Resurrection in Second Millennium Western Asian Cultures:

Its Origin and Development

Introduction

1. Aims and context

The present study seeks to examine the origins and development of the dying and rising god mythologem among Western Asian cultures of the second millennium BCE. Ever since James Frazer explored this mythologem in the late 19th and early 20th century CE, relying prominently on writings from the Hellenistic and Roman period and only on a few epigraphic texts, the topic has been repeatedly surveyed by many other scholars.[[1]](#footnote-1) The most recent comprehensive study published in 2001 by Mettinger re-examined the extant findings as well as related discussions yet eventually focused predominantly on the presence of this mythologem in Phoenician cultures of the late first millennium BCE and the first centuries CE.[[2]](#footnote-2) The present study, while accepting Mettinger’s conclusions regarding the first millennia, rather attempts to deepen the examination of findings from the second millennium BCE in order to outline the *origin* of this mythologem and *the paths in which it spread* among Western Asian cultures until it became one of the most prevalent motifs in the writings of later periods.

During the century between the publications of Frazer's and Mettinger’s research, numerous new finds were unearthed in the soils of the Near Eastern region – some of them originating from cultures whose existence Frazer could not even have assumed. Correspondingly, the definition of the mythologem of the dying and rising gods has changed frequently over time. Frazer himself, who, as stated above, relied almost exclusively on Hellenistic and Roman pagan literature and the literature of the church fathers in opposition of pagan beliefs, defined the mythologem in question as follows:…[[3]](#footnote-3)

The four main points of Frazer’s definition of the dying and rising gods were recently efficiently summarized by Smith as follows: “[1] the divine status of the figures; [2] their death and their return to life; [3] a correspondence of this thematic cycle to the seasonal cycle; and [4] a series of rituals which provides a cultic context for the recitation of the former and corresponds to the latter”. [[4]](#footnote-4)

However, throughout the 20th and early 21st century, with the decipherment of many new epigraphic findings, it soon became apparent that none of the gods presented in ancient texts matched the definition of the rising and dying gods as formulated by Frazer. As a result, the category of ‘dying and rising gods’ has been, at times, expanded or limited according to textual discoveries and trends.[[5]](#footnote-5) Some sought to further enhance it to include gods who do not die and return to life, but whose disappearance leads to a cessation of fertility and to climatic changes (like the vanishing gods of Hittite evocation rituals) – elements that were highly significant in Frazer’s definition.[[6]](#footnote-6) Other scholars have emphasized quite the opposite, that even a god who was said to have died and returned to life, despite the fact that there are no extant rituals linking his death and resurrection to the seasonal cycle or agricultural cycle (such as Baal in the Ugaritic literature), cannot be considered to be dying and rising gods at all.[[7]](#footnote-7) Still others viewed the dying and rising gods as a forerunner of later traditions regarding human beings that were said to have died and returned to life (such as in the Jewish literature of the Second Temple and later).[[8]](#footnote-8) Finally, according to some, any ritual attesting to the death of a given god is sufficient for including this god in the category of dying and rising gods – since, it appears, this god must have resurrected somehow. This holds true, even if no additional rituals or any other text attesting to the return of the god have been found (such as in ancient Egyptian texts relating to Osiris, and in the Assyrological field prior to the 1960s).[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, since the aim of the current study is to examine how had the concept of gods who died and then returned to life, in the most literal sense of this concept, been developed, there is no reason to rely on the historical definition of Frazer, which was based almost exclusively on Hellenistic and Roman literature. Rather, this study simply asks: which of the ancient Near Eastern cultures described its god(s) as died and then returned to life? Cultures whose extant texts describe gods that said to have died but not to return to life, or that describe seasonal cycle and agricultural works with no affinity to the death and rising of a divine, cannot be considered as cultures who view their gods as dying and rising ones, although they may have been influenced by this mythologem.

