned from a geographical meaning towards an alternative designation for the Netherworld. The evil spirits could depart from the realm of the dead by using this path laid out for them and going through the gate of sunset to enter the world of the living. This description signifies that the entryway to the Netherworld was located in the west. For Šamaš and Ištar, who embody the sun and the planet Venus, respectively, the gate towards the Netherworld was situated in the west because that is where they set. However, Katz suggests that the gate of sunset is used as a euphemism for the grave, as graves were not dug in the west, but in each city throughout Mesopotamia.[115] Still, the grave in *Lulil and his sister* is associated with the Netherworld itself:

Pour it into the libation pipe, to the dust of the Netherworld.[116]

The purpose of pouring water into the pipe was to nourish the ghost living in the Netherworld. In reality, the pipe was connected to the grave, and therefore, the dust of the Netherworld symbolizes the grave itself, where the bones were put to rest. However, the water eventually reached the ghost symbolically in the realm of the dead.

Apart from its location below ground or in the west, a different perspective existed that situated the Netherworld in the east. This perspective was based on a designation for the Netherworld, which is KUR. Apart from the realm of the dead, this Sumerian word could also

[114] CT 16, 9 i 1–10. In Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 338–341.
[115] Katz, "Death they dispensed to mankind," 71–72.
[116] *Lulil and his sister.* Translation from Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 207.

denote “mountain” and “foreign (hostile) land”.[117] A large mountain range called the Zagros Mountains formed the eastern border of Mesopotamia. Before the Semites invaded the Sumerian city states halfway through the third millennium BC, the Sumerians perceived these places as foreign and likely hostile. Consequently, these characteristics were allotted to the Netherworld in Sumerian literary sources as well, hence the name the KUR for the realm of the dead and likely its location. This identification is strengthened further with the opposition between KUR and KALAM, the latter referring to their land Sumer, which was known and safe. This linguistic distinction forms the opposition between their known land and the foreign territory beyond the Zagros and also the opposition between the land of the living and the realm of the dead. The idea of the Netherworld in the east disappeared slowly when the Semites took over and explored the uncharted territory. As a consequence, the unknown, foreign land became familiar and was incorporated into KALAM. Therefore, KUR could no longer embody the meanings of a (hostile) foreign land and the eastern mountains. These new characteristics did not suit the original characteristics, which were still embodied in the Netherworld. However, the distinction of KUR-KALAM to denote the realm of the dead versus the land of the living still prevailed. The Netherworld was still designated as KUR, but the latter was disassociated from its geographical and political denotations.[118]

§3.3 Political city

The Sumerian cities were not all the same, but overall, they shared some elements typical of a Sumerian city state. Most were equipped with a wall surrounding the city to defend its inhabitants from potential threats. Within the city gates were houses, shops, market spaces, palaces and temples in honour of the gods, the main one belonging to the city god. Each city had its patron god, who owned and protected the city and the cultivated land outside the city walls. The ruler (LUGAL or ENSI) “acted as the city god’s human deputy and managed the assets of the city as a whole” on his behalf.[119] The citizens of the city occupied jobs as temple personnel or were employed in the palace. Others were specialized as merchants, bankers, scribes, accountants, craftsmen, artisans, or farmers.[120]

[117] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 105.
[118] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 105–9.
[119] Aage Westenholz, “The Sumerian City-State,” in *A Comparative Study of Six City-State Cultures,* ed. Mogens Herman Hansen (Copenhagen: Reitzels Forlag, 2002), 28–9.
[120] Westenholz, “The Sumerian City-State,” 29–30.

It has been argued that the realm of the dead resembles the Sumerian city state with regard to politics and social order. To run a large territory inhabited by an infinite number of ghosts, queen Ereškigal and her consort Nergal had several subordinates to help them maintain order.[121] Ningišzida, an important Netherworld god, became known as the "chair-bearer", an office mentioned in sources dating from the Old Akkadian period to the Old Babylonian period.[122] He occupied this office from the Old Babylonian period onward; his responsibilities were that "he guides the laws (Á-ÁG-GÁ) and traditions of the Earth, he also controls evil spirits and demons together with" Neti, the guardian of the Netherworld's seven gates.[123] Geštinana occupied the role of chief scribe, recording the names of the newly arrived ghosts. Namtar acted as vizier and messenger of Ereškigal. Gilgameš and Urnammu, who bore the title of LUGAL acted as judges of the Netherworld. These occupations do relate to the ones of the Sumerian city state, signifying "that the realm of the dead was politically and socially conceived according to the model of the terrestrial city and that official positions in the administration system were held by divinities, according to their rank in the pantheon."[124] In addition, the order of the Netherworld was also maintained based on laws and punishments based on several terms mentioned in sources discussing the realm of the dead. These terms include ME, Á-ÁG-GÁ, and DI-KU_5. For example, Inanna tried to steal the ME away from Ereškigal, which is considered a source that "embodies the essence of all aspects of life, all the institutions, offices, and functions in the Sumerian world."[125] This in itself symbolizes the Netherworld as a community that values justice and order, just like the city state. Justice was also served, as Inanna was punished by being put to death for stealing the ME. As mentioned before, Á-ÁG-GÁ is associated with law and order itself, and DI-KU_5 means "judge".[126] This points to a legal system in place in the Netherworld which resembles that of a city state in the world of the living.

§3.4 Hierarchy

A social hierarchy existed among the gods who inhabited the Netherworld. The gods occupied jobs that were associated with their rank in the pantheon, as discussed in the

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[121] Unfortunately, even though a long list of Netherworld gods is known, for some their occupation remains obscure. Literary and magical sources inform us about some of these gods and their functions. See: Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources,* 383.
[122] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources,* 172.
[123] Frans Wiggerman, *RIA,* band 9, 371.
[124] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 170.
[125] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 177.
[126] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 181–5; 190.

previous paragraph, and it has been argued that a social hierarchy applied to the ghosts as well. According to Sumerian literary texts, the kings Gilgameš, Etanna and Ur-nammu received a high position within the realm of the dead. Gilgameš and Ur-nammu became the judges of the Netherworld to render verdicts among the ghosts. Etanna, who is reported as the 11th king of the dynasty of Kiš according to the Sumerian king list, was mentioned on a list of deities that lived in the Netherworld. However, Etanna was not deified, and he is listed after Gilgameš at the end. He is described as holding the office of nu-banda$_3$, which means "overseer".[127] These men received a position similar to the ones they held in their previous lives. As kings were also servants of the gods, deceased kings could not rule the Netherworld, but Ereškigal and Nergal stood at the head of the hierarchy. However, no other sources mention other kings (or kings in general) occupying an office with similar responsibilities, let alone what position the people of Mesopotamia would be given. One exception is in the *Death of Urnammu,* when the late Ur III king entered the Netherworld and was announced by several priests who seem to have retained their office in the realm of the dead.[128]

The archaeological record shows evidence that people would acquire a similar position in the realm of the dead, or at least they hoped that they would. When financially able, the deceased were provided with grave goods attached to them for different purposes. Some goods were given as provisions for the journey to the Netherworld, others were offered as gifts to the Netherworld gods, and personal items were given to the deceased to be used in the afterlife. Some graves contained more grave goods and more valuable items than others. For example, clothes, jewellery, lavish amounts of food, and weapons were provided to the wealthy deceased, while only pottery vessels were excavated from poorer graves.[129] The value and amount of the goods signified the social status of the departed person and conveyed this message to the gods in the hopes of receiving a similar status in the afterlife. The grave goods may have been considered helpful, however, probably slightly less emphasis needs to be put on them. Receiving the *kispu* was of greater importance, because ghosts depended on their loved ones to sustain them with food and drink. Even if the ghost was previously part of a

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[127] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 120–1.
[128] Lines 79–81. *Death of Ur-Namma. A version from Nippur.* ETCSL. https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr2411.htm
[129] Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1884; Akio Tsukimoto, "Aspekte von *kispu(m)* als Totenbeigabe," in *Death in Mesopotamia. XXVIe Rencontre assyriologique international,* ed. Bendt Alster (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 131.

wealthy family, this wealth loses all meaning when his family does not sustain him, and he is left "to eat a bread-loaf like a kiln-fired brick" [130] or the dust and clay from the Netherworld.

