
THE MAGIC DUEL FROM SUMER TO GRAIL: CONSIDERATIONS ON A STUDY BY A. COOMARASWAMY

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ABSTRACT

In 1944 Ananda Coomaraswamy published an essay on the parallels between the plot of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a Medieval English poem that forms part of the cycle of The Knights of the Round Table, and the mythological Hindu tale on the fight between the god Indra and Namuci. By means of this essay Coomaraswamy expounded his manifesto of Philosophia perennis, and referred to many mythologies of other cultures to illustrate the metaphysical theme of the One and the Many, the creation of Time and Space, and the Reintegration into the One.

At that time the Sumerian poem Lugal-e ud melambi nirġal was not well known. Now it is not only possible to integrate the documentation Coomaraswamy put forward with this poem and other Mesopotamian myths, but also to include Mesopotamian religious thought in the general pattern he outlined.

RIASSUNTO

Nel 1944 Ananda Coomaraswamy pubblicò un saggio sui paralleli tra la trama del poema inglese medievale Sir Gawain e il Cavaliere Verde, che fa parte del ciclo dei Cavalieri della tavola Rotonda, e il mito indiano sullo scontro tra il dio Indra e Namuci. Con questo saggio Coomaraswamy rese pubblico il suo manifesto di Philosophia perennis, e riferì su molte mitologie di altre culture, per illustrare il tema metafisico dell'Uno e del Molteplice, la creazione di Tempo e Spazio e la Reintegrazione nell'Uno.

A quel tempo, il poema sumerico Lugal-e ud melambi nirġal non era ben conosciuto. Ora non solo è possibile integrare la documentazione addotta da Coomaraswamy con questo poema ed altri miti mesopotamici, ma anche includere il pensiero religioso mesopotamico nello schema generale che egli delineò.

KEYWORDS

Coomaraswamy, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Indra and Namuci, Lugal-e, Enūma eliš, Ninurta, Marduk, Tigris, Water of life, Cosmogony, One and Many, Philosophia Perennis, Border of the world, cosmic order, Splitting of heaven from earth, Hieros gamos, soul, Reintegration, Phenomenological method.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Uno e Molteplice, Ordine cosmico, Confine del mondo, Separazione di cielo e terra, Anima, Reintegrazione, Metodo fenomenologico, Acqua di vita.

In 1973 Prof. Mario Liverani published a seminal paper in the volume of the Festschrift Ignace J. Gelb¹. It was a famous 'Memorandum' which exhorted scholars to go beyond the Eurocentric barrier and interpret the cultural traits of the society they were scrutinising using that society's own cultural criteria for their evaluation, instead of that of the observer: a phenomenological approach much needed at that time by the world of historians and philologists who were studying the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

It is a privilege for me to offer him these pages today, which follow the direction his Memorandum pointed out almost 40 years ago.

0. Hen kai Pan

In 1944 Ananda Coomaraswamy published an essay² that was in reality a manifesto, as its last pages reveal beyond a doubt, of that line of interpretative thought I label as 'perennialist', from the phrase *philosophia perennis* which I think is the most suitable to

¹ Liverani 1973.

² Coomaraswamy 1944 (henceforth SGGK): 104.

indicate it, or better than many others, at any rate³.

It was no accident that the author explicitly declared he agreed with the intent that the then young Mircea Eliade had expressed for his early works. The admiration was mutual, as Eliade himself declared in his famous interview with Roquet⁴, at a time when the Rumanian scholar was an author of international acclaim and an acknowledged master in his field.

The writing of the essay was prompted by a work of literary criticism by G. L. Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight*, Cambridge, Mass. 1916, in which its author examines a 14th-century Middle English poem belonging to the cycle of the ‘Knights of the Round Table’, and which is, in particular, part of the literature revolving around the ‘Quest of the Holy Grail’.

Here follows the plot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in Coomaraswamy’s own words⁵.

“What happens is that an uncouth stranger (the Green Knight) appears at Arthur’s court on New Years Day, when all are seated at table; but it is the ‘custom’ not to eat until some marvel has been seen or heard. The stranger rides into Arthur’s hall; and challenges any knight to cut off his head upon condition that he shall submit to the same forfeit a year later. Gawain takes up the Challenge and beheads the stranger, who walks off, with the head in his hand; it speaks, calling upon Gawain to keep his word. So Gawain does; the Green Knight spares his life and becomes his friend.”

Coomaraswamy’s path of investigation is not easy to follow. The starting point of his research was the Indian myth of Indra and Namuci, in which he recognised not only the hidden framework of the Middle-English poem, but also the same frameworks he has been able to detect in the mythological heritage of several other cultures from around the globe. In this circumstance, the Indian myth of Indra and Namuci becomes the paradigm of the expression of concepts which are common to the majority of humanity.

A world ruler god, who intends to impose order on the universe, and whose paradigm is Indra, beheads a titan (Namuci), whose head rolls on the ground or, alternatively, becomes the sun. As a consequence of this feat, the victorious god can release the pent-up waters, which must be understood as the source of all things⁶ [**theme a**]. In fact, the sun, which indicates the passing of days and months, is the symbol of time, which devours its own offspring, a topic to which I shall return subsequently.

The two contenders are not strangers to each other: they might even be brothers⁷ [**theme b**], or they may have been friends in the past, or the titan may even have spontaneously offered himself as a victim to the god. Any reference to the struggle between good and evil is out of place, because Coomaraswamy mentions Puruṣa, the divine figure who, when split in half, gives rise to heaven and earth. The defeated god lends his body in order to form the cosmos, the parts of which are fashioned from his limbs⁸ [**theme c**].

