

Betrayed lovers of Ištar: A possible trace of the 8-Year Venus cycle in *Gilgameš VI:i–iii*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the beginning of the VIth tablet of the Babylonian story about Gilgameš, which contains the list of lovers of the goddess Ištar. The possibility of their relationship to the constellations of the heliacal settings of Venus in the 8-year cycle is hypothesised.

The VIth tablet of the Babylonian story about Gilgameš is one of a few mythological sources in which astral motifs are explicitly expressed. It describes the battle of the hero against the Bull of Heaven, the creature without doubt representing the constellation Taurus (Sołtysiak 1999b: 291; 2001). However the tablet begins with a dispute between Gilgameš and the goddess Ištar, the dispute which made Ištar angry and, in consequence, caused the above-mentioned combat. Gilgameš refused Ištar's courtship in an offensive way and enumerated her six previous lovers who always got into trouble on her behalf. Here is the proper passage of the text:

(...) And Ištar the princess raised her eyes to the beauty of Gilgameš.
“Come to me, Gilgameš, and be my lover! (...)
I shall have a **chariot** of lapis lazuli and gold harnessed for you,
With wheels of gold, and horns of *elmešu*-stone.
You shall harness *umu*-demons as great mules!
Enter into **our house** through the fragrance of pine! (...)”
Gilgameš made his voice heard and spoke, he said to Ištar the princess,
“(...) Which of your lovers [lasted] forever?
Which of your masterful paramours went to heaven?
Come, let me [describe?] your lovers to you! (...)
For **Dumuzi** the lover of your youth
You decreed that he should keep weeping year after year.
You loved the colourful **allallu-bird**, but you hit him and broke his wing.
He stays in the woods crying »My wing!«
You loved the **lion**, whose strength is complete,
But you dug seven and seven pits for him.
You loved the **horse**, so trustworthy in battle,
But you decreed the whip, goad, and lash for him, (...)
You decreed endless weeping for his mother Silifu.
You loved the shepherd, herdsman, and chief shepherd
Who was always heaping up the glowing ashes for you,
And cooked ewe-lambs for you every day.
But you hit him and turned him into a **wolf**,
His own herd-boys hunt him down and his dogs tear at his haunches.
You loved **Išullanu**, your father's gardener,
Who was always bringing you baskets of dates.
They brightened your table every day;
You lifted your eyes to him and went to him,
»My own Išullanu, let us enjoy your strength,
So put out your hand and touch our vulva!«
But Išullanu said to you, »Me? What do you want of me?
Did my mother not bake for me, and did I not eat?
What I eat (with you) would be loaves of dishonour and disgrace,
Rushes would be my only covering against the cold«.

You listened as he said this, and you hit him, turned him into a frog? (*dallalu*),
 Left him to stay amid the fruits of his labours.
 But the pole? goes up no more, [his] bucket goes down no more.
 And how about me? You will love me and then [treat me] just like them!"
 When Ištar heard this, Ištar was furious, and [went up] to heaven.
 Ištar went up and wept before her father Anu (...)¹

At first sight this fragment contains nothing that could be interpreted in astral categories, except the last reference to Ištar ascending to heaven. However the character of the Bull of Heaven in the following part of the tablet and the character of Ištar as the goddess of the planet Venus suggest that some astral motifs can be concealed in the deeper layers of the text. The following discussion will be focused on an attempt to discover and explain these motifs. Of course hermeneutic procedures of this kind never provide sure results, but even the less probable hypotheses may be interesting for the researchers of astronomy in culture.

A very important aspect is the date and the context of the analysed story. The combat of Gilgameš and the Bull of Heaven had been included already in the Sumerian prototype of this Babylonian text. However the initial dispute between Gilgameš and Inanna (Sumerian counterpart of Ištar) looks different in the older source. The tablet is badly broken in this passage, but it is obvious that the lovers of the goddess are not mentioned. Inanna invites the hero to her temple and intends to perform a sacred marriage ritual with him. Gilgameš refuses because he wished "to catch? mountain bulls, to fill the cowpens", and this answer makes Inanna angry.

