A Parablepsis in Duplicate S of *Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld*

and its Impact on *Ištar’s Descent to the Netherworld*

For my teacher, Wayne,

who opened the

door for me to Sumerian studies

Two well-known poems from the literary tradition of ancient Mesopotamia recount the tale of a goddess who descends into the netherworld and subsequently returns to the heavens. She is the Sumerian goddess Inanna, known to the Akkadians as Ištar. The recensions of the earlier Sumerian composition *Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld* (hereafter referred to as *InD*) date back to the early second millennium BCE, while those of the Akkadian composition *Ištar’s Descent to the Netherworld* (hereafter referred to as *IšD*) date back mainly to the first half of the first millennium BCE. Unsurprisingly, the later Akkadian tablets inscribed with the text of IšD were discovered first, in the late 19th century.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 1914, Sumerian tablets of *InD* began to emerge as well, and within two years, in 1916, Stephen Langdon (1916, 55) designated one of these (later known as duplicate K) as the “Sumerian original of the *Descent of Ishtar*.” About eight years later, Edward Chiera (1924) established the connection between this tablet and other tablets of *InD* that were already known, along with some newly discovered ones. These findings expanded the then-existing understanding of the plot of *InD* and further substantiated Langdon’s insight into the relationship between the two Mesopotamian compositions, *InD* and *IšD*. Since that time, and up to the present day, additional recensions of the Sumerian *InD* have come to light.[[2]](#footnote-2) These contain significant variations such as interchanges, omissions, and additions. In the case of *IšD*, there are fewer differences in terms of text and wording, possibly due to the existence of only two recensions (one of which comprises two textual witnesses).

When studying the content of the Sumerian *InD*, scholars commonly turn to its composite edition, even though such a version never existed in ancient Mesopotamia. Originating from editions by Samuel Noah Kramer in 1937 and 1951, and by William R. Sladek in 1976, the composite edition is a modern scholarly convention that seeks to incorporate as many lines as possible. As such, it is believed to provide the most comprehensive depiction of the plot of *InD*. Nevertheless, when examining how the story of *IšD* evolved from its older counterpart in *InD*, relying on the composite edition proves inadequate. Instead, it is essential to separately examine the various duplicates of *InD*, each of which reflects a distinct recension of the composition, in order to identify the one that most closely aligns with *IšD*. Apart from *InD*, other works such as the Sultantepe version of *Nergal and Ereškigal* and the canonical version of *The Epic of Gilgameš* share textual connections with *IšD*. However, the question of which recension of *InD* is the closest to *IšD* remains open.

The present paper seeks to address this knowledge gap. Unlike the recensions of other compositions (such as those of *Nergal and Ereškigal* and *The Epic of Gilgameš*), the various duplicates of *InD* are very similar. Even so, duplicate S of *InD* exclusively contains a significant parablepsis, which is repeated in *IšD*,[[3]](#footnote-3) in precisely the same place, and this may suggest that the former text served as the basis for the Akkadian *IšD*. After a brief introduction highlighting the importance of errors like parablepsis as valuable tools for this research, the subsequent sections will present evidence from both *InD* and *IšD*, followed by a summary of the findings and their implications.

Error analysis is a conventional tool employed by scholars of textual criticism to establish connections between manuscripts. Manuscripts that share identical errors commonly belong to the same family. Quoting Martin West (1973, 32) on this matter: “In the absence of contamination, each copy will contain the same errors that were in the exemplar from which it was made, minus those that the scribe has seen and corrected, plus some additional ones (…). This axiom is the basis of stemmatic analysis.” While it is sometimes possible to trace the origins of an error back to the archetype, the original reason for this deviation from the source text does not lie in any of the descendant manuscripts that have inherited the corrupted text; only its documentation remains. When dealing with different adaptations of the same narrative (such as *InD* and *IšD*), one is of course less likely to find identical errors as the poet is not bound to the original text. However, if such a phenomenon is discovered, it may certainly serve as an effective tool for examining the source from which a particular adaptation evolved, much like the study of manuscripts.

# Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld

Of all the extant duplicates of *InD*, only one text shares a distinct scribal error with *IšD*: duplicate S. This particular feature is evident in the seventeen lines of duplicate S that correlate with the plot of *IšD*.[[4]](#footnote-4) The first line of this fragmented duplicate (=line 232 of the composite edition) is found halfway through Enki’s instructions to rescue Inanna from the netherworld, addressed to his aides, the Galaturra and the Kurgarra. This scene corresponds with lines 93-99 of *IšD* where Ea tells his aide, Aṣûšu-namir, how to save Ištar. The correlation between duplicate S of *InD* and *IšD* continues until line 17 (=284 of the composite edition), when Inanna’s descent into the netherworld, accompanied by Enki’s aides, is depicted. This scene parallels the descent of Ištar into the netherworld in *IšD*, lines 100-126. Duplicate S extends to the end of the narrative in *InD*, including Inanna*’*s pursuit of a substitute to take her place after her release, her selection of Dumuzi, the latter’s plea to the sun god, and Inanna’s decree that Dumuzi could leave the netherworld for half the year. However, this plot (originating from distinct literary sources) is entirely replaced in *IšD* with brief excerpts from Dumuzi’s funeral ceremony (ll. 127-138 in IšD).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Within the initial seventeen lines of duplicate S, an unexpected transition occurs between line 13 (=251 in the composite edition) and line 14 (=280 in the composite edition), as follows:[[6]](#footnote-6)

… 11=249 “(She will answer:) ‘The beaten meat is that of your queen.’

12=250 Say (to her): ‘Whether it is that of our king or that of our queen, give it to us.’

13=251 (Then)you will be given the beaten meat hanging on the nail.”

14=280 They threw on her; one the food of life, the other—the water of life.

14=281 Inanna arose.

Up to line 13 (=251), the text quotes Enki’s instructions to his aides regarding how to rescue Inanna from the netherworld, whereas line 14 (=280) abruptly shifts to Inanna’s actual resurrection, without indicating the transition from the instructions to their execution. This creates a distinct inconsistency in the sequence that is not observed in other sections of duplicate S. Furthermore, in contrast to the conventions of Mesopotamian literature, the intervention of the aides does not reflect the directions given and their actions come immediately after the end of the instructions.

While some scholars have attempted to translate the text harmoniously,[[7]](#footnote-7) the inconsistency is, in fact, a result of a mere scribal error. A comparison between duplicate S and other duplicates of *InD* provides insight into the origin of this error. It appears that one of the scribes responsible for the text in duplicate S accidentally omitted about thirty lines of the composition, including the last part of Enki’s instructions and the first part of their execution by his aides—all of which feature in the other duplicates.[[8]](#footnote-8) This omission occurred due to the wording echoed in lines 251 (see above) and 279 (see below). Since lines 251 and 279 differ only in the tense of their concluding verb (the English translation locates the verb at the beginning of the line), this parablepsis can be classified as an example of homoioarcton: when a scribe’s eye skips from one part of a text to another due to the identical or similar beginnings of a line.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The comparison between duplicate S and other duplicates of *InD* further reveals that the reason why this omission occurred solely in duplicate S is because this is the only duplicate to include lines 249-251 (11-13, see above). The question arises: Why were these lines added to duplicate S? As mentioned above, ancient scholars of Mesopotamian literature, in keeping with other ancient literary traditions, tended to harmonize the instructions given in a text with their execution (a characteristic that probably developed during the stage of oral transmission of literature). However, alignment between the two phases (instructions and their executions) is not always absolute: certain lines may have been left out—or supplemented—in either part (the instructions or their execution). In the case of *InD*, instructions are executed in lines 277-279 of all known duplicates except for duplicate S, but there is no corresponding passage in which the instructions are reported. Thus, while these lines are absent from duplicate S due to the previously discussed parablepsis, they have been preserved in other duplicates where the omission did not occur:[[10]](#footnote-10)

277 (she answers them:)[[11]](#footnote-11) “The beaten meat is that of your queen.”

278 They said to her: “Whether it is that of our king or that of our queen, give it to us.”

279 They were given the beaten meat hanging on the nail.

To harmonize the content of these lines (277-279) with the instructions, it appears that one of the earlier scribes working on the text of duplicate S inserted lines 11-13 into the ‘instructional phase’. Subsequently, these lines were integrated into the modern composite edition as lines 249-251, even though they are not present in any of the other duplicates.

The parablepsis in duplicate S may therefore be attributed to two scribes: (a) an earlier scribe who deliberately supplemented the content that he deemed missing in the instructions (ll. 249-251) to precisely align with their execution (ll. 277-279); (b) a later scribe, who, due to the great similarities between line 251 of the instructions and line 279, inadvertently skipped lines 252-279. This is the reason for the abrupt transition between Enki’s instructions to his aides and their actual intervention in duplicate S. In the other duplicates of *InD*, lines 277-279 were never supplemented, and consequently, the resulting parablepsis did not occur.