The importance of a proper burial is also emphasised in the Hammurabi law code and royal inscriptions. The Middle Assyrian legal code states that a pregnant woman who deliberately terminates the pregnancy and is found guilty will be impaled without receiving a burial.[131] Moreover, kings of the Neo-Assyrian period punished their enemies by taking or crushing their bones or leaving the bodies to rot on the open field without giving them a proper burial.[132] The disturbance of the bones and denying proper burial made the ghost incapable of entering the Netherworld and receiving the *kispu*.[133] The literary text *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld* also puts less emphasis on status as a prerequisite for a good afterlife but states that having more sons increases the quality of the afterlife. The ghost with only one son "bitterly laments over a peg set in his wall."[134] However, someone blessed with five sons lives the life of a good scribe; someone with six sons to take care of him is as "cheerful as a ploughman."[135] It is worth noting that the life of a cheerful ploughman is considered a better way of living in comparison to the life of a scribe. Nevertheless, according to the Sumerian texts, there seems to be a positive correlation between the number of sons and the quality of the afterlife. In addition, it was essential that everyone from the poor to the royal circle received the good-will and support of their living family members to sustain them and to be remembered.[136]

§3.5 Conclusion

The performance of burial has been the standard way of laying a person to rest since the pre-pottery Neolithic phase. In addition, placing grave goods in the grave dates to prehistoric times. As Mesopotamian beliefs were based on concrete and material things, it was likely hard for them to consider that death was final.[137] The act of interment and the placing of grave goods imply that "something survives of a human being after death" and "that something escapes the grasp of the corpse and goes somewhere."[138] Over time the concept of death

[130] George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 143.
[131] MAL A.53. Cited in: Mansen, *The Unremembered Dead. The Non-Burial Motif in the Hebrew Bible*, 83.
[132] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," 28.
[133] E.g. Ashurbanipal RINAP 003, vi 79-85; 011, vi 70-6; 217, 8'.
[134] George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 142.
[135] Lines 262–267. *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the nether world: translation. Version A, from Nibru, Urim, and elsewhere*. Translation from ETCSL: https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr1814.htm
[136] Tsukimoto, "Aspekte von *kispu(m)* als Totenbeigabe," 131.
[137] Bottéro, "La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne," 27.
[138] Finkel, *The First Ghosts. Most Ancient of Legacies,* 5.

evolved, and the body became a vital link to sustain the ghosts. Textual sources mention three perspectives on the location of the realm of the dead. An early conception locates the Netherworld in the east in the Zagros mountains. However, this idea slowly faded away as the KUR lost its geographical meaning and became a neutral designation for Netherworld.[139] Another perspective places the Netherworld in the west: the place of sunset. This location seems only to be used as an entryway solely for the gods and as a euphemism to denote the grave itself, implying that the Netherworld was perceived to be beneath the ground.[140] These perspectives show a foundation on geography using the unknown hostile Zagros mountains as a potential location, but also the place where the sun sets, or a location below one's feet as graves were dug to place the body into. The Sumerian city states and the Netherworld do show some similarities, which indicates that the Sumerian city state influenced the portrayal of the Netherworld. The gods were in charge of Sumerian cities, where each city had their own patron god; this was reflected in sources that dealt with the Netherworld, whose patron god or queen was Ereškigal. Similarly, Sumerian cities and the Netherworld were each run by a leader with several subordinates occupying similar offices to help him or her rule. The terrestrial cities and the Netherworld incorporated similar laws, rendered judgement, and meted punishment when necessary.

[139] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 244.
[140] Katz, "Death they dispensed to mankind," 71–72.

Chapter 4: Death and burial

Four aspects related to the realm of the dead have been discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter focusses on elements regarding death and burial practices. First, the burial transition will be discussed, followed by the period of mourning, and finally, the Sumerian designation for spirit.

§4.1 Burial transition

Interment of the body was essential, as cremation would destroy the existence of the body and its ghost, and foregoing burial would result in a ghost that was doomed to roam the Earth without permittance to enter the Netherworld. For a proper burial, two methods of interment existed that the Mesopotamians could choose: either burial in the local cemetery or interment within the city "underneath the floors of houses, streets, and squares."[141] Unfortunately, archaeological evidence for the use of cemeteries is scarce due to excavation methods which are more focussed on excavating the settlement itself. As a result, apart from a few exceptions,[142] cemeteries outside the city gates remain buried and untouched.[143] In addition, the exact locations of cemeteries, either inside or outside of cities, remain unknown.[144] This discrepancy also skews the perception that intramural burial was favoured above interment in cemeteries, as quite an amount of evidence for residential burials has been found. However, references to intramural interment in letters are scarce during the Old Babylonian Period, except for the following letter:

> *Twenty days ago your sister Narāmtum died (...). Her sister has taken her away and buried her in her house.*[145]

In this passage, it is explicitly mentioned that this woman is buried within her house. Another reference is made in a Sumerian hymn dedicated to the Šamaš:

> *Let the dead man eat in front of his house, let him drink water in his house, let him sleep in the shade of his house.*[146]

[141] Marc Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83.
[142] E.g., the Royal Cemetery at Ur; cemetery at Titriş Höyük.
[143] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," 23.
[144] Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, 83.
[145] AbB 1, 140. In Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria & Israel. Continuity & Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 60, footnote 95.
[146] Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria & Israel. Continuity & Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 60.

The hymn above alludes to the *kispu* and the location of its performance. The man is provided with food and drink at his house. A euphemism is used to denote the place of burial, which is in the house. “The shade of his house” refers to the secluded place of the dwelling. “Sleep” is an expression used to denote the deceased resting in his grave.[147] It was common to bury the bodies somewhere in the back of the house, where they enjoyed the most privacy to rest; this room was considered the bedroom.[148] A funerary chamber was dug out underneath the bedroom, where several individuals were buried. This implies that the burial chamber was opened repeatedly to place the recently departed next to other deceased family members. Alternatively, the deceased were buried underneath the floor in “simple pits, *pithoi,* or clay coffins.”[149]

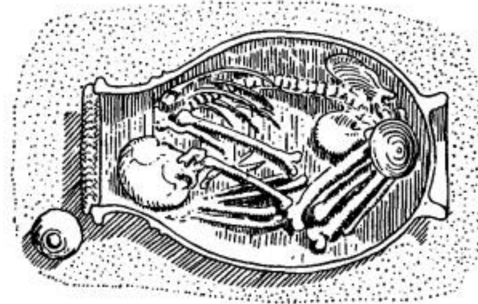

Figure 5: pithoi. From RIA 3, 582. Based on Reuther (1926), figure 105.