A specific passage from Kittredge about snakes or Serpent-men –that is, monsters who are able to dispose of their own heads at will– prompts further considerations along the same line of thought.

Indeed, in many cultures the ophidian aspect is peculiar to netherworldly beings.

³ Expression used by Coomaraswamy himself: SGGK: 125.

⁴ Eliade 1978.

⁵ *ibidem* p. 104.

⁶ SGGK: 105.

⁷ SGGK: 106.

⁸ SGGK: 106.

On one hand, in fact, the serpents are a symbol of the Prime Principle, since the snake unifies both principles, masculine and feminine, in itself, thus becoming the single source of all things. On the other hand, its bisection represents the division of heaven and earth⁹ **[theme d]**, an event which constitutes the point of departure for the generation of all living things¹⁰.

On a secondary level this very same separation into two parts expresses the distinction between “*Sacerdotium (brahma)*” and “*Regnum (kṣatra)*”, the former corresponding to heaven and the latter to earth¹¹ **[theme e]**. When discussing this topic, Coomaraswamy mentions the “sacred marriage” (*daivaṃ mithunam*, more usually known in our studies as *hieros gamos*), as a necessary practice for uniting both principles, mortal and divine¹² **[theme f]**.

Moreover, along the same lines, in Indian mythology snakes turn into the sun – and this is an aspect that appears elsewhere– when they shuff off their old skins. Coomaraswamy also broadens this discussion to include the ‘body of death’ which Saint Paul exhorts to cast off¹³.

After his victory over his enemy, Indra becomes ‘Indra the Great’ and assumes the role that Namuci (Vṛtra) once held, before being beheaded¹⁴.

Not only does decapitation symbolize here the liberation of the sun from the darkness, but the production of multiplicity out of one as well. Beings can realise their own potential, once they are “released from Varuṇa’s bonds”. It is important to observe that this realization is possible only between heaven and earth, that is to say, between time (which is started by the regular rotation of the starry vault) and space (which is expressed by the earth’s breadth)¹⁵ **[theme g]**. With this pivotal event, the course of time and becoming is set in motion, the symbol of which is the flowing of the waters. In figurative terms: The sacrifice of the One in order to repopulate the ‘wasteland’¹⁶ **[theme a1]**.

The requisite condition for the flow of time is the interaction of two polarities, such as light and darkness, day and night, male and female, heaven and earth, and so on.

Now –and this point is the culmination of Coomaraswamy’s essay– after the beginning of the cycle where everything is contained (as an example of this statement, the author also mentions the gold of Fafner¹⁷), the *panta rei* of the flow must reach an end. That is to say, the original unity must be restored by the conclusion of the cycle: Coomaraswamy mentions here the Self of the sacrificer, which must be related to the Divine¹⁸.

The sacrifice in question consists in the act of decapitation, which does not kill the victim, but instead makes the process of reintegration possible. It is the overcoming of both disintegration and reintegration that allows for “the winning of both worlds”¹⁹.

At this point, what is at stake is the secret of salvation, which can also be expressed by means of thaumaturgy: a secret that makes it possible to go beyond heroic valour itself.

Coomaraswamy does not stop at these considerations and proceeds to his conclusion: the beheading of the dragon and the subsequent reconstruction of the beheaded victim are

⁹ SGGK: 107.

¹⁰ SGGK: 109.

¹¹ SGGK: 107.

¹² SGGK: 107.

¹³ SGGK: 108.

¹⁴ SGGK: 108-109.

¹⁵ SGGK: 109.

¹⁶ SGGK: 109 fn 2.

¹⁷ SGGK: 110.

¹⁸ SGGK: 110-111.

¹⁹ SGGK: 112.

to be extended by analogy to the realities of the inner recesses of the human soul. Or, more precisely, of the two human souls, the mortal one and the immortal one: once again, he quotes Saint Paul, when the latter speaks about the ‘sword of the Word of God that sunders soul from spirit’²⁰.

Finally, after these concluding remarks, Coomaraswamy states his ‘manifesto’, by declaring, among other things, that mythology is nothing but a metaphysical system expressed in figurative language.

Of course, Coomaraswamy’s article touches on and explores much broader themes than the present brief summary can address, and should be read in its entirety; nonetheless, I hope this summary will suffice as an introduction to the main aspects of Mesopotamian religion. Of course, Coomaraswamy hardly ignored the subject, mentioning Ti’amat’s dismembering by Marduk in *Enūma eliš*²¹ (theme [c]) and the ophidian shape of the serpent-god²² (theme [d]). Indeed, it was not his intention to provide an exhaustive survey of the documentation available in every culture, a virtually impossible task, but to provide a selection of myths from different cultures and distant ages that could be compared and placed in the same general frame of meaning.

The increase in the literary cuneiform documentation available since the article was conceived, and in the greater reliability of scientific editions of texts, makes an updated version based on cuneiform documentation necessary, in order to verify the theses the author supported.

