The Weeping Goddess: Sumerian Prototypes of the Mater Dolorosa
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by Samuel Noah Kramer

Some time about 2000 B.C., a devastating calamity befell Sumer, a disaster that well-nigh ended the existence of Sumer as a political entity. What made this catastrophe particularly tragic, was the poignant fact that it marked Ur-Nammu, the founder of the Third Dynasty, erected this stele at Ur. Only fragments of the stele were preserved, but it has been restored to its original size of approximately ten feet high and five feet wide. The top decorative zone shows the king pouring libations before an enthroned deity. The scene is repeated in the second zone with Ur-Nammu appearing twice—once before the moon-god Nanna and once before the goddess Ningal. The heavily damaged, lower zones of the stele originally depicted the king engaged in building operations. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.
the end of a Sumerian renaissance of political and economic power, a period when learning, literature, and music flourished throughout the land. It had begun when a king of Erech by the name of Ur-Umah defeated the barbaric Gutian hordes from the east that had subjugated much of Sumer. Ur-Umah, however, did not rule long over Sumer—his throne was usurped by one of his ambitious governors, Ur-Nammu, who succeeded in founding the last important Sumerian dynasty, commonly known as the Third Dynasty of Ur. Ur-Nammu reigned for sixteen years and proved to be a capable military leader, a great builder, and an outstanding administrator.1

Ur-Nammu was followed by his son Shulgi, who reigned for close to half a century. Shulgi was one of the truly great monarchs of the ancient world: an outstanding military leader, a punctilious administrator, an energetic builder of monumental temples, and, even more important, a veritable cultural Maecenas. He extended Sumer’s political power and influence from the Zagros ranges on the east to the Mediterranean Sea on the west. He instituted an effective bookkeeping and accounting system in palace and temple, rearranged the calendar, and standardized weights and measures throughout the land. He brought to completion the construction of Sumer’s most imposing stage tower, the ziggurat of Ur, which his father had left unfinished, and built numerous religious structures in the cities of Sumer. He was a lavish patron of the arts—he founded or at least liberally supported Sumer’s two major academies of learning, one in Ur and one in Nippur.

But despite Shulgi’s remarkable achievements, the dynasty was nearing its end. His two sons, Amar-Sin and Shu-Sin, reigned only nine years each, and we now hear for the first time of serious incursions by nomadic Amorites from the Syro-Arabian desert. Shu-Sin found it necessary to build a huge fortified wall to keep the barbaric nomads at bay, but to no avail. They continued their inroads into Sumer during the reign of Ibbi-Sin, the last king of the dynasty, who succeeded in holding on precariously to his throne for twenty-four years. Throughout his reign, his situation was insecure and even pathetic. Undermined by the repeated incursions of the nomads from the west,

Finally, in the twenty-fourth year of his reign, the Elamites and their allies, the Su-people, overwhelmed and destroyed Ur and led off Ibbi-Sin, and no doubt many of the nobles and priests, into captivity. It was this calamitous event that left a bitter, distressing, harrowing impression on the Sumerian psyche. And in the years following this catastrophe, after Ur had recovered to some extent, when the priestly poets and bards were called upon to help conduct services in Ur’s restored temple, they were moved to compose lengthy poems consisting primarily of mournful laments over the sad fate of Sumer and its cities, but all ending on a note of hope and deliverance. It was in the course of composing these heartrending laments that the Sumerian poets created the image of the grieving “weeping goddess,” sorrowful, tender, and compassionate.

The Appearance of the Weeping Goddess in Sumerian Literature

In the course of the centuries that followed, the “weeping goddess” image became a current motif in the dirges and laments that abound in the Sumerian literary repertoire. She appears in numerous and diverse guises: as the divine queen bemoaning the destruction of her city and temple, the suppression of her cult, the suffering of the ravaged and dispersed people. Or, she is the spouse, the sister, and above all the mother, of Dumuzi, or a Dumuzi-like figure, who had been carried off into the nether world, a tragic fate that came to symbolize the death of the king and the destruction of her city and temple. For this paper I have combed the Sumerian literary documents in order to uncover and collect the more significant and intelligible passages that portray in one way or another the role, character, and behavior of the “weeping goddess” as imagined by Sumer’s poets and bards over the centuries.