The ritual of sacred marriage is attested in the sources from the 21st to the 18th centuries BC and belongs to the tradition of Uruk, the center of the cult of Inanna/Ištar and the city of Gilgameš. There are a number of hymns and stories concerning the courtship of the goddess and Dumuzi, the god of grain associated with the constellation Orion,² with whom the king was identified during the ritual. The following mythological events are described in a set of texts. The story about the descent of Inanna/Ištar to the Underworld concerns the journey of the goddess associated with the internal conjunction of Venus (Heimpel 1982: 9). After her return to the earth, the goddess was forced to choose a substitute who would be abducted to the Underworld. She chose her husband Dumuzi, who tried to escape from the hands of the demons. Eventually seized, he returned, owing to the self-sacrifice of his sister Geštinanna. All these events and their background are summarised in Table 1.

Since the analysed passage of the story about Gilgameš was composed at the same time when the kings of southern Mesopotamia celebrated the ritual of the sacred marriage of Ištar and Dumuzi (as stated before, it was not included in the Sumerian prototype), the name of the first lover of the goddess clearly relates to the above-mentioned cycle of sources. But what is the meaning of the five other characters?

The beginning of the 2nd millennium BC brought great changes in Mesopotamia. After the fall of the Sumerian third dynasty from Ur and the invasion of the Amorites, the interest in astronomy increased considerably. Regular observations of Venus are first attested in this period, in tablet 63 of the great astral omnia series *Enuma Anu Enlil*, called also the tablet of Ammišaduqa, from the name of the Babylonian king some of whose years of ruling are covered by the observations (Reiner and Pingree 1975). This tablet contains the first known theory of the motion of Venus as well. It is very

¹ The translation is by Stephanie Dalley (1989: 77–80); the words in boldface specify those elements in the story which are discussed here as possibly being associated with heavenly phenomena. The Sumerian sources quoted are in the translation by Jeremy Black et al. (1998–2001), if not stated otherwise.

² In later sources Dumuzi was related to the constellation called the Hired Man (*Aries*), but there are good reasons for assuming that in the 2nd millennium his astral attribution was the Shepherd of Anu (Orion), and even in a few later astronomical texts such association was suggested (Livingstone 1986: 154; Sołtysiak 1999a: 43–44).

likely that the 8-year cycle of the visibility of Venus was discovered in that period; it may be also hypothesised that this discovery would be interpreted in a mythological way.

Month	Solar year	Mythological and ritual events
XII = February/March	grain ripening	the courtship of Dumuzi and Inanna
I = March/April	grain completely ripe	the sacred marriage during the New Year festival
beginning of April	Aldebaran ↓	the death of Gugalanna, 'great bull of heaven'
	Venus ↓ once every 8 years	descent of Inanna to the Underworld
middle of April	Venus ↑ once every 8 years	the return of Inanna
	beginning of the harvest	Inanna gives Dumuzi into the hands of the demons
end of April	Orion ↓ →Hydra	change of Dumuzi into a snake and his escape
II-III = April-June	harvest in progress	Dumuzi escapes to succeeding hiding places
beginning of June	Hydra ↓ end of harvest	Dumuzi seized by the demons
III/IV = end of June	Orion ↑ sowing	festival of dead; Dumuzi returns from Underworld
V = July/August	Hydra ↑ germination	<i>abum</i> festival

Table 1. Associations of the agricultural and stellar calendar with the mythological and ritual cycle of Inanna and Dumuzi in the beginning of 2nd millennium BC. Notations: ↓ – heliacal setting; ↑ – heliacal rising; → – visibility on the western horizon. The two lines in boldface refer to annual festivals which were explicitly related to the story about Inanna and Dumuzi.

The love and the death of Dumuzi in the ritual of the sacred marriage was associated first with the conjunction of Venus and Orion, next with the internal conjunction of Venus, and finally with the heliacal setting of Orion. However such a phenomenon occurs only once in the 8-year cycle of Venus. There are still five internal conjunctions of Venus in this cycle, each on the background of another constellation. Let us check whether the list of the remaining five lovers of Ištar might correspond to the constellations heliacally setting after the internal conjunction of Venus in the same cycle. Of course one must bear in mind that the whole cycle shifts somewhat more than two degrees in each 8-year period, and the scheme must be compatible with the historical period when the story was composed. Assuming that the conjunction with Orion is the point of reference, the other constellations should be distant from each other by $360^\circ \div 5$, or about 72° or its multiples.