# Ištar’s Descent to the Netherworld

The Akkadian *IšD*, extant in two recensions,[[12]](#footnote-12) is commonly considered a condensed version of the Sumerian *InD*. As mentioned above, the poet of *IšD* entirely replaced the second part of *InD* (which recounts Dumuzi’s descent into the netherworld and subsequent ascent due to Inanna’s actions) with brief excerpts derived from funerary texts. In addition, the poet of the Akkadian version significantly condensed the initial part of *InD*, which depicts the descent of Inanna into the netherworld and her ascent, employing a variety of literary methods.

For example, while *InD* extensively describes Inanna’s preparation for her descent into the netherworld, including her instructions to her minister to seek help from the supreme deities if she does not return, this portion is completely absent in *IšD*. Another example can be cited: after Inanna is captured in the netherworld, the interactions between her minister and each of the deities are elaborated, depicting her appeals for help and the refusal of the deities until the last deity, Enki, finally grants her request. In contrast, *IšD* only retains the final stage of that scene: after Ištar descends into the netherworld, her minister weeps before the deities Sîn and Ea, with the latter finding a solution to assist her.[[13]](#footnote-13) *IšD* also diverges from the Sumerian composition in various other aspects, such as the identities of the minister seeking the goddess’s release and of those who were involved in her rescue from the netherworld. Additionally, the nature of the rescue itself varies, including the appeal of the aide(s) from Ereškigal for a waterskin (representing the dying Ištar) in *IšD* instead of beaten meat (representing the dying Inanna) in *InD*.[[14]](#footnote-14)

At first glance, another literary method to condense the Sumerian work can be detected in the abrupt transition from Ea’s instruction to his aide Aṣûšu-namir regarding the rescue of Ištar (up to line 99) to the subsequent reaction of Ereškigal (from line 100 onwards). Consequently, the scene omits the depiction of Aṣûšu-namir carrying out Ea’s instructions, as follows:[[15]](#footnote-15)

93 (Ea said:) “Go, Aṣûšu-namir, set your face to the gate of the Netherworld,

94 Let the seven gates of the Netherworld open for you…

98 Raise your head and pay attention to the waterskin (saying): [[16]](#footnote-16)

99 ‘No! my Lady, let them give me the waterskin, that I may drink water from it.’”

100 When Ereškigal heard this…

However, unlike other instances in which parts of *InD* were omitted or condensed in *IšD*, this shortening introduces an inconsistency in the narrative sequence. As Erica Reiner (1985, 44) explains: “Note that Ereškigal’s reaction immediately follows Ea’s instructions, as the poet skips over the expected repetition of lines 93-99, a repetition in which the instructions couched in the imperative or optative (“go,” “Let the seven gates…open,” etc.) would have been taken up line for line in the narrative past tense (“he went,” “the seven gates…opened,” etc.). The Philologist must caution, however, that the seven lines expected at this point could easily have been skipped by a copyist.” [[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, it should be noted that this form of abbreviation does not conform to the style of *IšD*, which elsewhere provides a comprehensive depiction of both the instructions and their execution, along with a transitional sentence between them (cf. *IšD*, 109-118). Notably, the abrupt shift from Ea’s instructions to Ereškigal’s reaction occurs precisely at the same point as the parablepsis in duplicate S of *InD*. In both texts, this shift occurs immediately after Enki/Ea, the god of wisdom, instructs his aide(s) to request the dead body (“beaten meat”/“waterskin”) of the goddess.

In light of these considerations, it seems unlikely that the author of *IšD* deliberately introduced this disruption in the sequence. Hence, two other possible explanations can be suggested to account for this: Tentatively, as Reiner suggested, it could be that one of the scribes of *IšD*, from whose text all the extant recensions derived, unintentionally skipped from the end of the instructions to the end of the report of their execution. If this is the case, the parablepsis arose for the same reason as in duplicate S of *InD*, namely because of the striking resemblance between the instructions and the lines depicting their execution. While practical verification of this possibility is unattainable due to the uniformity of all textual witnesses of *IšD* at this juncture, it cannot be dismissed.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Nevertheless, such a parablepsis could potentially occur in any corresponding set of lines (in the instructions and in the report of the aides’ activity) within both compositions. The fact that the omission in *IšD* corresponds precisely with the omission in duplicate S of *InD* suggests that the cause for the inconsistency in *IšD* is not another parablepsis. Rather, it is more plausible that the poet of *IšD* relied on the text of duplicate S of *InD*. For this poet, the unintentional omission in the Sumerian text became an inherent narrative element, ultimately forming the basis for the Akkadian adaptation of the story. In other words, the recurrence of the omission in duplicate S of *InD* in *IšD* implies that this inconsistency was an essential feature of the archetype from which the poet of *IšD* constructed his Akkadian work.