Observations have been made that during the turn of the third millennium BC into the second millennium BC, people started to bury their dead inside their homes in place of extramural burials. The close relationship between the deceased and their living kin is evident, especially during this period.[150] This increase in social cohesion has been attributed to economic and political changes that were taking place at that time. During the Ur III period (2110-2003 BC), the region of Sumer and Akkad was controlled by the institution of the Ur III kings. Due to its complex economic and political system, the region experienced prosperity and wealth.[151] After its downfall, the region became a mosaic of smaller city states, each competing for its own independent existence.[152] This allowed some families to participate in the newly arising long-distance trade, gaining and profiting from access to valuable commodities and other raw materials. In addition, they gained more independence from the previously pivotal role of the temple in the distribution system, which allowed them to sell their surpluses to a greater extent and subsequently improve their social status. As a result,

[147] Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria & Israel. Continuity & Change in the Forms of Religious Life,* 60, 125–6.
[148] Sara Tricoli, “The Old-Babylonian Family Cult and its Projection on the Ground: A Cross-Disciplinary Investigation,” in *La famille dans le Proche-Orient ancient: réalités symbolismes et images* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 63; Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria & Israel*, 61.
[149] Laneri, “A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E,” 124.
[150] Laneri, “A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E,” 121.
[151] Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East: ca. 3000-323 BC*, 82–83.
[152] Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 87.

new social groups emerged: merchants and entrepreneurs. In addition, a new ethnic group called the Amorites entered Mesopotamia, mingling with the local people. This blending subsequently brought about the idea of forming new social identities among the people.[153]

During this period of economic and social development, a change in burial location took place, whereby residential burials became more predominant than extramural interment. It has been suggested that at this time families tried to enhance family ties with their ancestors to a greater extent. The new emerging social groups sought to consolidate their acquired wealth and status, emphasizing their family lineage as essential.[154] The Amorites could have inspired this method, as "the long patrilineal genealogy of the OB period was a nomadic innovation."[155] In any case, reinforcing family ties called for the protection of their ancestors, who ensured "the integrity of the family,"[156] a new fruitful way of life, and protection when needed from certain risks inherent in long-term trade.[157]

§4.2 Mourning duration

The death of a loved one is accompanied by grief, mourning, and bereavement. The latter "refers to the period after loss during which grief and mourning occur(…); it is the state of having experienced a loss (…); mourning is the outward and active expression of grief (…),"[158] which "may be affected by personality, culture, religion, the nature of the relationship with the deceased person and the way in which he or she died."[159] When looking at ancient and modern cultures, there are differences in the way the bereaved express themselves. For example, the mourners in Mesopotamia are depicted as being ungroomed and clothed in dirty garments, with their hair unkempt or covered and with the women scratching their bodies and pulling their hair out.[160] Alternatively, Hindus express themselves in a more

[153] Zuzanna Wygnańska, "Burial in the time of the Amorites. The Middle Bronze Age Burial Customs from a Mesopotamian Perspective," *Ägypten und Levante/Egypt and the Levant* 29 (2019): 381.
[154] Laneri, "A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E," 121.
[155] Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," 123.
[156] Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria & Israel. Continuity & Change in the Forms of Religious Life*, 62–3.
[157] Laneri, "A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E," 131.
[158] Edith Buglass, "Grief and bereavement theories," *Nursing Standard* 24, no. 41 (June 16–June 22, 2010): 44.
[159] Buglass, "Grief and bereavement theories," 44.
[160] Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1886.

reserved fashion, as the deceased does not die but reincarnates in cycles occupying different lifetimes. In this context, intense mourning is believed to hinder the reincarnation process.[161]

One aspect, however, seems to be present in several cultures: a correlation between the duration of the mourning period and the amount of time that the deceased were believed to travel to reach the afterlife or a new life. Unfortunately, the archaeological record lacks evidence regarding mourning duration in Mesopotamia, except for one reference in an inscription dating from the first millennium BC. The mother of the Neo-Babylonian King Nabonidus had died, and a mourning period of seven days and seven nights was announced.[162] However, this one attestation cannot be generalized for several reasons. Firstly, Mesopotamian history comprises thousands of years involving alterations, meaning that mourning may not have lasted seven days, during the Old Babylonian period. Secondly, the inscription describes the death of a royal family member, which prevents the custom from being applied to the common people. Thirdly, the manifestation of mourning in the royal cult was likely more lavish and extended for a longer time than in the non-royal cult of the dead, depending on financial factors. Finally, this inscription only informs us about mourning duration, but it remains inconclusive whether the seven days of mourning are equal to the number of days it took for the spirit of King Nabonidus' mother to travel to the Netherworld.

Considering other modern and ancient cultures, mourning duration has been correlated to the length of the journey to the Netherworld. For example, in Buddhism, it is believed that the soul is reincarnated. There are variations with regard to the length of the mourning period in Buddhist traditions; however, the Tantric Buddhism that developed in Central Asia and especially Tibet around the 7th century BC maintains a mourning period of 49 days. This is believed to be the maximum time needed for someone to depart from his previous life and step into his new life.[163] In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the third, eight, and fortieth day after the funeral "memorial services are held at which psalms are chanted. These mark the passage of the soul on its journey."[164] It is believed that the deceased grieves his or her own

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[161] Joshua M. Gold, "Generating a Vocabulary of Mourning: Supporting Families Through the Process of Grieve," *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 28, no. 3 (2020): 237.
[162], Cited in Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," 19. From James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 561ff.
[163] Matt Stefon, "Bardo Thödol. Tibetan Buddhist text," *Britannica.* https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bardo-Thodol.
[164] Colin Murray Parkes, Pittu Laungani, and Bill Young, *Death and Bereavement across Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 138.

death and spend the first three days wandering the Earth.[165] During this time the family of the deceased provides him with food and drink to sustain the soul and alleviate his or her grief.[166] Subsequently, the personal Guardian Angel guides the person towards God. The first five days he or she observes the souls who went to heaven. Then the person spends the following month watching the tormented souls in Hell. After experiencing these fates, the soul appears before God to receive his or her own judgement.[167] The ancient Egyptians mourned until the body was prepared and the Opening of the Mouth ritual was performed, transforming the deceased into an *akh* and activating the five senses for the deceased to use in the afterlife. Afterwards, the deceased spent a final meal with his or her mourning family before entering the tomb. Once the mummy was placed in its grave, after the necessary rituals and prayers, the deceased journeyed to the Netherworld. It was believed that placing the mummy in his funerary chamber after travelling through the tomb, together with the Opening of the Mouth, symbolized the journey to the Netherworld and the arrival of the deceased in the realm of Osiris. This ritual likely marked the end of the mourning period.[168]

Figure 6: Harran inscription Nabonidus 1.B col. III, lines 1–30. From Gadd (1958), plate VIII.

The mourning time among the Mesopotamians could potentially be associated with the time the deceased needed to make the hazardous journey through the steppe, crossing the Ḫubur river to reach the gates of the Netherworld. The previously described cultures ended their period of grief when it was certain that the deceased had arrived at his next destination. The same could have been the case for the Mesopotamians, who feared the fate of a roaming ghost who was incapable of entering the afterlife due to improper burial or neglect of the *kispu.* In addition, family members wore

[165] Parkes, Laungani, and Young, *Death and Bereavement across Cultures*, 138.
[166] Richard D. Hecht, and Vincent F. Biondo, *Religion & Everyday Life and Culture* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 296.
[167] Parkes, Laungani, and Young, *Death and Bereavement across Cultures*, 138–9.
[168] Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, 185–7. The information is based on evidence regarding the elite and royal circles.

dirty, shabby clothes and had unkempt hair to present themselves as mourners to the outside world.[169] This practice implies that the Mesopotamians would go into mourning for a period of time; however, the exact number of days or the association with the journey to the Netherworld is uncertain. This ambiguity is present in Nabonidus' inscription regarding the death of his mother. As a member of the royal family, she could have potentially been granted a longer mourning period, which would indicate that the journey of the deceased was not associated with the duration of mourning. On the other hand, if the mourning period was linked to the journey, this would imply that the king's mother would have a longer journey to the Netherworld, crossing the hazardous steppe and river, than other Mesopotamians.