These documents fall into three categories: (1) A group of five city lamentations which give the impres-

1Until very recently Ur-Nammu was thought to have promulgated the first written law code in the history of man. Now, new facts have come to light. See my article, “Who Wrote the Ur-Nammu Law Code?” in the forthcoming issue of Orientalia.
sion that the destruction of Sumer and its cities was a tragic event whose bitter memories were still rather fresh in the hearts and minds of the Sumerian poets and bards. Two of these, the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur” and the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur,” were probably composed no more than a generation or two after the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur, that is, about 1900 B.C. The other three, the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Nippur,” the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Erech,” and the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Eridu,” were composed about a century later, during the reign of Ishme-Dagan, the fourth ruler of the Dynasty of Isin. (2) A group of formulaic, repetitive, stereotypical litanies and litanies that echo from afar, as it were, the destruction of such cities as Kesh, Isin, Ur, Nippur, Erech, Eridu, and Larsa. (3) A considerable number of liturgical laments relating to the death of Dumuzi, or one of the deities that came to be associated with him; most of these are couched in language that is laconic, enigmatic, ambiguous, and obscure.

Lamentations

Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur. By far the most vivid, graphic, and comprehensive delineation of the “weeping goddess” and her agony and torment is found in the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur,” a composition of over four hundred lines divided into eleven stanzas. This work bewails the destruction of Ur by the Elamites and the Su-people, and the ravaging of the land by a devastating calamity designated as a cruel, ruthless, and heartless “storm.” The first two stanzas set the stage, as it were, for the appearance of Ningal as the “weeping goddess.” After bewailing the abandonment of all the more important cities of Sumer by their tutelary deities, these stanzas conclude with an exclamatory address by the poet to the far-famed, high-walled city of Ur, bemoaning its destruction, the carrying off of its people like kids and lambs from their mothers, and the alienation of its rites and rituals.

The poet then begins the third stanza by introducing the agonizing, sleepless Ningal who seats herself on the ground with her plaintive lyre, and chants a lament, the burden of which is the suffering inflicted upon her by the terrifying, cyclonic destructive storm which she cannot escape day or night and which does not allow her one day of peace and rest. Because of the anguish of the land, the poet has her continue, she trod the earth like a cow in search of its calf, but the land was not delivered of fear. Although, because her city was in agony, she flew to its aid, flapping her wings like a bird in the sky, the city was nevertheless destroyed to its very foundations. Although when spying the “hand of the storm” she cried “Return, Storm, to the steppe,” her command was of no avail. The storm chose not to depart. Her Enunug, her house of queenship, for which she had been promised long days, lay hugging the ground in tears and laments. In her temple, which used to be the place where the spirit of the “blackheads” [that is, the blackheaded people, the Sumerians] was soothed and comforted, wrath and distress now abound instead of joyous celebrations.

Not, cries the grieving goddess, that she had abandoned her city and forsaken her temple—she had tried desperately to prevent the catastrophe that befell Ur and its inhabitants. On the very day that she had learned that the great gods An and Enlil had decreed the destruction of Ur and the extermination of its people, she claims to have poured out “the water of her eyes” before An and to have come as a suppliant before Enlil, pleading with them and saying “Let not Ur be destroyed! Let not its people perish!” But in vain—“An changed not his word... Enlil soothed not my heart [by saying] ‘It is good, so be it!’”

Even so, continues the goddess, she refused to resign herself. With bent knees and outstretched arms she came before the council of the gods meeting in solemn session and repeated her plea: “Let not Ur be destroyed! Let not its people perish!” But again in vain. An and Enlil refused to change their cruel verdict and they directed the utter destruction of the city and the death of its people.