1. Themes [a]: The fight, the beheading and the release of the waters; [c]: The creation of the universe from the corpse of the defeated titan [a1]: Peopling of the world

The theme of the beheading, with the image of the rolling head portrayed as the sun, is depicted on a terra cotta vase found in the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad²³, where a god equipped with a bow and quiver beheads, by means of a pruning-saw (*šuššaru*)²⁴, a Cyclops, whose severed head emits 12 beams of light. I can not find any literary reference to this image; Green associates it with the myth of Ninurta and Asag, which I shall return to below²⁵. It may well be that this is one of those mythical tales that has been lost to us, news of which we can only infer from the iconographical documentation, as Steinkeller has shown²⁶. At any rate, it may be safely said that we are not dealing here, in this terra cotta, with the killing of Humbaba by Gilgameš and Enkidu, first, because there is only one victor; and second, because he is wearing three pairs of horns, a distinctive trait of divinities.

The Sumerian poem, which was later translated into Akkadian, *Lugal-e (ud melambi nirġal)* “O king, storm of majestic splendour” (henceforth: *Lugal-e*) constitutes, in a sense, the model for the divine struggles. Here follows the fight episode:

“But the lord howled at the mountains, could not withhold a roar. The hero did not address the rebel lands, he He reversed the evil that it had done He smashed the heads of all the enemies, he made the mountains weep. The lord ranged about in all directions, like a soldier saying “I will go on the rampage.” Like a bird of prey the Asag looked up angrily from the mountains. He commanded the rebel lands to be silent and Ninurta approached the

²⁰ SGGK: 119.

²¹ SGGK: 106.

²² SGGK: 105 fn 5.

²³ Frankfort 1969, tab. 58 (B).

²⁴ Black – Green – Rickards 1992: 183.

²⁵ Green 1995: 1852.

²⁶ Steinkeller 1992.

enemy and flattened him like a wave (?). The Asag's terrifying splendour was contained, it began to fade, it began to fade. It looked wonderingly upwards. Like water he agitated it, he scattered it into the mountains, like esparto grass he pulled it up, like esparto grass he ripped it up. Ninurta's splendour covered the Land, he pounded the Asag like roasted barley, he its genitals (?), he piled it up like a heap of broken bricks, he heaped it up like flour, as a potter does with coals; he piled it up like stamped earth whose mud has been dredged. The hero had achieved his heart's desire. Ninurta, the lord, the son of Enlil, began to calm down."²⁷

The beheading of the defeated figure is not the conclusion of the struggle, as we shall see below. It needs to be stressed here that, as elsewhere in the mythic-epic poetry, the fight does not involve weapons, but a confrontation between the opponents involved and their glaring auras, the *melammu*. Moreover, as Jacobsen rightly noted, the Asag/Asakku demon is depicted in the poem as a tree of towering size, most likely a pine. The demon stands waiting for Ninurta's attack, and, like a tree, is uprooted by it²⁸.

Ninurta's follower, Marduk in *Enūma eliš*, also fails to prevail by decapitating his enemy²⁹, and this fact confirms the direct derivation of this poem –despite its significant innovations– from the *Lugal-e* and the stream of tradition from which the latter comes from³⁰.

Nonetheless, a beheading by Marduk is mentioned in a rather obscure text, a commentary edited by Livingstone³¹, who classified it as a “*Myth of Conflict*”, one of those myths related to rituals (*State Rituals*), the function of which they clarify. Paragraph 11 reads:

“The 24th day is when the king wears a crown. / Marduk slashed Anu's neck and ... [...]”

This commentary refers to a lost text which enumerates cultic operations the king must accomplish, at a specific time of the year. Even though the information this paragraph gives is very scanty, it is clear that this mythic episode is to be grouped with those tales related to the succession of the rulers of the universe, of which the *Theogony of Dunnu* provides the most complete evidence. Both *Lugal-e* and *Enūma eliš* –although in different ways– belong to this same tradition, the echo of which also reached the far-off Greece³². The beheading, therefore, is not foreign to this tradition, even if in both of the two great poems just mentioned, it is not been chosen as a conclusive outcome of the duel (those between Ninurta and Asag and Marduk and Ti'amat, respectively).

I propose, nonetheless, to interpret the defeat of Asag/Asakku as a decollation (*kišādam nakāsum* “to cut the neck”), similar to the felling of a towering tree, if the neck is considered an axis that connects the head (the sky) to the body (the earth), in Coomaraswamy's interpretation³³.

Indeed, the decapitation of the defeated enemy may take different forms. In the *Enūma eliš* Marduk, after his victory, decides to create the universe from Ti'amat's carcass, and his first act is to destroy his defeated enemy's head:

²⁷ Trad. etcsl *Ninurta's exploits: a šir-sud (?) to Ninurta* verses 281-299. See also the translations by van Dijk 1983: 87-88 and Jacobsen 1987: 250, resumed in Jacobsen 1988: 228-229.

²⁸ Jacobsen 1988.

²⁹ Lambert 2008: 47 verses 89-104.

³⁰ Lambert 1985 provides an exhaustive picture of this tradition.

³¹ Livingstone 1986: 126-129 (VAT 9947), 134-135 and 148-151.

³² Lambert – Walcot 1965.

³³ SGGK: 106, where the result of the duel between Marduk and Ti'amat is mentioned.

“And with his merciless club (Marduk) smashed her skull. / He severed her (Ti’amat’s) arteries / and let the North wind bear up (her blood) to give the news.”³⁴

and, a little further on, he continues by splitting her into two parts, these being intended to constitute the sky and the earth:

“Bēl (i. e. the lord, Marduk) rested surveying the corpse, / in order to divide the lump by a clever scheme. / He split her (Ti’amat) into two like a dried fish: / one half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens. / He stretched the skin and appointed a watch / with the instruction not to let waters escape.”³⁵

Hence, this is the sequence of the events:

1. Smashing of Ti’amat’s skull
2. Releasing of the waters, in the form of Ti’amat’s blood
3. Splitting of Ti’amat’s corpse in half, the upper part of which would form the sky

This sequence closely parallels the pattern Coomaraswamy outlined. It is not the beheading, but the ripping of Ti’amat’s belly by Marduk that initiates the ‘process of becoming’, according to Coomaraswamy’s metaphysical reading³⁶.