§4.3 Ghost as IM: "wind"

In Sumerian texts, the word for spirit is associated with "wind": IM (Akkadian *šāru*). After someone has taken his last breath, the body becomes lifeless, and the spirit remains locked inside. A special procedure is then performed to release the spirit and render it capable of entering the Netherworld.[170] During this phase, from the time of death to its release, the spirit is designated as "wind", as can be seen from *Lulil and His Sister*:

Mu-ná šu-te-ma-ab$_{\text{ša-ar-šu i-di-ip}}$ *im-bi ba-bar-mu un-nà*$_{\text{na}}$
After you have called my "his spirit is released" fetch me the bed![171]

The release of the spirit involves an incantation whereby the spirit, which is designated here as IM, is freed from the body. The word IM denotes the liminal phase to which the spirit is temporarily bound. The spirit transitions from "wind" to ghost as it enters the Netherworld and becomes united with the departed ancestors who reside there. This final transition is designated as GIDIM or *eṭemmu*. Only after the Old Babylonian period did it become common to designate both ghost and spirit as GIDIM (Akkadian *eṭemmu*).[172] Katz uses an incantation (KAR 21) to support her argument that a ritual was considered necessary for releasing the spirit; neglect would prevent the spirit from being released:

[169] Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1886.
[170] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 207.
[171] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 206.
[172] Katz, ""His wind is released." – The emergence of the ghost: Rite of Passage in Mesopotamia," in *Life, Death, and Coming of Age in Antiquity: Individual Rites of Passage in the Ancient Near East and Adjacent Regions,* eds. Alice Mouton and Julie Patrier (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2014), 427.

lu-u GIDIM$_4$ šá ina EDIN na-du-ma IM-šú la ed-pu / MU-šú la zak-ru
(...) or a ghost (of one) who was abandoned in the steppe and thus his spirit was not blown away (and) his name was not invoked.[173]

This incantation involves someone being harassed and oppressed by a being with bad intentions who threatens him with death. As the victim doesn't know who is terrifying him, the incantation is directed against any type of demon or ghost who could potentially be responsible, including a deceased person who was abandoned somewhere. As can be seen, the entity is designated as a ghost (i.e. GIDIM). However, it is also mentioned that his spirit (IM-*šú*) has not been released yet. How is a ghost, who transitioned from spirit to ghost after the necessary rituals had been performed, able to torment a living being if his spirit is still locked up in his body? He is not supposed to be a ghost yet. This wording contradicts the argument that the state of a ghost is not achieved, until the spirit is ritually released from the body, and upon entering the Netherworld becomes part of the family's ancestral group.

Returning to the association of spirit and wind, how did it come into existence? When confronted with the question "What happens after death?" the Mesopotamians likely sought answers in concrete and material things, things that they could grasp, as their belief system was based thereon. The idea that death is final, without any existence thereafter, likely did not come to mind. People would live on, but in a different form, as the body decomposes and only bones remain. Sights of the deceased person in dreams or other vague appearances of them are attested.[174] As an ethereal being, the soul was like wind and breath, an invisible but concrete entity, which could be the underlying reason for using IM for spirit.

The close relationship between "wind", "breath", and "soul" or "spirit" is also attested in other cultures as well.[175] In Hebrew, for example, one of the names attributed to the soul is *ruach*. This term is used to denote a wide scope of concepts, but it usually alludes to the breath of God, wind, and spirit.[176] God had the power to infuse *ruach,* or "breath", into a human being through his nostrils, which made the body become alive and acquire consciousness. Next to "breath of life", it also designates spirit, meaning "an individual,

[173] Text 10 (KAR 21, 11–12). In Jo Ann Scurlock, *Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 197–8.
[174] Bottéro, "La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne," 27–8.
[175] Oxley and Russell, "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath," 8. For an interdisciplinary overview see: Rebecca Oxley and Andrew Russell, "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath," *Body & Society* 26, no. 2 (2020): 3–29.
[176] Oxley and Russell, "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath," 6.

conscious being distinct from the body."[177] The Khoi tribes also believed in the relationship between wind, breath and soul. Everyday wind is seen in their culture as the normal wind that blows across the land, but, at the same time, it is God's breath of life. When breathing, the soul /*om* is taken in and out, the latter of which also refers to breath. Each and every living being has received a specific wind that stands for the gift of life, which is expressed among others through breathing.[178]

§4.4 Conclusion

A transition from extramural burials to residential burials was observed during a period of political and economic changes in Mesopotamia. New social groups emerged who attempted to consolidate their lineage by burying deceased family members underneath the house, thereby increasing social cohesion between family members.[179] The first attestations of *kispu* are mentioned during this period, which (next to the provision of food and drink) involved the ritual invoking of the name and resulted in a reinforced family relationship.[180] Mourning duration seems to be correlated in several modern and ancient cultures to the time a deceased person took to reach their next destination. Due to lack of evidence, nothing can be inferred about the mourning period in Mesopotamia, except for one instance where King Nabonidus' mother received seven days and nights of mourning. The relationship between "wind", "breath", and "spirit" can be found in various cultures and religions, but each attaches different meanings and dynamics to it. "Wind" doesn't always symbolize the soul or spirit. Still, it seems to be involved in the concept of life and death, with a close association with "breath". Therefore, "breath" could also be a good suggestion for IM as the designation for spirit. In the Mesopotamian conception, death occurs, which renders the body breathless; however, the spirit temporarily lives on in the form of wind, and transforms into a ghost after the essential ritual has been performed, and the deceased becomes part of the group of dead forebears.[181]

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[177] J. P. Moreland, Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 30–31.
[178] Chris Low, "Khoisan Wind: Hunting and Healing," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007): s74.
[179] Laneri, "A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E," 121.
[180] Macdougal, "Ancient Mesopotamian Remembrance and the Family Dead," 266.
[181] Katz, ""His wind is released." – The emergence of the ghost: Rite of Passage in Mesopotamia," 427.

Chapter 5: Everyday life

The previous chapter elaborates on a few aspects of to the topic of death and burial. The current chapter examines the concept of death related to everyday life including, the *kispu* ritual, the festival of the dead, and the expression of fear towards death.

§5.1 *Kispu*

"After death (…) the ghost retains the needs and emotional characteristics of its former life and resides in a separate distant land of dead spirits".[182] The continuation of basic needs for sustenance made the dead reliant on their living family members, not only to satisfy their hunger and thirst, but to be at peace as a result of this.[183] The first attestations of *kispu* date to the Old Babylonian period.[184] This ritual was held every month during the time of the new moon, a period when the moon god "laid down" and went to the Netherworld to judge.[185] A moonless night together with other celestial or seasonal events (see §5.2) was perceived as a time when the realm of the dead and the world of the living were close together.[186] At this time, three procedures were carried out: feeding the dead (*kispa kasāpu*), performing a libation (*mê naqû*) through the libation pipe connected to the grave, and recite a ritual invocation of the name of the deceased (*šuma zakāru*).[187] Sporadic evidence of food contained in ceramic vessels have been found buried with the deceased, attested in the Ubaid period (ca. 5000–4000 BC).[188] Offerings to the dead and places for libations are also attested in the third millennium BC, designated as KI.A.NAG.[189] At this point, the evidence does not indicate whether there existed a continuation of food offerings to the dead dating back to at least the Ubaid period. However, the evidence for the care of the dead has at least been attested since the pre-Sargonic age designated as KI.A.NAG, which means that people believed ghosts needed to be sustained.