This literal definition of a dying and rising god cannot, thus, include one of the prominent gods discussed by Frazer, namely, the Egyptian god Osiris. As many Egyptologists have long noticed, the Egyptian literature prior to the Late Antiquity relates to this god as the king of the netherworld, who had never returned to life.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is despite the fact that the descriptions of Osiris’ arriving to the netherworld recall extra-Egyptian texts dealing with gods who rising from the netherworld, suggesting a possible (mutual?) influence between these descriptions.[[11]](#footnote-11) The same is also true regarding Telipinu and the Hittite vanishing gods, who were considered in some post-Frazerian research as a dying and rising gods, due to their depictions in Hittite rituals as disappearing gods who eventually return to their companions and family.[[12]](#footnote-12) Since these gods are not said to have died and return to life, they do not fit into this category as well,[[13]](#footnote-13) even though their disappearance is associated with fertility and climate changes in a manner that may also imply for an influence of one culture upon other.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In contrast, two other Western-Asian gods are to be considered as belong to the definition of the dying and rising gods in its most literal sense: gods who die, or descend to the netherworld unwillingly,[[15]](#footnote-15) and then revive, or ascends from the netherworld. These are Dumuzi, whom Frazer have already included him among the dying and rising gods, but he based his claim on a late analogous between Tammuz and Adonis and thanks to a misinterpretation of an Akkadian text;[[16]](#footnote-16) And Baal, whom Frazer did not know at all in this context. As will be shown below, while the evidence in their case are still very few, they are sufficient to prove the extant of this mythologem in West Asia prior to the first millennium BCE.

1. The findings

As stated above, the present study accepts the view of previous scholars, including Mettinger, about the existence of the mythologem of the dying and rising gods in writings from the first millennium BCE and – especially – the first centuries CE. Tracing its early appearances in West Asia, however, the study challenges one of Mettinger’s final conclusions, according to which the Mesopotamian tradition of the dying and rising Dumuzi affected the character of Baal as a dying and rising god and that of later Phoenician gods. This conclusion, which Mettinger himself raises some doubts about it but eventually supports it, is consistent with the common assumption that Dumuzi was portrayed as a dying and rising god for millennia, from the earlier cuneiform writings up to the writings of the Late Antiquity.[[17]](#footnote-17) It fits well also with the popular conception of Mesopotamia as a major source of influence in the third to the first millennia BCE. The extant findings, however, do not suit with this view.

To date there is only one evidence from Mesopotamia regarding the rising of Dumuzi from the netherworld, briefly formulated at the end of the Sumerian work *Inana's Descent*, dated to the 18th century BCE. Apart from this, no evidence of such mythologem in Mesopotamia is in extant, neither in regard to Dumuzi, nor to any other Mesopotamian deity. This stands in sharp contrast to the many documents attesting for the death of Dumuzi and other Mesopotamian gods. In fact, even compositions whose composers appeared to be familiar with the content of *Inana’s Descent,* either omit any mention of Dumuzi’s rising from the netherworld, or they interpret it in a very different manner.[[18]](#footnote-18) In light of the huge number of textual findings from Mesopotamia, more than any other ancient culture, and considering the many textual findings telling of Dumuzi in particular, the fact that only one Mesopotamian evidence mentions the rising of Dumuzi is questionable.

Three additional documents attesting to the dying and rising of Dumuzi were composed in Mari of the 18th century BCE. The prominent of which is a letter sent by an Amorite chief who encourages his addressee, another Amorite chief, to maintain a nomadic ethos. With the publication of that latter – in the last decade of the 20th century CE – it was viewed as a significant proof for the quality of the Mesopotamian Dumuzi as a dying and rising god, especially due to the paucity of evidence from Mesopotamia.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, the provenance of these documents in the kingdom of Mari raises the question of how much they can support a single evidence from Mesopotamia from the same period? Perhaps, rather than reflecting Mesopotamian influence upon Mari, these documents, and especially the letter of the Amorite chief, imply for an Amorite tradition? If so, this mythologem would join to additional Western-Semitic elements, such as the intuitive prophecy, the treaty ritual “*ḫayaram qatālum*,” the *Zukrum* festival and the myth of the storm-god vs. the Sea, which, although were found in Akkadian documents at Mari, they all originated in the cultures inhabiting the Syro-Levantine region, from which the Amorites were immigrated to Mari and eastward.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In Ugarit, where far fewer tablets were uncovered (in relation to both Mesopotamia and Mari), all reflecting a few decades of literate activity, several traditions – some even contradictory – about Baal's death and his return to life have been found. Most of them are set in the second part of the *Baal Cycle*, and in two other works. The *Baal Cycle* itself comprises an additional tradition about the death and resurrection of Baal's rival, Mot, the god of the netherworld.[[21]](#footnote-21) Alongside the Ugaritic works, there is another literary text of north-western Semitic origin that describe the forced descent of the storm-god into the netherworld, and his ascent from there after being revived. This is the work known as the *myth of Elkunirša, Ašertu and the Storm-god*, which despite being written in Hittite, bears numerous foreign elements that pointed to a southern Levantine provenance.[[22]](#footnote-22)