“Ti’amat and Marduk, the sage of the gods, came together, / Joining in strife, drawing near to battle. / Bēl (i.e. Marduk, “the Lord”) spread out his net and enmeshed her; / He let loose the Evil Wind, the rear guard, in her face. / Ti’amat opened her mouth to swallow it, / She let the Evil Wind in so that she could not close her lips. / The fierce winds weighed down her belly, / Her inwards were distended and she opened her mouth wide. / He let fly an arrow and pierced her belly, / He tore open her entrails and slit her inwards, / He bound her and extinguished her life.”³⁷

It is this event with which Marduk initiates the creation of the universe, and therefore we may consider Ti’amat’s belly to be analogous with that of Vṛta, where all the beings that would populate the world after Vṛta’s beheading by Indra were concealed (“So what Indra gets from Vṛta is ‘that by which he, Vṛta, is these worlds’”)³⁸. In spite of some narrative divergences, the Indian myth and the duel in the *Enūma eliš*, are very closely related with regard to their basic concepts, an observation that brings the stream of tradition from which both *Lugal-e* and Marduk’s poem originate into the same area of meaning as the Indra myth.

In *Lugal-e* there is no ripping apart of bodies –at least, not in the surviving portion of text– but we do find there the “releasing of the waters”³⁹.

In a study dedicated to this particular point, Heimpel outlined the way in which the victorious Ninurta made the waters previously confined to the Kur flow into the Mesopotamian plain, giving rise to the river Tigris, which made agriculture possible⁴⁰.

³⁴ Lambert 2008: 48 verses 130-132.

³⁵ Lambert 2008: 48 verses 135-140.

³⁶ SGGK: 107.

³⁷ Lambert 2008: 47 verses 93-103.

³⁸ SGGK: 109 and fn 2.

³⁹ SGGK: 105. We come across this same theme in the Chinese mythology as well, in a context very similar to the present one: cf. Mander 2005b.

⁴⁰ Heimpel 1987.

This is not the place to examine the Kur, a region that, in the present context, cannot be identified with a “highland”, considering that mountains had not yet been created. Ninurta would be the one to bring them into being by heaping the defeated stones that were fighting in Asag’s army into piles⁴¹. I am preparing an *ad hoc* study on the Kur, in collaboration with my colleague Prof. Luciano Albanese, which we hope to publish soon; at present, I refer readers to the exhaustive study by Bruschweiler, which is the basis for any further enquiry into this peculiar topic in the Sumerian mythological thought⁴².

The significance to be attributed to Ti’amat’s blood in the *Enūma eliš* is made clear by a Hymn to Marduk, mentioned by Heimpel, in which the god is praised for releasing the waters previously confined to the mountains⁴³: this text confirms the placing of both *Enūma eliš* and *Lugal-e* in the same stream of tradition.

In the latter, the archetype consists of a warrior god who severs the axis joining sky and earth; with this act he opens the path to the course of time and hence the process by which the world would come into being. From this point of view, the *Lugal-e* is closer to its archetype, if ‘tree’ is held to mean ‘neck’, while the *Enūma eliš* keeps the essential meaning of the myth intact by using different narrative forms.

The myth surrounding the feats of the goddess Inana is related to this same topic. In one of her poems she takes revenge for the murder of her husband, Dumuzi, at the hands of the old tavern keeper Bilulu in her tavern at the edge of the world⁴⁴. Inana kills Bilulu and transforms her into a waterskin for sating travellers’ thirst in the desert⁴⁵. In this case as well, Bilulu/Namuci contains waters that give life to travellers. This poem provides evidence of the relevance of the archetype Indra/Namuci even outside the tradition to which Ninurta/Marduk belong.

Before concluding this topic, with its pivotal function in providing evidence of the adhesion of the Mesopotamian mythological thought to the pattern Coomaraswamy proposed, we should look at the evidence coming from epic poetry.

The act of beheading is an event that is also related in the epic poem *Gilgameš and Humbaba*. Jacobsen showed the close affinity of the *Lugal-e* to this poem⁴⁶: an aspect that will be examined below.

Here, the decapitated figure is the monster Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest, who, similarly to Namuci, irradiates light from his seven frightening auras, which make his head look like the sun.

Gilgameš deceives Humbaba and succeeds in stealing these seven auras from him, taking Humbaba captive. The god Enlil then allots the seven auras to different parts of the cosmos, an act that can be read as an act of distribution, comparable to the meaning of the mythical releasing of the waters and their diffusion in the world, still on a reduced inferior level.

As Jacobsen pointed out⁴⁷, Gudea, Yahdun-Lim of Mari and other historical sovereigns reprised the feat of Gilgameš in the myth, in order to achieve the status of the ruler who imposed order on the cosmos: the same status of Indra, the paradigm in heaven being Ninurta. Again, it is noteworthy how important this topic is in the Mesopotamian thought.

⁴¹ Heimpel 1987: 316.

⁴² Bruschweiler 1987.

⁴³ Heimpel 1987: 314

⁴⁴ Mander 2003-04.