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182 Katz, "Death they Dispensed to Mankind," 56.
183 Mansen, *The Unremembered Dead. The Non-Burial Motif in the Hebrew Bible*, 68.
184 Macdougal, "Remembrance and the Dead in Second Millennium BC Mesopotamia," 155.
185 Hymn to Nanna. See Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, 122–3.
186 Macdougal, "Remembrance and the Dead in Second Millennium BC Mesopotamia," 155; Mark E. Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993), 454.
187 Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," 116.
188 The available burial data is small and therefore a general belief system regarding burial practices in the Ubaid period cannot be inferred. In Peter N. Peregrine and Melvin Ember, *Encyclopedia of Prehistory, volume 8: South and Southwest Asia* (New York: Springer, 2002), 379, 381.
189 Akio Tsukimoto, "Peace for the Dead, or *kispu(m)* Again," *Orient* XLV (2010): 101.

At some point, people in Mesopotamia started to believe “that something survives after death (…) and escapes the grasp of the corpse and goes somewhere”.[190] As their mindset was based on concrete and material ideas,[191] it is not improbable to suggest that they started to project their own basic needs (i.e. food and drink) onto deceased forebears in order for them to ‘stay alive’ in their next sojourn. Providing food offerings for the dead is characteristic of several other cultures as well. For example, the Andeans in South America “overeat at feasts in order to feed the dead: the living stuff themselves so that they may share the excess with those not physically present”.[192] In ancient China (e.g., Late Shang Dynasty, ca. 1200–1045 BC) mourning family members held a festive meal together with the recently departed next to his grave to transform the latter into an ancestral spirit.[193] This concept of the dead’s dependency on food, together with the growing fear present in the Old Babylonian period (see §5.3), may have influenced the image of the gloomy Netherworld, where ghosts were deprived of good-quality food and drink, subsequently making them dependent on their living kin.

§5.2 Festival of the dead

Annual festivals in honour of the dead were celebrated throughout Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium BC.[194] During these festivities the dead ritually arose from the Netherworld to return temporarily to their family members in the world of the living, where they spent time together, and food and drink were offered to the deceased forebears. A few festivals were celebrated during the summer months: the NE-IZI-ĜAR at Nippur, the cult of Ninazu, the netherworld deity, at Ur, and the AB-È festival at Adab dedicated to the dead.[195]

Celebrations for the NE-IZI-ĜAR at Nippur were held in the fifth month, which bore the same name as the festival.[196] NE-IZI-ĜAR, “braziers and torches”, denotes the light that guided the ghosts back to their family.[197] Attestations place the beginning of the festival at around the time of the full moon. It has been suggested that moonlight had the same effect as

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[190] Finkel, *The First Ghosts. Most Ancient of Legacies*, 5.
[191] Bottéro, “La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne,” 27.
[192] Katheryn C. Twiss, *The Archaeology of Food. Identity, Politics, and Ideology in the Prehistoric and Historic Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 160.
[193] Twiss, *The Archaeology of Food. Identity, Politics, and Ideology in the Prehistoric and Historic Past,* 161.
[194] Julia Krul, *The Revival of the Anu Cult and the Nocturnal Fire Ceremony at Late Babylonian Uruk* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018), 196.
[195] Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, 455.
[196] Other Sumerian cities celebrated the NE-IZI-ĜAR at a different time of year. For example, the NE-IZI-ĜAR was celebrated at Ur in the eight and tenth month; at Larsa and Adab in the eight month, and at Ešnunna in the fourth month. For more information, see: Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, 457.
[197] Krul, *The Revival of the Anu Cult and the Nocturnal Fire Ceremony at Late Babylonian Uruk*, 196.

the torches and braziers, which repelled evil ghosts and demons and safely guided the family ghosts, who travelled at night from the dark Netherworld back to their parental homes for a temporary visit, receiving a meal for sustenance.[198] *The Death of Gilgameš* confirms that the festival of braziers and torches is associated with celebrations for the dead:

> *In the Month of Torches, the festival of ghosts, without his being present light will not be provided for them.*[199]

Around the beginning of the second millennium BC, NE-IZI-ĜAR, the festival as well as the name of the month, changed into its Akkadian equivalent, Abu/Apu, continuing the same celebrations.[200] Letters describe preparations for the festivities, listing the needed commodities. For example, in one letter,[201] a 1-year-old calf is requested for the 15th of Abu. An ewe is requested in another letter[202] on the 21st of Abu. Milk, and butter were also desired ingredients.[203] The sources mentioned here belonged to the higher circles, with the latter ingredients requested by king Ammiditana of the first Babylonian dynasty.[204] Apart from commodities, an extispicy was performed on a sheep on the 25th of Abu. From these documents, it can be deduced that preparations and the festival itself lasted for several days.[205] Another festival was called the AB-È festival, which is attested before and during the Akkadian period at Lagaš, Uruk, and Adab. However, little is known about the festivities, only that they took place during the fifth month and sixth month in Adab and Uruk respectively. It has been suggested that during the Ur III period, this festival was dedicated only to the late Ur III kings. As no attestations exist for offerings to deceased kings in other festivals, the AB-È celebrations may have been in honour of deceased royals, but not for the dead in general.[206]

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198 Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, 456.
199 *The Death of Gilgameš,* N1v10. In George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 157.
200 Krul, *The Revival of the Anu Cult and the Nocturnal Fire Ceremony at Late Babylonian Uruk*, 197.
201 CT 48, 100. From Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im Alten Mesopotamien*, 42–4.
202 JCS 11, 37, 27, 5–14. From Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im Alten Mesopotamien*, 43–4.
203 TCL 1, 7. From Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im Alten Mesopotamien,* 40–1.
204 Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im Alten Mesopotamien*, 40–1.
205 Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im Alten Mesopotamien*, 40–52.
206 Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, 458.

Figure 7: Cylinder seal of a man powing. (900-700 BC). Morgan Seal 653. Morgan Library & Museum

The festivals seem to have been related to the period in which they were celebrated, during the summer months, and were therefore likely connected to the agricultural cycle. In autumn, the fields were sown. In spring, around April and May, the annual inundation caused the Tigris and Euphrates to overflow their banks and submerge neighbouring fields. The flooding of the rivers happened during harvest time, while the summer months were characterized by arid and lifeless fields. In autumn, around October and November, the seeding season began, thereby creating new life.[207] In Mesopotamian mythology, this is explained by the Sumerian literary text *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld.* Besides explaining the cycle of Venus, especially the planet's disappearance, which is associated with Inanna and her descent to the Netherworld, another cycle is touched upon.[208] Dumuzi, the shepherd god, was dragged to the Netherworld, because he did not mourn his beloved Inanna. As punishment, he had to spend six months of each year down in the realm of the dead. His sister Geštinanna replaced him for the remaining months, which allowed Dumuzi to ascend back to the world of the living. The alternation of the two siblings represented the agricultural cycle, in which Dumuzi's death is associated with the summer months, the period of drought and arid fields.[209]

