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. 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, reviewed extant findings as well as related discussions on this topic, but predominantly focused 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 millennium, delves deeper into the examination of findings from the second millennium BCE and outlines the *origin* of this mythologem and *the paths in which it spread* among Western Asian cultures until it became one of the most prevalent themes in the writings of later periods.

During the century between the publications of Frazer's and Mettinger’s research, numerous finds were excavated in the Near Eastern region – some of these originating from cultures whose existence Frazer could not even have conceived of. Correspondingly, the definition of the mythologem of 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 to 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 deciphering of many new epigraphic findings, it soon became apparent that none of the gods presented in ancient texts suited the description of the rising and dying gods as formulated by Frazer. As a result, scholars have expanded or contracted the category of ‘dying and rising gods’ in a variety of ways in response to new textual discoveries or scholarly paradigms.[[5]](#footnote-5) Some have 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 or to climatic changes (like the vanishing gods of Hittite evocation rituals) – elements that were highly significant in Frazer’s definition.[[6]](#footnote-6) The opposite has been emphasized by other scholars, claiming that even a god who was said to have died and returned to life, although there are no extant rituals linking his death and resurrection to the seasonal or agricultural cycle (such as Baal in the Ugaritic literature), cannot be considered to be dying and rising gods at all.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moreover, the theme of dying and rising gods has also been viewed as a precursor for later traditions involving the death and resurrection of human beings (such as in the Jewish literature of the Second Temple and later).[[8]](#footnote-8) Finally, another group of scholars has posited that any ritualistic reference of the death of a given god is sufficient for this god to be included in the category of dying and rising gods – since, it appears, this god must have resurrected somehow. Accordingly, this holds true even if no additional rituals or any other texts attesting to the return of the god have been found (which applies to ancient Egyptian texts on Osiris and in the Assyrological field prior to the 1960s).[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, since the current study focuses on the conceptual development of dying and rising gods in a truly literal sense, there is no reason to rely on Frazer’s historical concept, which was based almost exclusively on Hellenistic and Roman literature. Rather, this study simply asks: which ancient Near Eastern cultures describe their god(s) as having died and returned to life again? Cultures whose extant texts portray their gods as having died but not returned to life or resurrected or merely refer to the concept in the sense of seasonal and agricultural cycles without involving the notion of an actual death and resurrection of a divine being cannot be included in this category at all, although perhaps such cultures were influenced by the discussed mythologem as expressed in other cultures.

Thus, this literal definition of a dying and rising god cannot include one of the prominent gods discussed by Frazer, the Egyptian god Osiris. Egyptologists have long held that Egyptian literature prior to late antiquity refers to Osiris as king of the netherworld, as a king who, in fact, never returned to life.[[10]](#footnote-10) Although it is correct to classify Osiris in this manner, non-Egyptian texts that describe Osiris’ arrival in the netherworld also talk about gods who returned to life from the netherworld, suggesting a possible (reciprocal?) influence between Osiris and the presently discussed theme.[[11]](#footnote-11) The same also applies to Telipinu, the Hittite vanishing god, who was classified in post-Frazerian research as a dying and rising god on account of his depictions in Hittite rituals as a disappearing god who eventually returns to his companions and family.[[12]](#footnote-12) Such gods are not said to have actually died and returned to life and therefore also do not fit the presently discussed category,[[13]](#footnote-13) although their disappearance is associated with fertility and climatic changes suggesting a possible reciprocal influence of one culture on another.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In contrast, two other Western Asian gods fall within the definition in the literal sense as gods who die or descend to the netherworld unwillingly[[15]](#footnote-15) and then revive or ascend from the netherworld. These include Dumuzi, whom Frazer already included among the dying and rising gods, although he based his claim on a late analogy between Tammuz and Adonis and the misinterpretation of an Akkadian text,[[16]](#footnote-16) and Baal, who was not known at all to Frazer within this context. As will be shown below, the scarcity of available evidence nonetheless sufficiently proves that the dying-and-rising-god mythologem existed in Western Asia prior to the first millennium BCE.

1. The findings

As stated above, the present study accepts the view of scholars such as Mettinger about the existence of the mythologem of dying and rising gods in writings from the first millennium BCE and – especially – the first centuries CE. However, the present investigation also broadens its scope to include early appearances of the theme in Western Asia, challenging one of Mettinger’s final conclusions according to which the Mesopotamian tradition of the dying and rising Dumuzi influenced the character of Baal and that of later Phoenician gods as gods of this category. Mettinger himself eventually reaches this conclusion, although initially raising some doubts. This finding is consistent with the commonly held assumption over the course of millennia that Dumuzi was portrayed as a dying and rising god, from the earlier cuneiform writings up to the writings of late antiquity.[[17]](#footnote-17) The assumption also fits well with the popular conception of Mesopotamia as a major source of influence from the third to the first millennia BCE, although extant findings do not support this view.