With Ningal’s plea rejected, the poet devotes the next two stanzas to a detailed, distressing description of the destruction of Ur on Enlil’s command. He called the cruel merciless storm, accompanied by raging winds and scorching fire, against the trembling, horrified land. After destroying the cities of Sumer it turned to Ur and “covered it like a garment, enveloped it like a cloth.” Ur’s high walls were breached by the Elamites and their allies, the Su-people. Dead bodies lay rotting away at Ur’s lofty gates and wide promenades; the blood of its people flowed like molten metal in the crucible. Its arms-bearing men died fighting; those who escaped were killed by the storm. Young and old, weak and strong, perished through famine. The old men and old women who stayed in their houses were burnt alive. Disorder and confusion reigned everywhere. Mother forsook daughter, father forsook son, wife and child were abandoned. Ningal, herself, had to flee the city “like a bird on the wing.” Ur’s possessions were defiled, its storehouses were burnt, its rivers were
dried up. Ninlil, concludes the poet, left the city crying out to her spouse Nanna: “Alas for my city, alas for my house… Ur has been destroyed, its people have been dispersed!”

The poet now brings the embittered Ningal once again on the scene, and has her utter a long heartrending soliloquy bemoaning the fate of her city and temple. An, she cries, has cursed her city, and Enlil has turned inimical to her house. Ur has been destroyed inside and outside. In its rivers dust is heaped high; there is no fresh water. There is no grain in the field, gone is its field-worker. Her palm groves and vineyards have brought forth the mountain-thorn. Her possessions have been carried off to the lands above and below, her precious metals, stones, and lapis lazuli lie scattered about. Her ornaments of precious metal and stone now adorn the bodies of those who “know not” precious metal and stone. Her sons and daughters have been carried off into captivity; she is no longer queen of Ur. Her city and house have been demolished and a strange city and a strange house have been erected in their place. Woe is her, she exclaims, Ur has been destroyed; its people have been put to death; where shall she sit down, where stand up?

Here the poet interrupts Ningal’s mournful soliloquy with a brief three-line passage depicting the goddess’s violent emotional state: With tear-filled eyes she tears out her hair like rushes, and beats her breast like a drum. He then has the goddess continue her despondent monologue: Woe is her; her house is a stall torn down whose cows have been dispersed—she was an unworthy shepherdess who let her ewes be struck down by the weapon. Woe is her; she has been exiled from her city and can find no rest, can find no home. As if she were a stranger in a strange city, curses and abuse are pressed upon her and she can say nothing in response.

The goddess now proceeds to berate the personified “City-Fate” and “House-Fate” who had dared approach her for destroying her city and turning her house into ruins, warning them that she will lie down in the debris and, like a fallen ox, rise no more. Finally, turning once again to her city, she concludes her lamentful soliloquy with the accusation that her house had been built in deceit and that her city, from chamber. An, he consoles her, is no longer angry with her, and Enlil will restore her city so that she might once again be its queen.

**Other Lamentations.** So much for the weeping Ningal as portrayed in the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur.” Nothing quite comparable to this striking, poignant, sensitive depiction of the “weeping goddess” is to be found in any other extant Sumerian lament, not even in the four other impressive lamentations listed in the first group. In the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur,” for example, a composition of over five hundred lines that is of no little historical significance, one of the stanzas mentions briefly virtually every important Sumerian city that had been destroyed by the enemy, as well as the name of its weeping divine queen. But all that the poet says about each of these suffering goddesses is that they cry bitterly “Oh my destroyed city! Oh my destroyed house!”—a vague, colorless assertion that says virtually nothing about any passionate, emotional reaction to the suffering and devastation about them.

In the case of the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Nippur,” a composition of which the first part only is a lament, while the second, larger part is actually a song of jubilation celebrating the deliverance of Nippur by the messianlike Ishme-Dagan, its divine queen Ninlil is only briefly mentioned, and not as a “weeping goddess” but rather as a “great mother” offering a prayer to her spouse Enlil who, according to the poet, had already been moved to mercy and compassion by the plight of the city and its anguished plea for the restoration of his temple and the deliverance of the “blackheads.”

The “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Erech” is only about half-preserved and in the extant portion there is no mention of its queen Inanna in the role of a “weeping goddess.” Inanna does appear toward the very end of the composition, not as a “weeping goddess” but as the exalted Eve-
Nothing comparable to the striking depiction of the "weeping goddess" in the "Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur" can be found in any other Sumerian lament.