With the destruction of Ugarit and Hatti at the end of the second millennium BCE, our acquaintance with the Syro-Levantine traditions prevalent in this vast area abruptly cease. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Mesopotamian findings in all periods, the Levantine cultures of the second half of the first millennium BCE and forwards continue to provide evidence for the existence of the mythologem of the dying and rising gods, as have already been shown extensively by scholars, from Frazer up to Mettinger.

This very-short overview, which will be elaborated at length in the following study and is based upon it, concludes that while in Mesopotamia the mythologem of the dying and rising gods has only one documentation in about 3000 years of literate activity (while that of the dying gods has many attestations), the sources reflecting the Syro-Levantine cultures – the Ugaritic ones and the Hittite text of north-western Semitic origin, as well as texts from the first millennium BCE and forwards (which are beyond the scope of this study) – they all testify for a long continuity of this mythologem, despite the paucity of epigraphic material in general. In light of these findings, we must inquire how did a sole document from Mesopotamia of a god’s rising from the netherworld fits the common paradigm of a Mesopotamian origin of that mythologem? Perhaps a different, new paradigm should be proposed? Indeed, the only evidence from Mesopotamia precedes those from Ugarit and Hatti; but the lack of local writings in the Levant during the 18th century alongside the evidence from the Amorite Mari of that time (and especially the letter sent by the West-Semitic chief), suggest that precedent alone is not a sufficient parameter to argue for origin. The present study thus seeks to reexamine all the texts containing the mythologem of the dying and rising god from the second millennium BCE, and their relationship each other and to later documents, in order to illustrate the development of the dying and rising god mythologem in West Asia from its very beginning and forward.

1. The scope

The discussion proceeds chronologically and geographically – from the 18th century evidence from Mesopotamia in the east (Chapter 1), through the 18th century evidence from Mari, westward of Mesopotamia (Chapter 2), up to the 13th-12th century evidence from Ugarit in the west (Chapter 3), and the text of southern-Levantine origin discovered at Hatti (Chapter 4).

Two appendices are also included: Appendix 1 refers briefly to evidence of the dying and rising gods’ mythologem in the Levantine cultures of the first millennium BCE onwards, part of them has been extensively discussed elsewhere and others are discussed here for the first time. Appendix 2 deals with sources (from Mesopotamia, Hatti and Israel) that tell of the storm-god’s descent to the netherworld or his death which were not included in the previous chapters due to the lack of an account of his resurrection.

The closing chapter (Chapter 5) summarizes the conclusions raised in each chapter and appendix, in light of which a new perspective on the origin and development of the dying and rising god mythologem is offered.

1. Some preliminary notes

Since each culture has preserved a different type of evidence, discovered in different modern times, and originating in different centuries, the study of each has evolved differently. This complicated situation has far-reaching implications for the structure of each chapter in the present study. Thus, Chapter 1 gives much weight to the history of the research of Dumuzi as a resurrected god, research that began as early as the late 19th century CE, and affected not only the field of Assyriology, but also – and perhaps above all – Frazer’s and his followers’ research of the mythologem of the dying and rising gods. In contrast, in Chapter 3, which due to the nature of evidence focuses mainly on the Baal Cycle, a broad examination of the manner in which the Cycle was composed must precede the survey of each of the dying and rising god’s traditions embedded there.

Another prominent difference between the study of the Mesopotamian texts and that of the Ugaritic texts, reflected in Chapters 1 and 3 (respectively), is the question of the god’s death. No current scholar doubts that Dumuzi has been portrayed as a god descending to the netherworld or as a dead god; it is only his ascent from the netherworld/his resurrection that is questionable. As for Baal, in contrast, some scholars have argued that Baal was never described as a god who died or forced to descend to the netherworld, and –consequently – he was never said to be revived. These different attitudes to each of these gods (which are not necessarily based on extant textual evidence) resonate in each of the Chapters. Thus, while the following discussion on Dumuzi does not seek to prove his being a dying god, but rather focuses on the primary and secondary sources regarding his being a rising god; As for Baal, the textual evidence regarding his death must precede those relating to his resurrection.