§5.3 Fear of death

Every person has wondered at some point in their life what happens when someone dies. They wonder whether there is such a thing as an afterlife, and if so, in what shape or form. Cultures have had and still do have a great influence on the way people perceive, experience,

[207] Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, 455.
[208] Jeffrey L. Cooley, "Inana and Šukaletuda: A Sumerian Astral Myth," *Kaskal* 5 (2008): 164.
[209] Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, 455–6.

and respond to death. They also influence whether death is feared or not, and if so, to what intensity.[210] In addition to inter-cultural variety, intra-cultural variety is also possible. In her work *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources* Katz demonstrates a transition in the intensity of fear of death around the end of third millennium BC and the beginning of the second millennium BC. In the third millennium BC people focussed on to the importance of life, though the mortality of human beings was accepted. The Netherworld itself was not a topic addressed in literary texts at this point; texts addressing it began to appear in the Old Babylonian period. Katz proposes that something happened at the turn of the third into the second millennium BC, which altered people's concept of death to a great extent.[211]

During the third millennium people were concerned with life. It was believed that veneration and honouring the gods was correlated with lifespan, and devoting one's whole life to serving the gods could result in being blessed with a long life.[212] Building or restoring a temple belonging to a deity was one way kings showed off their service to the gods. The project was recorded, describing the project, the name of the king responsible, and the god whom it was dedicated to. Several of these dedicatory inscriptions have been unearthed dating to the Old Akkadian and Ur III period. Two dedication inscriptions belonging to King Šulgi were found reused in a private dwelling. Both address the king building a temple, called the Esikil, situated in Ešnunna; however, they demonstrate linguistic and structural differences. One is written in Sumerian and is dedicated to the god Ninazu, while the other is written in Akkadian and is dedicated to the god Tišpak. The formulations also differ:[213]

For Ninazu his king, Šulgi, the strong man, king of Ur, king of Sumer and Akkad, built for him the Esikil, his beloved house.

Šulgi, the strong, king of Ur and king of the four regions, fashioned the Esikil, the house of Tišpak in Ešnunna.[214]

Whereas the first one (the Sumerian version) begins with the god in question, followed by the king and his titulary and, last, the project dedicated to the god, the Akkadian version starts with the king and his titulary, followed by the dedication project, the god, and the project's location. The way the Sumerian and Akkadian inscriptions are structured are standard and

[210] Gire, "How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying," 5.
[211] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, xvii.
[212] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 246–7.
[213] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 347–8.
[214] Both translations from Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 347.

demonstrate the same layout as other inscriptions written in the same languages. It is likely that Šulgi tried to incorporate the northern region of Mesopotamia into his realm, subsequently unifying the Sumerians and Semites. Dedicating one building project in two languages was a means of bringing the two groups together. This idea is supported by another find: two inscriptions are dedicated to Nergal, whose temple the Emeslam was built by King Šulgi. The Emeslam is located in Kutha, situated in the north of Mesopotamia. In addition to language, dedicating something to a god in a region where many Semites live is another method aimed at consolidation.[215]

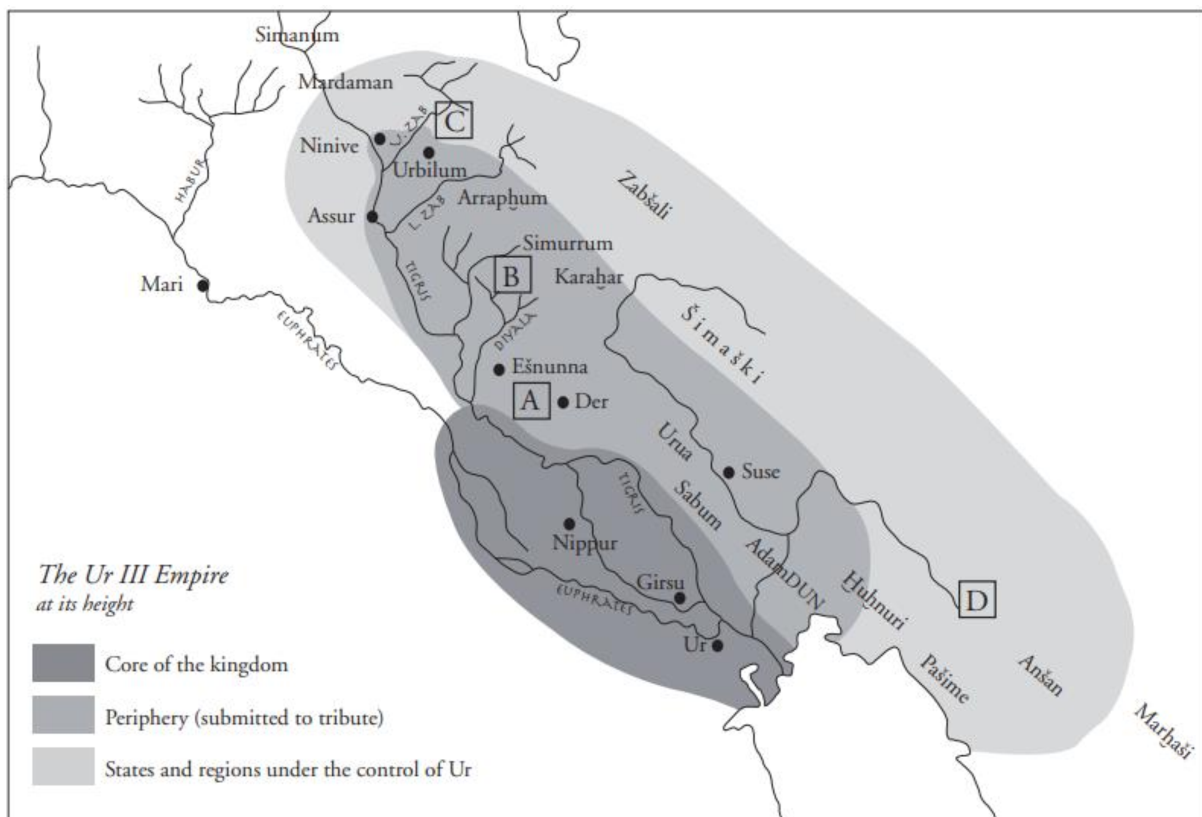

Figure 8: Ur III kingdom. From Lafont (2009), 3. After Steinkeller (1991), 31.

During this period kings emphasize their good and loyal services and expected in return prosperity and longevity. This signifies that people were concerned with life and its duration, rather than with death itself, which was acknowledged. A change in concept happened when a very loyal servant of the gods died an early death.[216] This is expressed in the literary text *The Death of Ur-Nammu*: "(…) because, deceitfully, Enlil had completely changed the fate he

[215] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 347-9.
[216] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 246–7.

decreed (…) the trustworthy shepherd who had been snatched away".[217] Ur-Nammu who was perceived as a humble but loyal servant to the gods, was not given a prosperous and long life, and as a result, people's concept of death was altered. However, this did not imply that one's level of devotion was of no significance. People still remained in the gods' services, which is likely why Ur-Nammu is rewarded for his loyalty by being appointed as LUGAL together with Gilgameš in the Netherworld.[218] *The Death of Gilgameš* also describes the reward Gilgameš receives after death has caught up with him: he is appointed judge of the Netherworld. In contrast with *The Death of Ur-Nammu,* which only describes the unfair passing of the king, *The Death of Gilgameš* also generalizes to all of mankind, stressing the mortality of human beings and the inevitability of death.[219]