The complete list of the Mesopotamian names of stars and constellations can be found in the series *mulApin*, a kind of astronomical compendium composed around the end of the 2nd millennium, but surely containing the elements of an older tradition. Short commentaries on some names are also provided there. In contemporary and later sources more particulars about the most important stars and constellations are present.

The *allallu*-bird is the second lover of Ištar. Its name never appears as the name of a star or constellation; the bird itself was identified as *Coracias garrulus* (Campbell Thompson 1924). The third lover is the lion, which can be identified as the constellation Leo. It fits the system well since Leo and Orion were about 72° from each other. Moreover, the lion is associated with Ištar as her animal attribute. In astronomical sources the name of Leo was written as Urgula or Urmah (both mean 'the great lion'). Next, the horse appears on the list of lovers. The Horse in the list *mulApin* was located on the left side of the Demon with Gaping Mouth (Cygnus) and thus might be identified as Equuleus although this identification is not certain. In some later sources this constellation was associated with the mythological bird Anzu and with the planet Mars. The distance between the constellations Equuleus and Orion are $2 \times 72^\circ$, or about 144° ; so once again the hypothetical system is affirmed. The next lover is the shepherd turned into a wolf. It may be an etiological explanation of the constellation Wolf, in some sources also associated with the planet Mars. The Wolf can be identified as the modern Triangulum. In many texts this constellation appears as the star of Anu, the god of heaven. Since Triangulum covers the area of about 72° back to Orion, it also fits the system of five constellations in which the heliacal settings of Venus can be observed in the 8-year cycle.

Number	Lover	Constellation	Modern name	Right ascension	Venus' cycle
1	Dumuzi	Shepherd	Orion	~50°	I 1
2	<i>allallu</i> -bird	?	?	~195°	I 5
3	the lion	Great Lion	Leo	~120°	I 3
4	the horse	Horse	Equuleus (?)	~265°	I 2
5	the wolf	Wolf	Triangulum	~335°	I 4
6	Išullanu	Abode of Anu (?)	Taurus/Gemini	~50°	II 1

Table 2. Lovers of Ishtar and their possible association with the 8-year cycle of Venus.

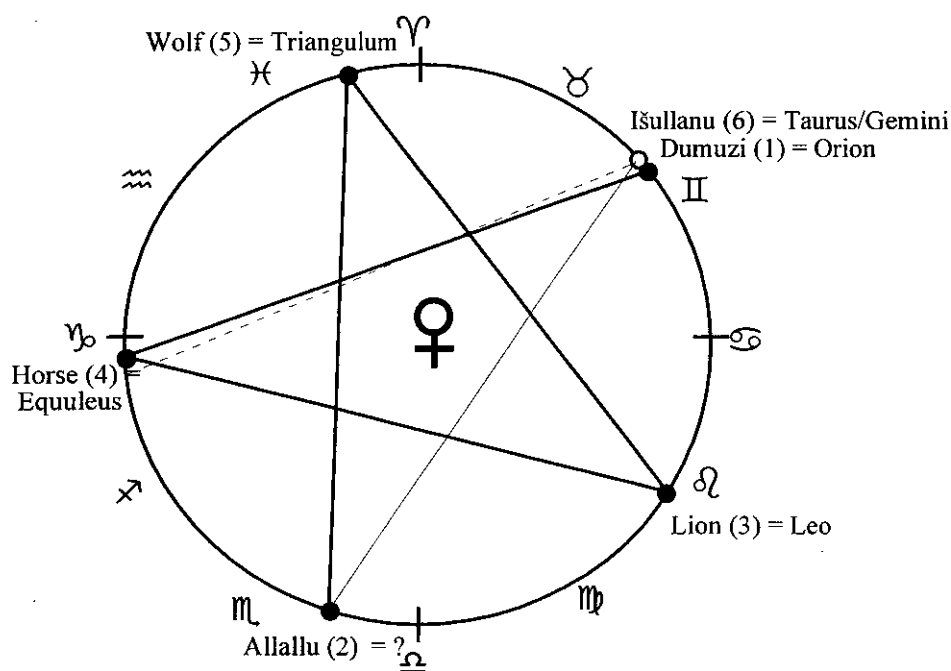


Fig. 1. Graphic presentation of the data in the Table 2.