# Conclusions

The composite edition of *InD*, developed from the 1930s onwards, compiles the maximum number of lines from each duplicate, even if they appear only in a single instance. However, both the additions and omissions in each duplicate are interrelated and pivotal for comprehending the evolution of *InD* and the works derived from this. The present article illustrates how lines 249-251 in *InD* (= 11-13), exclusively added by a harmonist scribe to the text of duplicate S, inadvertently led to the omission of lines 252-279 by a later scribe of the same duplicate. Given that this omission had lasting effects centuries later in lines 99-100 in the Akkadian *IšD*, it is suggested that duplicate S of *InD* served as the basis for the reworked composition of *IšD*.

1. See list of texts and editions in Lapinkivi 2010, xi-xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the history of scholarship up to 1974, see Sladek 1974, 1-8. For the most recent list of texts and editions, see Attinger 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elsewhere, I briefly mention this finding (…). The current discussion expands on it, particularly the implications for *IšD*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an updated edition of duplicate S, see Attinger 2021, and cf. Petersen 2019, 32-39; Kramer 1980, 299-310. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the independent traditions comprising the two major parts of *InD* (only the first of which is narrated in *IšD*), see Katz 1996; 2003: 251–287; Alster 2011; Zgoll 2020a; 2020b. For the conclusion of *IšD* and its relation to the second part of *InD*, see… [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Text and translation follow Attinger 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Petersen 2019, 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. Kramer 1980, 308; Attinger 2021, 1 n. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Such an error could have resulted from a process of copying from memory (cf. Delnero 2012, 35, 201), or copying from another source or from dictation (as evidenced by instances in classical and biblical texts). For a similar occurrence of homoioarcton in an Akkadian text, see tablet XI in duplicate J of *The Epic of Gilgameš*, which omits lines 267-268 (George 2003, 894). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The lines were preserved in duplicates M, U, and V. The quotation cites, for each line, the corresponding parallel to lines 249-251 in duplicate S. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. U precedes this line with: “She answered them” (line 276). V contains: “Holy Ereškigal answered the [young] Galatura [and kurgarra].” M lacks this line, similar to the text of S in the part where the instructions are reported. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. One recension was discovered at Aššur and the other (with its two textual witnesses) in Aššurbanipal’s library at Nineveh. An earlier tablet from the library of Tiglath-Pileser I, citing only the beginning of the composition, is sometimes regarded as a third recension of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In fact, to introduce an additional deity alongside Ea, the poet of *IšD* merely relied on a common short parallelism, rather than elaborating on this scene: “(Papsukkal) is weeping before his father Sîn; his tears are flowing before Ea the king.” Note that similar parallelism is employed in Type B of *The Cow of Sîn*, where Sîn himself takes on the role of the lamenting god (Ayali-Darshan 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For additional differences between the compositions, including the additions presented in *IšD*, see Falkenstein 1968; Kirk 1970, 107-111; Sladek 1974, 34-51; Katz 1995, PP. For the waterskin as the corpse of Ištar in *IšD*, which is analogous to the beaten meat in *InD*, see Reiner 1985, 43; Lapinkivi 2010, 83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The text follows Setälä 2022; cf. Lapinkivi 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Thus reads the text from Nineveh; the text from Aššur reads… [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. While Rainer’s examination pertains to the inconsistency in *IšD*, it also applies perfectly to the omission in *InD*. In this respect, it is worth citing the continuation of her argument (ibid): “Ea’s instructions include, in the first line, the words his messenger is to address to Ereškigal, a direct quotation that would have been identical in such a narrative counterpart; and the copyist’s eye could easily have skipped the seven lines….” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A century before Reiner 1985, Schrader 1874, 48 struggled with this inconsistency. See also Landsberger 1922, 299, n. 2; Ebeling 1926, 209 n. c. Surprisingly, modern translators tend to ignore this. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)