A different kind of discussion takes part in Chapters 2 and 4 that focus on sources from Mari and Hatti, as the history of scholarship in their regard is scanty, and to date have yet to have a significant impact on the history of the research of the dying and rising god mythologem. Nevertheless, their contribution to the conclusions of the present study is crucial.

Eventually, the present study wishes to fill a lacune concerning the origin of the dying and rising gods’ mythologem in the ancient Near East. The extant findings led the focus of the study into West Asia of the second millennium BCE. The four chapters of the book and its two appendices – dedicated to sources mainly from Mesopotamia, Mari, Ugarit and Hatti – were composed while tracing these findings.

1. For the studies that followed Frazer, see briefly below, and Chapter 1. For a recent overview, see... Note that the term ‘dying and rising god’ was not used by Frazer in the various editions of his *Golden Bough*, but rather ‘dying and reviving’ and ‘death and resurrection’. The present study uses each of these definitions intermittently. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For Frazer’s previous definition of the ‘dying and rising god’ in his 1894 edition of *The Golden Bough*, see Chapter 1, n… below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. At the same time, many scholars have stated that Frazer's definition of the dying and rising gods does not even fit the writings of late antiquity or believe these writings to have been influenced by Christian doctrine, thereby inaccurately reflecting the beliefs of pagans. However, according to scholars like Ribiccini 1981, this opinion should be rejected. See further discussion in Appendix 1, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The two main gods relating to this case – Osiris and Dumuzi – were mentioned by Frazer as resurrected gods due to his familiarity with the rituals that took place in late antiquity as these mention the death and resurrection of Tammuz and Osiris. In contrast, among the epigraphic writings of Mesopotamia and Egypt, rituals involving the return of these gods have yet to be discovered, and only a single literary text from Mesopotamia mentions the return of Dumuzi, which was brough to light in the 1960s. Nevertheless, in modern research these two gods were – and are – considered to be dying and rising gods. See below, and in Chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. the verbs in the Pyramid Texts relating to the transition of Osiris to the netherworld, calling him: “stand up! raise up!”; “awake” and calling his relatives: “revive (him)”; “make (him) hale. Assmann explained the atmosphere of ‘resurrection’ during the descent of Osiris to the netherworld by viewing the netherworld as a third world… Helck, on the other hand, surmised that such descriptions might point to the Syrian origin of Osiris, after its suitability for Egyptian theology. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Popko, who added the following argument:… Others were of a close opinion, distinguishing between the dying and rising gods and the vanishing gods (or viewed the former as a subcategory of the latter), and argued that Baal in the Ugaritic literature is closer to the second category. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Although it is commonly assumed that the rituals of the vanishing gods reflect an old Anatolian tradition, the extant versions contain Syro-Mesopotamian and Luwian components, which may explain well the striking similarities between these rituals and texts of Mesopotamian and Syrian provenance. This resemblance also led to an opposite conclusion, that the *mugawar* rituals influenced the Syrian tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Therefore, the claim that Inana should also be treated as a dying and rising goddess does not fit that definition, since the texts describe her as one who deliberately descended to the netherworld. As Alster argued, the account telling of the descent of Inana to the netherworld belongs to a genre unique to Inana, which depicts the goddess' entering dangerous places and escaping from there thanks to Enki's assistance. However, it is plausible that the Akkadian adaptation of this account has already been influenced by traditions of dying gods (as will be discussed below). It is worth mentioning again that Telepinu and other Hititte gods of this type vanished by purpose, not being forced by other gods to get lost. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See at length in Chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This assumption was weakened during the mid-20th century CE, after it was realized that Frazer and his predecessors relied on a misinterpretation of a single Akkadian text when they claimed that Dumuzi had returned from the netherworld, and before the discovery of the last lines of a Sumerian text that describe the return of Dumuzi from the netherworld. However, excluding that decade of the mid-20th century, this assumption is so firm among scholars, that even those who rejected Frazer's view for all other gods, still assumed this in relation to Dumuzi. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This letter further serves Mettinger as a proof for the acquaintance of the West-Semitic people with this Mesopotamian mythologem (the two additional economic documents were not mentioned in his book). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See further in Chapter 2, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)