The last lover on the list is Išullanu, the gardener of Anu. No Mesopotamian constellation is associated with this name, but its position suggests that it can be related to the region of the sky recognised as the abode of Anu, i.e. the surroundings of Taurus (Sołtysiak 2001). Thus Išullanu could be included in the system as the character for the place of internal conjunction of Venus in the next cycle. All data presented above are summarised in Table 2 and presented graphically in Fig. 1. The heliacal settings and risings of Venus in similar positions were observed in Babylon in the 7th century BC (Table 3) and, theoretically, could have been observed also five earlier shifts of the 8-year cycle, i.e. in the middle of the 19th century BC.³

The sequence of the betrayed lovers of Ištar precisely corresponds to the sequence of constellations in which Venus heliacally sets in its 8-year cycle, under the condition that Orion is the starting point. Only the *allallu*-bird cannot be identified with a constellation. It should be noted that the sequence of lovers is not correlated with the time of heliacal settings, but with the right ascension

³ The difference between eight solar years and five synodical cycles of Venus is about 2.44 days, which gives an average shift of 2.4° in the position of Venus at the beginning of two consecutive 8-year cycles. A shift of 72° occurs then each 240 years, and after such period the internal conjunction of Venus can be observed on the background of the same constellations. Although the sizes of particular constellations differ considerably, their sequence can be valid for a few 8-year cycles, i.e. for a few decades.

of constellations; also this time only the *allalu*-bird does not fit the system (Fig. 1). Of course all these correspondences may be due to chance. Taking into account the historical circumstances and the ritual context of the story, however, we cannot exclude the possibility that the list of Ištar's lovers was a commentary to the astral interpretation of the courtship of Ištar and Dumuzi, connecting it to all five internal conjunctions of Venus in its 8-year cycle and to all characters related to the constellations occurring as a background for these conjunctions. Of course it must be underlined that there is no direct proof of such an interpretation.

Year	Last visibility in the west				First visibility in the east			
	Julian date	Babylonian date	Right ascension	Constellation	Julian date	Babylonian date	Right ascension	Constellation
678 BC	May 21	Simanu 14	56°	Gemini	May 30	Simanu 23	51°	Orion
677/676 BC	Dec 29	Kislimu 10	276°	Capricorn	Jan 1	Kislimu 13	274°	Capricorn
675 BC	Jul 24	Du'uzu 22	128°	Leo	Aug 8	Abu 7	119°	Leo
673 BC	Mar 10	Addaru 25	348°	Piscis NE	Mar 12	Addaru 27	346°	Piscis NE
672 BC	Oct 2	Tišritu 7	203°	Scorpius	Oct 19	Tišritu 24	194°	Libra
670 BC	May 19	Simanu 10	54°	Ori/Gem	May 29	Simanu 20	48°	Orion

Table 3. Internal conjunctions of Venus in the years 678-670 BC, observed in Babylon (Parpola 1983: 391-392):

Finally let us return to the beginning of the story. In the opening passage Ištar invites Gilgameš to the house (which may be interpreted as heaven, in particular the abode of Anu) and offers him a chariot. In late esoteric Babylonian texts the constellation Chariot (modern Perseus, called also The Old Man) was associated with Venus since the sign for chariot resembles the sign U (interpreted homographically as Dilbat-Venus) in a box (George 1991: 161). Also the chariot of Marduk, in a bilingual text from the late 2nd millennium BC, was called Dilbat in Sumerian and 'Ištar of the stars' in an Akkadian version (Lambert 1973: 279). Is that association exploited also in the story about Gilgameš? Unfortunately this question remains unanswered.

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