In another of these liturgical laments, Ninisinna complains bitterly that it is the cruel relentless word of An and Enlil that have brought about the destruction of her temple by the enemy, who carried off her possessions in boats loaded front and rear, who came into her holy cella without taking off his shoes; who laid a terrifying hand on her, who tore off her garments and dressed her wife with them; who ripped off her ornaments and adorned his child with them. So terrified was she, the goddess grieves, that she darted to the roof of her house like a frightened dove, fluttered about in the crevices like a bat, fled her city and house like a bird on the wing, exclaimed, "You are not my house, you are not my city" when he kept calling after her.

The poet now introduces a motif that in one form or another appears in several of the liturgical laments: the goddess's despondent response to the accusation that it was she herself who had dishonored herself by destroying her house and city. No, the poet has the goddess assert, it was not she who was responsible—it was her "father" An, and/or Enlil, the lord of all the lands, who did these terrible things to her.

Another of these Ninisinna liturgies, one that may be entitled "The Goddess and Her Lyre: A Doleful Dialogue," begins with a bitter soliloquy by the goddess in which she laments the tragic misfortune that has befallen when the stormlike, cruel word of An and Enlil overtook her: Her city and house were devastated, deprived of her possessions and of her husband and son, she wanders about aimless and overcome, the fledglings of her nest are hungry, the young of her stall are thirsty; her Dilmun boat has been sunk in the swamps and her fishing boat is lost in the marshes; she is an enemy in her own city, despised in her birthplace, without strength and willpower.

After an obscure passage in which the goddess continues to lament for her ravaged city and house, she solemnly proclaims that she has decided to flee the word of An and Enlil and hide where no one can find her, not even they who seek her in the most desolate places. These mournful words so move her lyre, which the poet imagines to be in earshot of the sombre soliloquy, that it breaks into a lamentful chant addressed to the goddess, the burden of which is that her flight from the word of An and Enlil will only make matters worse: The princely children will rush pell-mell out of her sheepfold and will be cut down by the word of An and Enlil. The response of the goddess is not clear, but to judge from the general tone of her speech which continues to dwell on the dreaded word of An and Enlil, she remains firm in her resolve to flee.

One of these Ninisinna liturgical compositions, consisting of close to six hundred lines, is inscribed on a ten-column tablet which is more than half-preserved. The text, which is replete with repetitious litanies and refrains, nevertheless adds to the repertoire of plaints uttered by the "weeping goddess." Thus we find the poet picturing her as walking about bent low in her defiled cult chamber, bemoaning the devastation of her temple and her treasure house that was once overflowing with riches but is now so desolate and dust-covered that even dogs and scorpions have abandoned it; the doves flee its crum-
bled spires; its much admired gates are broken down and desolate; its roof beams lie in the sun like a man who is disease-ridden; its lofty brickwork lies weeping like a grieving woman; its reed mats squirm and twist like a man afflicted by colic; its roof hedges lie scattered on the ground like ripped-out hair; its hedgerows (?) dart into the crevices like flying bats; its door posts lie rubbed raw like a man water-scrubbed; its door hinges have been torn apart; its locks and bolts groan and moan; her lofty cult chamber has been given to the wind. It is Enlil, she complains bitterly, who dishonored her temple and brought moaning and weeping into her house that had been built for the celebration of joyous feasts.

Fate, bitter tragic fate symbolized by the nether-world demon Namtar, is frequently mentioned in the Sumerian lamentations. But there is one liturgical composition, a rather difficult text found in several versions according to which the "weeping goddess" is either Nin-sinna or Inanna, that treats Namtar as the villain par excellence, the goddess's *bete noir* as it were. Beginning with the mournful words "I will cry woe, I will cry oh; I will cry woe, I will cry oh again and again; I will cry woe for my house, I will cry oh for my city," the goddess complains that Namtar is standing at her side day and night; she married a spouse but now has no spouse; she gave birth to a son but now has no son; like a ewe she cherished a strange lamb; like a mother-goat she cherished a strange kid; she has been devastated in her own city; her friends, male and female, are distraught because of her. She therefore announces her decision to go to Enlil's "House of Fate" and bring him her defiant complaint. Pressing open the door and crying out "Open, Namtar" she accuses Enlil of decreeing a wretched fate for her. But her cry is in vain.

