A Parablepsis in Duplicate S of Inana’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—Inana or Ištar—who descends into the netherworld and subsequently leaves. The recensions of the earlier Sumerian composition Inana’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 designated one of these (later known as duplicate K) as the ‘Sumerian original of the Descent of Ishtar.’[[2]](#footnote-2) 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.[[3]](#footnote-3) These contain significant variations such as interchanges, omissions, and additions. In the case of IšD, there are fewer differences between its recensions, in terms of text and wording, possibly due to the existence of only two of them (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 the aforementioned *Nergal and Ereškigal* and *The Epic of Gilgameš*), the various duplicates of InD are very similar. Even so, one of the duplicates of InD exclusively contains a significant parablepsis, which is repeated in IšD,[[4]](#footnote-4) and this may suggest that the text reflected in this duplicate 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 reason for this error 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.

# Inana’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.[[5]](#footnote-5) The first line of this fragmented duplicate (=line 232 of the composite edition) is found halfway through Enki’s instructions to rescue Inana 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 Inana’s ascent from the netherworld, with the assistance of Enki’s aides, is depicted. This scene parallels the ascent of Ištar from the netherworld in IšD, lines 100–126. Duplicate S extends to the end of the narrative in InD, including Inana*’*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 Inana’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).[[6]](#footnote-6)

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:[[7]](#footnote-7)

… 11=249 usù níĝ sàg-ga ga-ša-an<-zu>-ne-ne

12=250 níĝ lugal-me-en ḫé-a níĝ nin-bi ˹ḫé-a˺ [š]úm-ma-zé-en du11-ga-ma-ab-mèn-zé-en

13=251 usù níĝ sàg-ga ĝeš˹gag˺-ta lá-a im-ma-da-ab-šúm-mu-zé-en

14=280 deš-àm ú nam-tìl-˹la˺ deš-˹àm a nam-tìl˺-[la] ˹uugu6˺-ni ba-an-šub-bu-eš

14=281 dinana ba-gub

… 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 Inana arose.

Up to line 13 (=251), the text quotes Enki’s instructions to his aides regarding how to rescue Inana from the netherworld, whereas line 14 (=280–281) abruptly shifts to Inana’s resurrection following the intervention of Enki’s aides, 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. Instead, the story is interrupted immediately after the instructions and resumes at the point where the aides have already reached Inana and are trying to save her, but their actions are not the same as those prescribed in the previous lines.

While some scholars have attempted to translate the text harmoniously,[[8]](#footnote-8) 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.[[9]](#footnote-9) This omission occurred due to the identical wording present in most of lines 251 (see above) and 279 (see below). Since lines 251 and 279 differ only in their concluding lexemes (unlike the Sumerian text, the English translation locates them at the beginning of the line), this parablepsis can be classified as an example of homoioarcton: when a scribe skips from one part of a text to another due to the identical beginnings of a line.[[10]](#footnote-10)

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, 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 execution) 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, it appears that the instructions in lines 277–279, quoted below, initially lacked a corresponding passage in which they were executed.

277 usù níĝ sàg-ga níĝ ga-ša-an-zu-ne-ne-ka (U)

278 [níĝ lug]al-me ḫé-a níĝ nin-me ḫé-me-a šúm-me-eb in-na-ne-e[š](M)

279 ˹usù˺ níĝ ˹x˺ ĝešgag-ta lá-a im-me-ne-˹šúm-uš˺ (V)

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.

While these lines are now absent from duplicate S due to the previously discussed parablepsis, they are preserved in other duplicates where the omission did not occur:[[12]](#footnote-12) To harmonize the content of these lines (277–279) with corresponding instructions, 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. However, 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,[[13]](#footnote-13) 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 Inana’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 Inana into the netherworld and her ascent, employing a variety of literary methods.

For example, while InD extensively describes Inana’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 Inana 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.[[14]](#footnote-14) 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 Inana) in InD.[[15]](#footnote-15)

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:[[16]](#footnote-16)

93 *alka Aṣûšu-namir ina bāb Kurnugi šukun pānika*

94 *sebet bābu Kurnugi lippetû ina pānika…*

98 *šuqqi rēšika ana ḫalziqqi uzna šukun*[[17]](#footnote-17)

99 *ē bēltī ḫalziqqa lidnūni mê ina libbi lultatti*

100 *ereškigal annīta ina šemêša*…

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):

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.’[[18]](#footnote-18) 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 poet 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.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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 the text reflected in 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. Langdon 1916. On p. 55, he adds: ‘The ends of the lines are broken away, but the fragment reveals the interesting fact that the famous Semitic poem of the Descent of Ishtar is really a revision and an expansion of a Sumerian original.’ Later, it was discovered that IšD is a condensed version of InD (see below). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 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-3)
4. Elsewhere, I briefly mention this finding. The current discussion expands on it, particularly the implications for IšD. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an updated edition of duplicate S, see Attinger 2021, and cf. Petersen 2019, 32-39; Kramer 1980, 299–310. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 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 literary relation to the second part of InD, see Ayali-Darshan 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Text and translation follow Attinger 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. Petersen 2019, 32–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Kramer 1980, 308; Attinger 2021, 1 n. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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-10)
11. U precedes this line with: ‘She answered them’ (line 276). V contains: ‘Holy Ereškigal answered the [young] Galaturra [and kurgarra].’ M lacks this line, similar to the text of S in the part where the instructions are reported. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 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-12)
13. 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-13)
14. 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 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 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, 228–233. 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-15)
16. The text follows Setälä 2022; cf. Lapinkivi 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Thus reads the text from Nineveh; the text from Aššur reads: *šuqqi rēšikama uzna šukun ana ḫalziqqi.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 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. Therefore it remains doubtful whether, even in this condensed second half, the poet omitted the narrative section intentionally, without even a hint that a repetition is to be supplied, as is sometimes given in other narrative poems by inserting the line “The messenger appeared before so-and-so” even when the expected verbatim repetition of the messenger’s words is omitted, or by inserting the phrase “and so forth” indicating the reader or performer that such repetition is to be made.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 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-19)