Since Ur-Nammu and Gilgameš received high positions in the Netherworld, people likely began to ponder whether they would be given a reward as well. A reaction to this expressed anxiety was likely the literary text *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld.*[220] After Enkidu has entered the Netherworld, Gilgameš asks questions about it, including the destinies of various people based on the number of their offspring and the circumstances of their death. For example, a person with six sons is faring well, and his heart rejoices, while someone with only one son was seen weeping.[221] In addition, the repercussions of unfortunate deaths are still felt in the Netherworld. For example, someone who was killed by a wild animal bitterly weeps over his sore hand and foot.[222]

Knowing that matters could be taken into their own hands, people could to some extent control their living conditions in the Netherworld.[223] This idea is supported by the role of Šamaš as the judge of the dead, first attested during the Old Babylonian period. This was likely introduced by the Semites, as the sun god and judge was a highly venerated deity in their pantheon. It was believed that Šamaš spends his time during the day in the world of the living, but after he sets, he spends the night in the Netherworld decreeing judgement among the ghosts. Based on rituals and prayers to the sun god, people were judged by their actions performed on Earth.[224] If someone behaved unrighteously, Šamaš could be asked to absolve

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[217] *The Death of Ur-Namma (Ur-Namma A): translation. A version from Nippur,* lines 8–21. ETCSL. https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr2411.htm
[218] Katz, *The Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 247.
[219] Katz, *The Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 247.
[220] Katz, *The Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 247–8.
[221] *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld.* In George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 142.
[222] *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld.* In George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 143.
[223] Katz, *The Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 247–8.
[224] Katz, "Death they Dispensed to Mankind," 85–7.

him from his sin.[225] However, during the Old Babylonian period, the alleviated anxiety turned into fear of death, trying to escape one's destiny. The Old Babylonian version of *the Epic of Gilgameš* as well as the standard version embody this topic, where the main character Gilgameš goes on a quest to obtain immortality, as he has become afraid of death after his best friend Enkidu passed away. In the end, he learns and accepts the fact that nobody can escape their destiny and that every human life on Earth comes to an end. The only immortality he can obtain is being remembered by descendants.[226] This literary composition describes the fear and other emotions Gilgameš experiences throughout his journey, while in *The Death of Gilgameš* these are lacking; it is only acknowledged that fate is fixed. This likely reflects growing fear among the people of Mesopotamia.[227]

§5.4 Conclusion

Certain dates on which festivities and rituals dedicated to ancestors were held are attributed to events happening in the environment. The *kispu* ritual was observed on the day of the disappearance of the moon, and the festival of the dead was associated with the agricultural cycle, celebrating the temporary return of family ghosts during a period of aridity and lifelessness.[228] Changes in the Mesopotamian concept of death seem to coincide with political transformation and emerging social groups (see §4.1). The Ur III kingdom encompassed a large realm in which people tried to live a good and humble life in dedication to the gods, wishing for a long life in return for their services. The political fragmentation after the fall of the Ur III dynasty caused friction and conflict between city states, making death more salient in people's minds and, as a consequence, more fear. The new emerging social groups tried to consolidate their lineage, through which family ties and relationships with deceased family members became more important.[229] In addition, the belief in sustaining one's forebears together with the growing fear of death may have led to the gloomy image of the realm of the dead, where no food or drink is provided for the dead.

[225] See *An Elegy on the Death of Nannaya.* ETCSL 5.5.2, where a son asks for a favourable judgement regarding his father, who has been violently killed. He also asked his father to be released from wrath and sin. https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.5.5.2#
[226] Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria & Israel,* 65.
[227] Katz, *The Netherworld in Sumerian Sources,* 248.
[228] Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, 455.
[229] Laneri, "A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E," 121.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the relationship between the environment and the Mesopotamian concept of death. Throughout history, civilizations have developed different systems of shared beliefs and norms to guide and clarify how one is to act and to respond to all kinds of events. Among these events is death, a phenomenon transcending culture and religion.[230] However, "cultural variations in conceptions of death and dying (…) have significant implications on how people act in life, how they approach death, whether or not they fear death, and on their funeral and bereavement practices,"[231] meaning that the Mesopotamian concept offers a unique view to the understanding of death and responses of the Mesopotamians towards it. Environmental factors play a significant role regarding the development of the concept of death. The aim of this paper is to present an analysis of the interplay between the environment and the shared beliefs among the Mesopotamians concerning their perception of death.

Chapter one and two elaborate the general Mesopotamian concept of death. Because Mesopotamia encompasses a large territory with a long and rich history ranging from the third millennium to the second half of the first millennium BC, differences in attitude likely existed throughout time and between city states. In addition, evidence is scattered unevenly with regard to time, space, and text genre.[232] For these reasons, a "general" concept of death must be interpreted with caution in the context of the current study. The first two chapters are dedicated to providing an overview of the Mesopotamian concept of death.

Ghosts were deemed real beings and the Mesopotamians interacted with their deceased forebears on a daily basis. It was not a mere belief, but a reality in this view.[233] People were destined to die because the gods had kept immortality for themselves. However, humans partly consisted of divine elements, which would live on in the Netherworld; the perishable body would return to earth. The realm of the dead was a big dreary and dim place where all ghosts gathered. A government was in place there with Ereškigal on top, and other Netherworld gods acting on her behalf to rule the Netherworld efficiently. In the Old Babylonian period Nergal became Ereškigal's consort and they ruled together. The realm of the dead was designated in several ways, for example, "the place where the sun sets", "The

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[230] Lehman, Chiu, and Schaller, "Psychology and Culture," 692.
[231] Gire, "How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying," 5.
[232] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources,* xvii–xviii.
[233] Finkel, *The First Ghosts. Most Ancient of Legacies*, 55.

Great Below", and KUR, indicating the Zagros Mountains. These designations refer to a geographical location; however, descriptions of the Netherworld can also be based on its characteristics: "the Great City", "the Land of No Return", or "the house which none who enters ever leaves".[234]

Figure 9: Charcoal sketch by Kantzveldt

For the deceased to arrive at "the Great City" it was essential that he or she be given the necessary funerary rites and a proper burial; if not, the person was doomed to roam the land of the living.[235] The *pāqidu* was responsible for taking care of the dead and saw to it that the deceased was given everything he or she needed.[236] After washing and dressing up the body, an incantation was recited to release the spirit from the body so it could make its way to the Netherworld.[237] For its part, the body was buried, together with commodities, underneath the floor of the house or in a cemetery.[238] The commodities depend on wealth and status and were meant for the journey, the sojourn in the realm of the dead, or as gifts for the Netherworld gods.[239] After someone had passed away the family went into mourning. They were publicly recognizable, wearing dirty clothes, weeping and beating themselves.[240] The family performed the *kispu* ritual each month during the new moon to sustain their ancestors. Because the realm of the dead was deprived of good food and drink, a pipe was connected to the grave through which libations were poured.[241] In addition, the ghosts were ritually called to take part, "eat" their meal among the family members and thus reinforcing family ties. In

[234] Bottéro, "La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne," 30; Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, 194, 244; George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, 59.
[235] Bayliss, "The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia," 116.
[236] Macdougal, "Remembrance and the Dead in Second Millennium BC Mesopotamia," 5.
[237] Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1884.
[238] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia," 23.
[239] Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1884.
[240] Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal communication in the Ancient Near East*, 401.
[241] Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege,* 230.

return, family ghosts could be asked, through necromancy, for advice or to and ensure protection against demons or restless ghosts.[242]