To date, only one piece of evidence from Mesopotamia supports the concept of Dumuzi as a god rising from the netherworld, a brief mention at the end of the Sumerian work *Inanna's Descent*, dated to the 18th century BCE. Apart from this occurrence, no other evidence of such a mythologem, neither in regard to Dumuzi nor to any other Mesopotamian deity, has been discovered in Mesopotamia. There are, however, many documents attesting to the death of Dumuzi and other Mesopotamian gods. In fact, even compositions whose authors appear to be familiar with the content of *Inanna’s Descent* either omit Dumuzi’s resurrection from the netherworld or interpret it quite differently.[[18]](#footnote-18) In light of the abundance of existing materials from Mesopotamia, in fact, more than from any other ancient culture, and due to the many textual findings concerning Dumuzi in particular, the fact that only one Mesopotamian text mentions the rising of Dumuzi makes this concept rather doubtful.

Three additional documents attesting to the dying and rising of Dumuzi were composed in Mari in the 18th century BCE. The most prominent of these is a letter sent by an Amorite chief encouraging the addressee, another Amorite chief, to maintain a nomadic ethos. When the letter was published in the last decade of the 20th century CE, its discovery was seen as significant proof for classifying the Mesopotamian god Dumuzi as a dying and rising god, especially due to the paucity of evidence from Mesopotamia.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, the fact that these documents originated from the kingdom of Mari raises the question to what extent these findings can support the single piece of 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 an Amorite tradition? If so, the mythologem could be grouped with additional western Semitic elements such as the intuitive prophecy, the treaty ritual “*ḫayaram qatālum*”, the *Zukrum* festival and the myth of the Storm-god and the sea, which, although included in Akkadian documents at Mari, all originated among peoples inhabiting the Syro-Levantine region from which the Amorites immigrated to Mari and eastward.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Far fewer tablets (compared to the findings in both Mesopotamia and Mari) have been discovered in Ugarit, which all reflect literate activity over the course of a few decades as well as multiple traditions – some even contradictory – about Baal's death and his return to life. Most occurrences are from the second part of the *Baal Cycle* as well as from two other works. The *Baal Cycle* itself comprises an additional tradition regarding 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 describes the forced descent of the Storm-god into the netherworld and subsequently his ascent after being revived. This work is known as the myth of Elkunirša, Ašertu, and the Storm-god, which, although written in Hittite, contains numerous foreign elements suggesting a southern Levantine provenance.[[22]](#footnote-22)

With the destruction of Ugarit and Hatti at the end of the second millennium BCE, our insight into Syro-Levantine traditions prevalent in this vast area abruptly ceases. Nevertheless, in contrast to Mesopotamian findings in all periods, the Levantine cultures of the second half of the first millennium BCE and onwards continue to provide evidence for the existence of the dying-and-rising-god mythologem as already demonstrated extensively by scholars from Frazer to Mettinger.

This very-short foundational overview, developed in detail in the following study concludes that while the mythologem of the dying and rising gods in Mesopotamia is only documented once over the course of approximately 3000 years of literate activity (although there are many references to dying gods), the sources reflecting the Syro-Levantine cultures – the Ugaritic portrayals and the Hittite text of north-western Semitic origin as well as texts from the first millennium BCE and onwards (which are beyond the scope of this study) – all testify to a long continuity of this mythologem, despite the paucity of epigraphic material in general. In light of these findings, the question arises how a sole document from Mesopotamia of a god’s rising from the netherworld fits the common assumption of the mythologem’s Mesopotamian origin? Perhaps a different and new paradigm should be proposed. Indeed, the solitary piece of evidence from Mesopotamia precedes those from Ugarit and Hatti, yet the lack of local writings in the Levant during the 18th century alongside the evidence from Amorite Mari of that time (specifically the letter sent by the western Semitic chief) suggest that precedent alone is not a sufficient parameter to argue for origin. Thus, the present study seeks to reexamine all texts containing the mythologem of the dying and rising god from the second millennium BCE as well as their relationship to each other and to later documents in order to illustrate the development of the dying-and-rising-god mythologem in Western Asia from its earliest beginnings onward.

1. The scope

The discussion proceeds geographically and chronologically – based on the evidence from eastern Mesopotamia dating to the 18th century BCE (Chapter 1), the evidence from Mari, west of Mesopotamia dating from the 18th century BCE (Chapter 2), and the evidence from Ugarit in the west dating from the 13th to the 12th century BCE (Chapter 3) as well as the text of southern Levantine origin discovered at Hatti (Chapter 4).