⁴⁵ etcs! *Inana and Bilulu: an ulila to Inana* verses 98-110.

⁴⁶ Jacobsen 1988: 231.

⁴⁷ Jacobsen 1988: 231.

Even if no conclusions can be drawn from the Sumerian poem *Ninurta and the Turtle*, because it is so poorly preserved, the poem needs to be mentioned here. Deceived by Enki, while trying to seize the *me* (the *essentiæ* that give their owner dominion over the cosmos), Ninurta falls in a trap set by Enki, involving a turtle (this animal being one of Enki's symbols⁴⁸) and cannot get out of a deep pit, after Enki has unleashed a hurricane⁴⁹. This poem may well represent the halting of the warlike activity of Ninurta, beyond the limits of the cosmic order, parallel to the Green Knight's refusal to behead Sir Gawain.

2. Theme [b]: Common origin of both contenders

The demon Asag shares the same origin as Ninurta. The *Lugal-e* describes Asag's birth in these words:

“Heaven copulated with the verdant Earth, Ninurta: she has born him a warrior who knows no fear – the Asag, a child who sucked the power of milk without ever staying with a wet-nurse, a foster-child, O my master”⁵⁰

The genealogies of Ninurta's father, Enlil, can be traced back to An⁵¹, as different sources attest, and An is the cosmic power which manifests⁵² itself in the sky⁵³; however, besides their common origin, a certain similarity between the two contenders makes them even closer⁵⁴.

a) Both are given the title of king (*lugal*);

Ninurta: verses 1, 7, 12 —> Asag: 35

“The plants have unanimously named it king over them”

b) Both receive the homage of the divinities, albeit at different levels;

Ninurta: verses 12, 16

“Ninurta, king, whom Enlil has exalted above himself” (verse), “Ninurta, king, son who has forced homage to his father far and wide” (verse)

Asag: verse 40

“Before its might the gods of those cities bow towards it”

c) Both sit on a throne;

Ninurta: verse 17

“Inspiring great numinous power, he (Ninurta) had taken his place on the throne, the august dais,”

⁴⁸ Black – Green – Rickards 1992: 179.

⁴⁹ etcsl *Ninurta and the turtle*, verse 32.

⁵⁰ etcsl *Ninurta's exploits: a šir-sud (?) to Ninurta* verses 26-29.

⁵¹ Lambert 1975: 51-54, 2008: 26-37.

⁵² Pettazzoni 2005: 157-158, quoted in Mander 2009: 24.

⁵³ Edzard 1962: 40-41; Jacobsen 1976:

⁵⁴ Translations from etcsl quoted above.

Asag: verse 41

“My master, this same creature has erected a throne dais: it is not lying idle”

d) Both perform as judges: verse 42;

“My Ninurta, lord, it actually decides the Land’s lawsuits, just as you do.”

These kinds of parallels, despite their contrasts (as point [b] above), also occur elsewhere in the poem; the cases mentioned above are good examples of the contiguity between the two antagonists.

Asag grew up as an orphan, and never knew who either his father or his mother was⁵⁵:

“Heaven copulated with the verdant Earth, Ninurta: she has borne him a warrior who knows no fear – the Asag, a child who sucked the power of milk without ever staying with a wet-nurse, a foster-child, O my master – knowing no father, a murderer from the mountains, a youth who has come forth from”

The genealogy of Humbaba is interesting in this respect, because it is very similar to that of Asag, as Humbaba himself tells Gilgameš, when asking him for mercy.

153-157. {He tugged at Gilgameš’s hand.} {(4 mss. have instead:) “Gilgameš, let me go!”} “I want to talk to Utu!” “Utu, I never knew a mother who bore me, nor a father who brought me up! I was born in the mountains – you brought me up! Yet Gilgameš swore to me by heaven, by earth, and by the mountains.”

This is a further point of contact between *Gilgameš and Humbaba* and *Lugal-e*, and it strengthens Humbaba in Namuci’s paradigm.

3. Theme [d]: Serpents; Splitting of Heaven and Earth

The separation of heaven and earth is an universally documented myth, which marks the birth of the cosmos.

It occurs in the Sumerian and Akkadian mythologies as well, including a complementary version in which the marriage of these two cosmic principles is documented in the form of *hieros gamos*.

Quite rightly, Pongratz-Leisten⁵⁶ distinguishes these ‘Sacred Marriages’ from those between divinities, or between divinities and humans. Sacred marriages belong to a cosmological pattern from which the other two are excluded: indeed, she labels the former ‘cosmogamies’. I will turn to marriage between divinities, which Pongratz-Leisten calls ‘theogamies’, and those between humans and divinities, later on, at § 5.

A few words on the topic of snakes⁵⁷ and the interpretation of them Coomaraswamy provided in the present context; it is not by chance that he mentions Asklepios⁵⁸.

Mesopotamian healing divinities are related to serpents and have an underworldly nature; they consist of Ninazu and his son Ningizida, and Ištaran⁵⁹, all included in the

⁵⁵ See also Jacobsen 1988: 227 fn 5.

⁵⁶ Pongratz-Leisten in: Nissinen – Uro 2008: 44-46.

⁵⁷ Black – Green – Rickards 1992: 167-168.

⁵⁸ SGGK: 106-108, 112.