Namtar, she weeps, brought her misery as if it were a silver ornament for her hand and a precious stone for her neck; then he added insult to injury by pressing her to meet fate with a cheerful face, to rejoice in the death of her husband and son. But, she retorts defiantly, she is not a slave-girl and will not submit to fate; though she be made to stagger when walking and to bow her head when sitting, though her hair be ripped out and her skin torn apart, she will not submit.

Burdened as she is with Namtar on her lap, she proclaims that she has decided to journey to the steppe where she will drink water from unfamiliar rivers, eat grain from unfamiliar fields, walk about in unfamiliar paths. But even there, in the steppe, she complains, she is hunted by Namtar as birds are hunted in the canebrake. There, moreover, a new calamity befalls her, she is afflicted by Asag, the demon of disease. And so she cries out to her mother about her wretched fate: No one now seeks her out in the steppe, no one asks about her, not even Enlil as he walks to his stall; she is treated like an unmentionable ghost of the steppe. And when her mother tries to console her, imploring her not to cry for she is beautiful and lovely, adorned with kohl and bedecked with ornaments, and urging her to keep on beautifying herself, to wash and soap herself, to paint her eyes with kohl, and to put on clean clothes, she responds despondently that there is no lyric chant in her broken heart and that no one who sees her shamed face and mumbling lips will have any sympathy for her. The composition, rather strangely, closes with an obscure four-line address to the goddess that relates in some way to the death of Gilgamesh, an enigmatic ending whose real meaning is at present difficult to penetrate.

The indictment of Enlil as the god responsible for the goddess's misfortune is also underlined in at least two other compositions in which Inanna plays the role of the "weeping goddess." In a long liturgy of several hundred lines that is only about half-preserved, the poet depicts the goddess bewailing the destruction of her city and temple and the pillaging of her possessions; she sighs and moans by the Euphrates and its canals, without food to eat and water to drink; she wanders about aimlessly crying "oh and woe" for the dead "lord" of her house. And when she is chided for her shameful part in the destruction of her city and temple, she responds despairingly that it is not she who did it but her father Enlil.
An even more vivid example of Inanna's complaint against Enlil is found in an Inanna lament inscribed on an as-yet unpublished tablet in the British Museum. Beginning with the goddess's reproach that he, Enlil, had filled her with dismay and consternation, the text continues with a picture of Inanna seated before Enlil in his temple, demanding answers to her bitter, plaintive queries. She wants him to tell her, now that her house and city have been destroyed and her spouse and son no longer live there, where is she to find a home. Or, as the weeping goddess herself puts it:

The bird has its nesting place,
but I—my young are dispersed;
The fish lies in calm waters,
but I—my resting place exists not;
The dog kneels at the threshold,
but I—I have no threshold;
The ox has its stall, but
I—I have no stall;
The cow has a place to lie down, but I—I have no place to lie down;
The ewe has its fold, but
I—I have no fold;
The beasts have a place to sleep, but I—I have no place to sleep.

Inanna's homelessness is also a motif in another liturgy that begins with the familiar cry of woe for her temple that had been so devastated, that even the dog and the scorpion, not to mention humans, abandoned it. In this case, however, it is the poet, not the goddess, who asks plaintively where will she live now that she allowed the storm to roar day and night in her temple and cella? Moreover he chides the goddess for permitting this shameful act. Inanna's expected answer, that it was Enlil who did it, is probably omitted in this composition, which seems to end in medias res.

Finally, there is a brief poignant lament by Inanna that summarizes much of the tone, mood, and content of the much longer formulaic liturgies:

I, the hierodule of An, the
Queen of Heaven—
I, the destroyer of mountains,
the Queen of Eanna—
My house that had been built
for me in a dream,
My city that had been built
for me in a dream,
My house that fecundates like
stalls and sheepfolds,
My house that fecundates like
sheep in the sheepfold,
My house where the seal-cutter cuts seals,
My house where the lapis-lazuli worker, works lapis lazuli,
My [house] at whose gate one stands in wonder,
My sanctuary of all mankind,
My treasure house of all the lands—
When it was built, the land,
too, was built,
When it was destroyed, the land was destroyed with it.
The comely spouse has been

was carried off to the land of the dead—her husband, Pabilsag by name, is not characterized as a dying god in any extant text. Inanna, it might therefore be expected, should be mourning only for her doomed husband, and Ninisinna only for her doomed son. Since, however, the two goddesses are often interchanged in the liturgies, their authors and redactors did not seem to find it necessary to distinguish between them and to specify who mourned for whom in the husband-son motif that had become a literary stereotype. This brings us to the third class of “weeping goddess” compositions, those consisting of laments for the capture and death of Dumuzi and Damu, and the deities who for some unknown reason had come to be associated with them.
Laments for Dumuzi, Damu, or Associates