The remaining chapters of the current study analyse certain facets of the concept of death which can be traced back to environmental factors. The third chapter focusses on the realm of death, examining its portrayal, location, hierarchy, and type of government. These Mesopotamian beliefs were based on concrete, tangible objects and events whose existence could be acknowledged through the five senses, and likely gave rise to the actuality of an afterlife, and eventually developing in the dark and gloomy place described in for example, *the Epic of Gilgameš*.[243] This premise is supported by the ritual act of interment and the placement of grave goods dating back to prehistoric times.[244] The bones became an essential vessel for the transfer of food and drink to the ghost in the Netherworld. If the bones were disturbed or burned altogether, the ghost to which they belonged was unable to receive the *kispu* or gain admittance to the Netherworld, or in the latter case, the ghost ceased to exist and "died" a second time.[245]

The location of the Netherworld seems to be attributed to geographical and celestial matters. An early outlook identified the region occupied by the Netherworld as the Zagros Mountains. This mountainous area and beyond was deemed unknown and hostile land, and associated with the realm of the dead; once these regions became familiar due to campaigns and conquests, the Netherworld lost this geographical connotation. A second perspective locates the Netherworld where the sun sets, in other words, in the west. It has been argued that planets like the sun and Venus set in the west and therefore, "the gate of sunset" can be understood as a cosmic passage way. Regarding humans, however, this term was presumably used as a euphemism for the grave. Because graves were located below ground, the euphemism indicates the location of the Netherworld to be underground instead, accessible through the "Road of No Return".[246]

The image of the Netherworld can be said to have been based on the environment, because descriptions of the Netherworld show resemblances with a Sumerian city state. Each city had its own patron god, housed in a palace within the citadel. So did the Netherworld, whose

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[242] Cooper, "The Fate of Mankind," 28-9; Scurlock, "Mortal and Immortal Souls, Ghosts and the (Restless) Dead in Ancient Mesopotamia," 80.
[243] Bottéro, "La Mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie Ancienne," 27.
[244] Finkel, *The First Ghosts. Most Ancient of Legacies,* 5; Katz, "Death they Dispensed to Mankind," 56.
[245] Mansen, "Death, Burial, and Non-Burial in the Ancient Near East," 79–80.
[246] Katz, "Death they Dispensed to Mankind," 71–2.

patron god, or queen, was Ereškigal. Both types of city incorporated a governmental system comprising similar offices, for example, scribe or gatekeeper. The cities also implemented similar laws, rendered judgement, and provided punishment when necessary. Furthermore, each city was surrounded by a fortification wall to protect against hostile attacks or, in the case of the Netherworld, to keep the inhabitants inside.

Political, economic, and social changes formed the foundation for increasing residential burials and decreasing extramural burials. After the fall of the Ur III kingdom, a mosaic of city states emerged at the turn of the third millennium to the second millennium BC. Chances arose for new social groups to gain wealth through long-distance trade. These merchants and entrepreneurs sought to consolidate their identity and lineage by burying deceased family members underneath their houses to increase social cohesion and to emphasize lineage.[247] In addition, during this time the first attestations of *kispu* are mentioned, supporting the theory of reinforcing family ties through the ritual invocation of the names of the ancestors.[248]

The mourning of deceased family members has been observed in sources; however, the duration of the mourning period remains unknown due to lack of evidence. There seems to be a relationship in several cultures, both ancient and modern, between the duration of mourning and the deceased's journey to his or her next destination, but apart from one source mentioning seven days and nights to mourn the recently departed mother of King Nabonidus, nothing can be inferred about the exact duration of mourning in Mesopotamia. A suggestion would be that the king's mother did not receive a longer mourning period, because she would take longer to travel through the dangerous steppe before reaching the Netherworld in comparison to other Mesopotamians. With this in mind, either a specific amount of time was generally reserved for mourning, or the mourning period was longer in honour of the king's mother, because of her royal background.

The relationship between ghost and wind has also been touched upon in this paper. Upon death, the person stops breathing, This association easily creates the understanding that life is associated with breath, but when death occurs, it renders the body breathless. Breath might thus be seen as a gust of wind, which could have shaped the designation of spirit as IM ("wind"). The relationship between wind, breath, and spirit can be found in a variety of cultures and religions, but each one attaches different meanings and dynamics to it; "wind"

[247] Laneri, "A Family Affair: The Use of Intramural Funerary Chambers in Mesopotamia during the late Third and Early Second Millennia B.C.E," 121.
[248] Macdougal, "Ancient Mesopotamian Remembrance and the Family Dead," 266.

does not always symbolize the soul or spirit, but it seems to be involved in the concept of life and death and, with closely associated with "breath". According to the Sumerians, the spirit temporarily lives on in the form of wind after its release from the body, and it transforms into a ghost after the essential ritual has been performed and the deceased has become part of the group of dead forebears.[249]

The transformation of the political landscape created city states, each protecting and quarrelling about its own territory. This development seems to have coincided with a growing fear of death, triggering the Mesopotamians to think about their own mortality and the phenomenon of death. It might be said that the fear of death bleached the portrayal of the afterlife as described in *the Epic of Gilgameš*, *Ištar's Descent*, and *Nergal and Ereškigal*. Whereas the Sumerian version, *Inanna's Descent*, is concerned only with Inanna's journey and what happens to life on Earth, not reflecting on the Netherworld itself, *Ištar's Descent* illustrates the conditions of the realm of the dead.[250] As in *the Epic of Gilgameš*, it is a dark and gloomy place, without escape, and with nothing good to eat or drink. It would seem that the fact of death was eventually accepted, but no one was looking forward to it. In *The Epic of Gilgameš*, the added appendix (tablet XII) seems to provide a small sign of hope that people have some control over their lives in the Netherworld, once their time on Earth has come to an end.

Due to the limited size of this paper, only the above-mentioned facets of the concept of death can be accounted for. Future research is needed to examine, for example, medicinal methods used to remedy diseases inflicted by demons. These creatures lurked in the depths of the Netherworld, and were sent by the gods to inflict a disease upon someone, who had offended the gods.[251] To cure someone from a disease, incantations and rituals were performed using special ingredients. Presumably these ingredients were chosen, because they grew in neighbouring areas which were easily accessible.[252] Here the environment plays a significant role in dealing with disease-inflicting demons originating from the Netherworld. Another topic for future research is the act of digging or restoring of a tomb or well. The Netherworld was considered to be underground; therefore, people likely needed to be careful when digging or restoring a well or grave on a particular day or at a particular time, or when

[249] Katz, ""His wind is released." – The emergence of the ghost: Rite of Passage in Mesopotamia," 427.
[250] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources*, xvi–xvii.
[251] Black, and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 63.
[252] See Scurlock, *Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia.*

digging too deep, one might accidentally end up in the realm of the dead.[253] Although evidence is scattered unevenly with regard to time, space, and text genre,[254] and a general concept of death has to be interpreted with caution, the uncovered evidence supports the influential role of the environment in the beliefs shared by the Mesopotamians, resulting in a unique understanding and identity of death perceived by the Mesopotamians.

[253] See for example, tablet 16 and 17 of the omen series *šumma alu ina mele šakin.* In: Sally M. Freedman, *If a City is Set on a Height: The Akkadian Omen Series šumma alu ina mele šakin, volume 1: Tablets 1–21* (Winona Lake: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 239–61.
[254] Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in Sumerian Sources,* xvii–xviii.

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[255] Abbreviations according to *The Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago* (CAD).

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