⁵⁹ Edzard 1962: 110-111, 112-113, 119-120 (Sataran) respectively.

exhaustive list of mythical ophidian natures or forms provided by Wiggermann⁶⁰. Depictions of the horned viper, which is a poisonous snake, have, nonetheless, a protective function⁶¹. If combat with obscure powers is to be considered the paradigm of the single duels of exorcists (*āšīpu*) against evil entities⁶², then Tišpak, who replaces Ninazu as a city-god, assuming ophidian traits, is to be included among the divinities considered here⁶³.

Cosmic marriages and healing are both symbols of reintegration into the former condition of unity; even if they occur in different literary contexts, these mythologems all express the same conception.

4. Theme [e]: Priests and Kings

When he examines the ‘second beheading’, Coomaraswamy introduces the relationship between *Sacerdotium* and *Regnum*. This ‘second beheading’ is symbolized by the forced acceptance of Sir Gawain to be decapitated by the Green Knight; in other words, the winner of the first fight must submit to the will of the defeated contender. On a mythological level the latter event equals –or expiates– the former, but in metaphysical terms it is the reversal of the process of multiplying beings by the primeval *Puruṣa*⁶⁴.

Sacerdotium is to *Regnum* as the head is to the body, and their original unity has to be “made whole again”⁶⁵.

With regard to this topic, in my opinion Coomaraswamy had the system of the Hindu castes in mind, the highest of which are, in hierarchical order, priests and warriors. In the latter are included those who administer governments, including the sovereigns.

In the cuneiform documentation we cannot find a similarly clear hierarchical distinction; nonetheless, we can follow a general direction on the mythological level. The *apkallū* “sages” and *ummiānū* “experts” correspond to the Hindu *Sacerdotium*, the *Brahmins*, who have to assist and advise the *Regnum*, i. e. the *Kshatriyas*. The verse of the *Erra Epos*, where Marduk complains:

“Where the seven *apkallū*, the pure *purādu*-fishes, are, they who, like their lord Ea, are fully endowed with high intelligence, (and) are assigned to cleaning of my body?”⁶⁶

is revealing enough of the degraded conditions which forced Marduk to relinquish control of the universe. As far as I know, there is no tale about the renewal of the unity between kings and the primeval knowledge of the *apkallū*, or the wisdom of the *ummiānū*. The course of the events in the history of humanity underwent an evident and gradual degeneration⁶⁷. I have already discussed this topic elsewhere: the sources inform us that both *apkallū* and *ummiānū* were associated with the antediluvian kings, that the former antedated the latter, and that from a certain time on, no sage nor wise man sided with the sovereigns, with the exception of historical personalities, cultural figures who became characters in the mythic tales: such is the case, for example, for Sîn-leqē-unnini, Kabti-

⁶⁰ Wiggermann 1993-1997: 233-235.

⁶¹ Black – Green – Rickards 1992: 168.

⁶² Mander 2010: 34.

⁶³ Black – Green – Rickards 1992: 166, 178.

⁶⁴ SGGK: 111-113.

⁶⁵ SGGK: 107.

⁶⁶ Cagni 1969: 76-77, 197-198 verse 162; CAD Š III: 225 1h.

⁶⁷ Mander 2007; 2011: 40-57.

ilāni-Marduk, Saggil-kīnam-ubbib, and Esangil-kīn-apla⁶⁸.

The signs of the decline consist not only in the *ummiānū* replacing the *apkallū*, and then in the absence of both and of any competent person, as Marduk complains, but in the mythic context in which they are occurring. The terms of reigns of the antediluvian kings and of those who came immediately after, recall the succession of the ages in Hesiod and of the *yuga* and *manvantara* in Hinduism, a course in which the knowledge of the divine is getting more and more blurred⁶⁹. It can not be ruled out that the *hybris* of the behaviour of the *apkallū* is the sign of such decay or that it begun just because of their impious deeds⁷⁰.

5. Theme [f]: *Hieros gamos*

Lapinkivi pinpointed the deep sense of the *hieros gamos* rite, when the king, in a period from roughly the middle of the 3rd millennium up to the first half of the 2nd, united with the goddess Inana⁷¹. This scholar set the phenomenon into a wider cultural context, including areas outside Mesopotamia borders, such as India, Syria and Anatolia, for a longer period than that of the cuneiform documentation. A spatial and temporal extension, certainly justified in the light of the topics here considered and of the formulation of Coomaraswamy's study.

Indeed, in that study the topic of the *hieros gamos* is of pivotal importance, because it is through it that Coomaraswamy reaches the pinnacle of his investigation, relating the union of the two principles, the divine and the human, on the cosmological level, to that of the inner life of the human soul. In this view, the ultimate goal of the myth is taken as the fundamental principle of a regenerative ritual, in which the material and mortal party, after its defeat, recreates itself by means of its union with the immortal and divine element⁷². Consequently, Coomaraswamy quotes St. Paul, whose words refer to interior processes of the human soul. "The sword of the Word of God that sunders soul from spirit", the first of these phrases quoted in the article, is exemplary in this regard.

Moreover, there is no doubt that Inana is also a representation of the human soul: indeed, this is Lapinkivi's central point, but a *caveat* is in order, because "human soul" is not a Mesopotamian concept; how, then, is 'soul' translated into the Sumerian and Akkadian languages?

We must bear in mind that one of the four elements of the so-called 'external multiple soul'⁷³ is named *ištaru*; it is this element that determines the *šimtu*, a word meaning a process which we come across in distant periods such as Late Antiquity as well, in Iamblichus. On this point, I have observed that⁷⁴:

"According to Oppenheim, its translation as "destiny" or "fate" is misleading. He rather considers the meaning of this term [*šimtu*] "a disposition originating from an agency endowed with power to act and to dispose ... acting under specific conditions and for specific purposes"⁷⁵"

⁶⁸ Mander 2011: 46-47, 51.