In the case of Dumuzi, the “weeping goddesses” who mourned his cruel fate were his spouse Inanna, his sister Geshtinanna, and his mother Ninsun. This is put succinctly in a recently published version of the death of Dumuzi in which the poet has Dumuzi himself bemoaning his cruel fate and actually imagining and visualizing his spouse Inanna weeping bitterly for him in her temple Eanna, while his sister Geshtinanna rips out her hair and rends her sinews by the boulevard of his mother Ninsun. To be sure, Inanna’s tears for her spouse are, in a sense, crocodile tears, since it was she herself who according to the myth “Inanna’s Descent to the Nether World,” turned him over to the cruel little demons to carry him off bound and fettered to the “land of no return.” Nevertheless the poets did not seem to find it incongruous to portray her as weeping for the husband/son who had been taken captive and put to death in Kullab, a district in her city of Erech, and lamenting:

Gone now is my husband, sweet husband;
Gone now is my son, sweet son;
My husband has gone among the early plants;
My son has gone among the late plants;
My husband who has gone to seek plants, has been given over to the plants;
My son who has gone to seek water, has been given over to the water;
My bridegroom has departed from the city as if it were a fly-infested place;
He has departed from the city as if it were infected with early-plant flies.

According to another composition consisting almost entirely of a lament uttered by Inanna, it was not the nether-world demons who carried off Dumuzi but, strange and inexplicable as it may seem, a bison with mottled eyes and crushing teeth. Lamenting for her hus-

band Dumuzi, who is no longer alive, she weeps:

Wild ox, how can you lie there—the ewe and its lamb have fallen asleep;
Wild ox, how can you lie there—the mother-goat and its kid have fallen asleep.

Fate, bitter tragic fate, is frequently mentioned in the Sumerian lamentations.

She then decides to go looking for him in the “Hill of the Bison” and keeps asking for his whereabouts, for him “who is no longer given food to eat and water to drink.” When the answer is given that the bison has carried him off to the nether world, she pleads with him not to seal tight his comely open eyes and not to silence his comely open mouth. But her plea is in vain, and she concludes her lament with these mournful lines:

On his cot the dog lies,
My man—in his hut the raven dwells,
His flute-song the wind utters,
My man—his chants the North Wind utters.

While there may be some doubt about the sincerity of Inanna’s tears for her spouse, there is no doubt whatever about the deep concern and profound agony of Dumuzi’s sister Geshtinanna who, according to the mythographers, loved him so dearly that she was prepared to sacrifice her own life to save his. There must have existed numerous laments uttered by Geshtinanna for her brother in the Sumerian literary repertoire, but at present only a few brief dirges can be identified as having been uttered by the goddess. One of these is part of a telescoped version of the myth “Inanna’s Descent to the Nether World” in which Geshtinanna plays a major role. The scene for this brief lament is set in Geshtinanna’s home whither Dumuzi, beaten and tortured, has fled to escape the pursuing nether-world demons. Upon catching sight of her unfortunate brother, Geshtinanna lacerates her body and weeps:

Oh my brother, oh my brother, lad whose days have not been fulfilled,
Oh my brother, Shepherd Aamushungalanna, lad whose days and years have not been fulfilled,
Oh my brother, lad who has no wife, who has no son,
Oh my brother, lad who has no friend, who has no companion,
Oh my brother, lad who brings no comfort to his mother.

In another brief passage that is part of a complex and obscure composition, Geshtinanna thinks of herself as Dumuzi’s mother as well as his sister. Thus, according to the poet, when Dumuzi tells her that he would go to his mother, weeping and crying like a small child, she seems to comfort him with these ambiguous words:

Oh my brother with the jumrum eyes, with the lamlam eyes,
Who is your sister? I am your sister;
Who is your mother? I am your mother.
The sun that rises for you rises also for me;
The sun that gazes upon you, gazes also upon me.