Two appendices are also included: Appendix 1 briefly addresses evidence of the dying-and-rising-god mythologem in Levantine cultures from the first millennium BCE onwards of which some evidence has been extensively discussed elsewhere while other evidence is discussed here for the first time. Appendix 2 deals with sources from Mesopotamia, Hatti, and Israel that tell of the Storm-god’s descent into the netherworld or of his death, which was not included in the previous chapters as there is no account of the resurrection of this god.

The closing chapter (Chapter 5) summarizes the conclusions from each chapter and the appendix based on which a new perspective regarding the origin and development of the dying-and-rising-god mythologem is offered.

1. Some preliminary notes

Since different kinds of evidence have originated from distinct cultures and various centuries, discovered at different times throughout modernity, the study of each has evolved differently. This complicated situation has far-reaching implications regarding the structure of each chapter of the present study. Thus, Chapter 1 strongly emphasizes the history of research conducted on Dumuzi as a resurrected god, which began as early as the late 19th century CE and has had an influence on the field of Assyriology, but also – and perhaps above all – on the research of Frazer and his followers concerning the mythologem of dying and rising gods. In contrast, Chapter 3 focuses mainly on the Baal Cycle based on available evidence and provides a broad examination of the manner in which the cycle was composed, which must precede the survey of each of the traditions concerning dying and rising gods embedded there.

Another prominent difference between the study of Mesopotamian and Ugaritic texts, reflected in Chapters 1 and 3 (respectively) is the question of the death of gods. No current scholar doubts that Dumuzi has been portrayed as a god descending to the netherworld or as a god who died. It is merely his ascent from the netherworld and his resurrection that is being called into question. However, certain scholars have argued with respect to the god Baal that he was never described as a dying god or a god who was forced to descend to the netherworld and – consequently – was never said to have arisen. The different perceptions of each of these gods (which are not necessarily based on extant textual evidence) are reflected in each of the chapters. Thus, the following discussion on Dumuzi does not seek to prove that he is a dying god but rather focuses on the primary and secondary sources portraying him as a rising god. As for Baal, the textual evidence regarding his death must precede the evidence regarding his resurrection.

A different kind of discussion takes place in Chapters 2 and 4 as the focus is on sources from Mari and Hatti since the history of scholarship in this field is scanty and has, thus far, not had a significant impact on the history of research on the dying-and-rising-god mythologem. Nevertheless, its contribution to the conclusions of the present study is crucial.

Ultimately, the present study strives to fill the vacuum concerning the origin of the mythologem of the dying and rising gods in the ancient Near East. On the basis of extant findings, the study has shifted its focus to Western Asia of the second millennium BCE. The four chapters of the book and its two appendices – mainly relying on sources from Mesopotamia, Mari, Ugarit, and Hatti – trace 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 is not even in line with the writings of late antiquity or have argued that these writings were influenced by Christian doctrine, thereby inaccurately reflecting pagan beliefs. 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 referenced here – 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 as discovered by researchers in the 1960s. Nevertheless, modern research has considered and still considers these two gods to be dying and rising gods. See below, and in Chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. the Pyramid Texts in regard to Osiris’ transition to the netherworld where relatives use the verbs “stand up! raise up!” and “awake” or “revive (him)” and “make (him) hale” when calling to Osiris. 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 in relation to its suitability for Egyptian theology. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Popko 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 god reflect an old Anatolian tradition, extant versions contain Syro-Mesopotamian and Luwian components, which may explain the striking similarities between these rituals and texts of Mesopotamian and Syrian provenance. This resemblance has also led to the inverse conclusion that *mugawar* rituals influenced the Syrian tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Therefore, the claim that Inanna should also be treated as a dying and rising goddess does not fit the definition, since the texts describe her as one who deliberately descended to the netherworld. As Alster argued, the account of the descent of Inanna to the netherworld belongs to a genre unique to Inanna, which depicts the goddess entering dangerous places and escaping from there with the assistance of Enki. However, it is plausible that the Akkadian adaptation of this account was already influenced by traditions of dying gods (as will be discussed below). It is worth mentioning again that Telipinu and other Hittite gods of this type vanished by choice and were not forced to do so by other gods. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See at length in Chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This assumption was weakened during the middle of the 20th century CE as scholars realized that Frazer and his predecessors had relied on a misinterpretation of a single Akkadian text in regard to the claim that Dumuzi had returned from the netherworld. This occurred prior to the discovery of the last lines of a Sumerian text that describe the return of Dumuzi from the netherworld. However, notwithstanding the middle of the 20th century, the assumption in regard to Dumuzi has been so firmly established among scholars that even those who reject Frazer's view with respect to all other gods still believe Dumuzi to be a dying and rising god. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For Mettinger, this letter provides further proof that western Semitic people were familiar with the 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)