⁶⁹ Mander 2007; 2011: 42.

⁷⁰ Mander 2011: 56-57.

⁷¹ Lapinkivi in: Nissinen – Uro 2008: 7-41. Her book *Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence* (SAAS 15) was not available to me.

⁷² SGGK: 119 ff.

⁷³ Oppenheim 1977: 198-206. In my opinion, the adjective "external" is to be deleted. See below and Mander 2012.

⁷⁴ Mander 2012.

⁷⁵ Oppenheim 1977: 201-202.

Now, the immortal and the mortal soul have been split apart in the ‘world of the becoming’ because of the paradigmatic division of heaven and earth, and their unity must be restored:

“... a separation of the ‘two selves’ that dwell together in us,’ respectively immortal and mortal; and that it is only by the performance of the ‘sacred marriage’ (*daivarāṁ mithunam*) ritually and within you that the broken image of the immanent deity can be made whole again”⁷⁶

It is therefore the task of that soul, according to its *šimtu*, to guide the king –who is the apex of humanity, responsible for the accomplishment of the divine designs on earth with respect to the gods– to reach that divine soul, *ilu*, that fragment of divinity mixed with clay, which served to fashion man. The *dingir-saĝ-du₃ / ilu bānišu*⁷⁷ had previously been identified by Eliade⁷⁸ with the inner essence of the human being, Coomaraswamy’s ‘immortal soul’, and fully illustrated by Abusch⁷⁹.

This is the *hieros gamos*, by means of which the king unites with the goddess Inana/Ištar, thus entering into an axial alignment with heaven⁸⁰. Such a deed represents the union with the *ilu* –that is, the divine element of the multiple souls– as well as union with the divinities of the pantheon. It is pointless to try to localize the *ilu*, and determine whether it is external or not, since the soul, like any other non-corporeal entity, has no spatial dimension⁸¹.

The *hieros gamos* process is reserved to the sovereigns, but it runs parallel to the process described in the *Hymn to Nungal*, where it is the common man who achieves the unity in question⁸². For both of them, the king and the commoner, the conclusion of this process is well-being. The king will see his kingdom flourish, while the common man will become *ilānu*⁸³.

For the Sumerian period there is scant evidence of the belief in the soul *ištaru*; I can only mention the *lil₂* and its relation with Inana⁸⁴; the *ama-dim₂-ma-ni / ummu bānītišu*⁸⁵ is too little known to be identified with *ištaru* with any certainty.

The result of the union with heaven is seldom recorded in Mesopotamia, with the exception of events such as the Šulgi episode (he became a star when he died⁸⁶), but it is not the outcome of a hierogamy ritual (in Pongratz-Leisten’s terminology), however it is performed. Divinization *post mortem*, and identification with a star, is one of the reasons I cannot support Lapinkivi when she reverses this symbolism and interprets the king as symbol of the divine world⁸⁷, with whom Inana/Ištar, as a human soul, must unite by means of her own redemption and divine assistance⁸⁸. The divinized king is a *divus* and not a *deus*, according to the terminology proposed by Servius, *Ad Æn.* 5.45, at least, if we choose to adopt his criterion to make a necessary distinction and avoid confusion:

⁷⁶ SGGK: 107.

⁷⁷ Klein 1982

⁷⁸ Mander 1998

⁷⁹ Abusch 1998

⁸⁰ Mander 1996, id. 2005a: 43-54, 65-66.

⁸¹ Mander 2012.

⁸² ETCSL *A Hymn to Nungal*. Mander 1998a.

⁸³ Oppenheim 1977: 200.

⁸⁴ Jacobsen 1989: 274

⁸⁵ Klein 1982: 296.

⁸⁶ Lapinkivi in: Nissinen – Uro 2008: 39 fn 118.

⁸⁷ Lapinkivi in: Nissinen – Uro 2008: 35.

⁸⁸ Lapinkivi in: Nissinen – Uro 2008: 15, 29-41.

“... quamauam sit discretio, ut deos perpetuos dicamus, divos ex hominibus factos, quasi qui diem obierint; unde divos etiam imperatores vocamus”⁸⁹.

As related to Mesopotamian civilization, the parallel with Servius’ opinion is positively supported by Glassner⁹⁰.

The main reason that prevents me from accepting Lapinkivi’s position, however, is that the hierarchy of the cosmic levels, which correspond to levels of sacredness, cannot be inverted. Only a strict hierarchy of levels of holiness allows for the passage of the divine power from the superior to the inferior levels, as I have recently attempted to prove⁹¹. Just to provide an example, the angelic hierarchies of *Canto XXIX* of Dante’s *Paradise* pattern themselves on the same model. Moreover, in the poems *Inana’s/Ištar’s Descent* it is not Dumuzi/Tammuz who rescues the goddess, but Enki/Ea⁹². Epithets such as ‘Sun of His Country’ or the like refer to the king (Dumuzi) because, thanks to his union with the divine world, he made his kingdom prosper; they do not at all mean that he is the divine polarity to which, as a symbol of the soul, the goddess turns in order to unite with the divine. The goddess herself is divine. The ‘splendid table’ to which Dumuzi/the king leads the goddess⁹³, like the ‘bridegroom’s garden’ she enters, represents the ‘refreshing shadow’ of the shrine the king built, an accomplishment described in the poem *Eridu Genesis*.