As for Dumuzi’s mother Ninsun, we have at present only one reasonably intelligible lament actually uttered by the goddess for her son—its laconic repetitive contents may be paraphrased as follows: Her heart, she cries, has set up a dirge in the steppe, on the shepherd’s hill, where Dumuzi lies bound and fettered, “where the ewe has given up its lamb, the mother-goat has given up its kid.” Having heard her suffering son plead “Would that my mother could reach me!” she can only repeat helplessly, “My heart has set up a dirge in the steppe.” The
On his cot the dog lies;  
My man—in his hut the raven dwells;  
His flute-song the wind utters;  
My man—his chants the North Wind utters.

text closes with a portrayal of the mother who, having braced her drooping hands and feet, arrived at the place her son was lying and gazed with a shudder upon his lifeless face.

Since Dumuzi, the son of Ninsun, is often fused and confused with Damu, the son of Ninisinna in the dying-god laments, it is not surprising to find that the mothers, too, were sometimes interchanged, so that it is not clear who mourned whom. This is especially true of a composition entitled by the ancient scribes “In the Steppe Among the Early Plants,” which is concerned primarily with the mother’s search for her lost son. The sequence of events in this long and rather obscure text is quite uncertain. It may have begun with the mother comparing her missing son metaphorically to a dead tamarisk, to an uprooted poplar, to withered plants. It continues with the mother cursing the day when she was bereft of her son, as she wanders from canebrake to canebrake pleading that someone reveal to her the whereabouts of her son. When she is informed that he has been carried off by the fiendish deputies of the nether world who will not return him to her, she proceeds to the deputy-gate and pleads for the return of her son, but to no avail—Dumuzi was now in the land of the dead, and unable to respond to his mother’s tears.

In quite a number of the mater dolorosa compositions, the name of the lost martyred son is not stated, and it is uncertain whether the mother is mourning Dumuzi, Damu, or some other of the dying-god prototypes. Thus there is one partially preserved lament attributed to the goddess Ninisinna, who is depicted as a woebegone mother who had wedded a spouse but now has no husband, who had given birth to a son but now has no son, and who rushes about searching desperately for her unnamed son whom has been taken from her and whom she compares to a choice donkey-foal that has been abducted, a lamb snatched by a wolf, a calf carried off by a wild beast. In her own city, she declares, she has been mistreated, she is a ewe whose lamb has been taken from her, a mother-goat whose kid has been taken from her, with a heart that is disconsolate and bewildered, she pleads nonetheless that her city and temple not be destroyed.

In another of the mater dolorosa compositions it is the great mother-goddess Ninhursag (or two of the deities associated with her) that is mourning her unnamed son. The first part of this composition is virtually identical with that of the Ninisinna text just cited. But the burden of Ninhursag’s lament that constitutes the second half is quite different—it centers on the futility and profitlessness of her having wedded a loving spouse and having given birth to a princely son, a choice donkey-foal, whom death would take from her.

Ninhursag is the mater dolorosa in a dying-god composition inscribed on a tablet in the British Museum that has only just been edited (1982). According to this text, the goddess’s comely, attractive, unnamed son had disappeared, and she went about searching and questioning in the vicinity of a mountain, which she traversed from base to summit. Carrying rushes and reeds in front of her, the goddess, designated as “the mother of the lad” and “the mother of the lord,” sets up a lament among the reed thickets. The burden of her plaint is largely unintelligible—it seems to involve a fallen meteor that had turned noon to dusk, setting the earth tremble and interfering with her search. In any case she did not find her missing son, and it was finally revealed to the weeping goddess, portrayed as a cow lowing to its unresponding calf, that there was no point to her searching and lamenting—her son is in the nether world, and the officials in charge will not give him back to her.