“Let them build many cities so that I can refresh myself in their shade. Let them lay the bricks of many cities in pure places, let them establish places of divination in pure places, and when the fire-quenching is arranged, the divine rites and exalted powers are perfected and the earth is irrigated, I will establish well-being there.”⁹⁴

The sense of hierogamy is unidirectional, from the apex of the human world (the king), to the divinity who surveys its borders –that is, Inana/Ištar, who represents the access to the divine world, because, as I have said before, she herself is divine⁹⁵. She is indeed the goddess of the limits or, more precisely, she is the cosmic power manifested by the borders. For this reason, the liminal position is peculiar to her, so it is she who receives the king in order to unite him with the heaven of the gods.

To conclude this topic, the three typologies of *hieros gamos* outlined by Pongratz-Leisten all represent, on different levels, the union of two halves that had previously been divided, in full accord with Coomaraswamy’s interpretation. Heaven and earth are the supreme cosmic realities (cosmogonies). The human element, which contains an element of the same divine nature of the gods, unites with the gods (hierogamies). The theogamies express the relationship between the ‘glory’, *kabôd* or the ‘shakti’ (i. e. the wife) of the god, and the god himself⁹⁶. In all cases, two halves of the same essence regain their unity.

⁸⁹ “although there should be a distinction in that we call the immortals *dii*, whereas *divi* are created from men, inasmuch as they have ended their days; from which we likewise call [dead] emperors *divi*” (Translation by Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, chapt. 3).

⁹⁰ Glassner 2002: 321-322.

⁹¹ Mander 2010.

⁹² Lapinkivi in: Nissinen – Uro 2008: 35, 39.

⁹³ Lapinkivi in: Nissinen – Uro 2008: 37-38

⁹⁴ ETCSL: The Flood Story, Segment A verses 5-10.

⁹⁵ Mander 2001; id. 2003-04.

⁹⁶ Mander 2011: 21 fn 19.

6. Theme [g]: Time and the vault of the sky

I have dealt with this topic fully elsewhere⁹⁷; what follows is a brief summary of passages from two books on ancient astronomy⁹⁸, the authors of which have outlined the opposition of two realities: the regular revolution of the starry vault (time) and the variability of weather. In fact, the exact start of the astronomical season, as determined by the position of the sun in the zodiac, only very seldom coincides with its corresponding change in climate. The growing season may actually anticipate that position or be late in arriving, sometimes by a large margin. This lack of alignment provides the representation for the two metaphysical concepts of the absolute and the ‘becoming’. The latter has the necessity –or so it may appear– to conform to the precision of the former, and follows it, but almost never at the right time.

I should add that even today, the exact measure of the year’s length is not calculated using the sun, but the culmination of a given star, which is why it is known as the *annus sideralis*.

It is clear that the revolution of the starry sky constitutes the main measure of time’s passing, thus providing it with its most obvious symbol.

7. Conclusions

Liverani’s *Memorandum* was my starting point for discussing Coomaraswamy’s Manifesto: a phenomenological approach being the underlying thread common to both, one that I have tried to follow in this paper. I placed the written Mesopotamian documentation in the context of universal myths; in this way, the meaning of single mythologems benefitted from a comparison with similar myths from other cultures, according to the pattern outlined by Coomaraswamy.

Admittedly, the topic of the beheading and production of life (themes [a], [a1], [c-e], [g]) is well documented in Mesopotamian mythology, while the theme of reintegration is not so easy to grasp. Besides the *hieros gamos* ([f]), which belongs to rituality and not the mythological tales, no clear trace of the reintegration theme can be found.

I should mention here, however, the conclusive event in the *disputationes*: the verdict, by which the judge (usually a god) assigns the victory to one of the two contenders⁹⁹. The specific mythological themes in these texts put them in the class of religious literature, even if their meaning escapes us. The theme of the banquet and the quarrel, which constitute the normal *locus* where the contenders meet¹⁰⁰ and which are substituted when missing¹⁰¹, recalls the context of the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

I choose to interpret, following Coomaraswamy, the *locus* in the *disputationes* as the union of the multiplicity (the round table), this being the starting point of the plot (in the form of a cycle: the reciprocal beheading).

The importance attributed to any marvellous tale or deed¹⁰² moves the plot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the direction of first a split and then a reintegration (indeed, Vanstiphout stressed the harmony of the banquet¹⁰³, which parallels the Middle-English poem reintegration).

⁹⁷ Mander 2000: 636.

⁹⁸ Melville – Putnam, 1993: 6; Aveni, 1997: 2

⁹⁹ Vanstiphout 1990: 284-286.

¹⁰⁰ Vanstiphout 1992: 278.

¹⁰¹ Vanstiphout 1992: 281-284.

¹⁰² SGGK: 108 fn 2.

¹⁰³ Vanstiphout 1992: 14.

The theme of reintegration is present only in the final phase of the *disputationes* (the verdict, which restores the original harmony of the banquet).

But its most meaningful manifestation is to be found, once again, in a ritual –the ritual *maqlû*, the interpretation of which Abusch has provided¹⁰⁴. The counter-black magic ritual *maqlû* ends in participant's ascent to the stars of heaven: he himself becomes a star, as result of an exhausting struggle to break the spell. The interior dimension Coomaraswamy referred to is to be found here.

¹⁰⁴ Abusch 1995.

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