One of the goddesses associated with Ninhursag in the composition just cited is her daughter Lisin who is the mater dolorosa in two dying-god laments that have only recently come to light. One of these is a fairly well-preserved text of seventy-six lines that is quite remarkable for its relatively rich and surprising content as well as for its metaphor-oriented style. The poet sets the stage with a brief introductory passage: The goddess Lisin, after searching in vain over meadow and high steppe for her lost son, turns pale and weeps, uttering her cry of woe in regions high and low. After pleading to no avail that her
unnamed son—she depicts him metaphorically throughout the text as a choice donkey-foal who has been torn to pieces by a pack of dogs, as a bird whose nest has been destroyed, as a calf whose sleeping place has been destroyed, as a wild donkey cut down in the forest, as a canal inspector overcome by the river, as a farmer whose field has been inundated—be returned to her, she lies down among the saplings and laments once again for her metaphorically designated son. The poet now introduces a rather startling motif unknown from any other literary source: Lisin accuses her own mother Ninhursag of having put to death her son, that is, Ninhursag’s own grandson. To quote the goddess:

To whom shall I compare her?
To whom shall I compare her? I—to whom shall I compare her?

My young hero—my mother has killed him. I—to whom can I compare her?
My mother who bore me, Ninhursag.
My mother has killed him.
I—to whom shall I compare her?
To a bitch that has no compassion I shall compare her again and again.

Lisin, according to the poet, now seats herself all alone with aching heart and continues her plaint with special stress on her loneliness and alienation:

Like a celibate I will weep and weep.
Like one who has no boyfriend I will eat all by myself;
Like one who has no girlfriend I will eat all by myself;
The doorstep of my house—that is my sister;
The doorbolt of my house—that is my brother;
The marshes have taken my donkey-foal, the sweet;
I will make weeping “live” for my choice donkey-foal;
I will make sighing “live” for my choice donkey-foal;
I have offered a prayer for his head;
I have invoked (?) a blessing (?) for his cheek.

The poet now depicts the goddess as lowing anew for her choice donkey-foal like a cow, and braying for him like a donkey-mare along the marshes and river, repeating the lament for the loss of her son, and the denunciation of her mother as a pitiless bitch. Embittered and despondent the goddess abandons her city and sits down all alone with a kurgarra (a being connected in some way with the nether world) at her head and Namtar, the demon of death, at her cheek; tears of lament flow from her eyes.

Finally, it is probably Lisin who is portrayed as the mater dolorosa in a composition of forty-five lines that is fairly well preserved but whose contents are laconic, allusive, ambiguous, and...
obscure. As I very tentatively interpret the text, it consists of an introduction describing the suffering of the woebegone, fasting goddess Lisin, an obscure narrative passage concerns the search for her son in the river, the bringing of his corpse to her by the official in charge, and the setting up of her grieving lament; the lament itself, the burden of which is that because of a violent destructive tempest sent against her by the Father (unnamed — perhaps the god Enlil), she was wrecked like a boat and forced to surrender her son to the waters.

Following the plea by the goddess to the skipper of a boat sailing downstream not to set afloat her son who is also sailing, as it were, on the waters and not to force him to gash his nose like a river frog but to keep searching for him in river and marsh, the poet concludes the composition with a melancholy three-line address to Lisin's dead son, bemoaning the grievous suffering of the mother who is restless and unable to sleep.

Bibliographical Guide
Below is a list of the works of Sumerian literature discussed in this article. The bold numbers that appear after items refer to the following reference list. For a general overview of this literature, see references 2, 3 | pp. 1-40), 8 | pp. 277-325|, 20 | pp. 11-51|, and 21 | pp. 1-7|.

"Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur": 4, 9, 11, 13.
"Lamentation Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur": 14.
"Lamentation Over the Destruction of Nippur": 12.
"Lamentation Over the Destruction of Erech": 14 | pp. 293|.
"Lamentation Over the Destruction of Eridu": 8 | pp. 326-74|.
First Ninisinna liturgic lament: 3 | pp. 103-06|.
Fourth Ninisinna lament: 20 | pp. 52-223|.
"Fate" lament: 3 | pp. 96-103 and 175-79|.
First Inanna liturgic lament: 1, 7 | pls. 35-38|, 17 | p. 297|.
Second Inanna lament: 15 | pp. 91-93|, 17 | p. 297|.
Third Inanna lament: 3 | pp. 66-69 and 158-59|.
Fourth Inanna lament: 3 | pp. 70-71 and 159-61|.
Death of Dumuzi: 16.
Inanna's husband/son lament: 3 | pp. 73-74|, 10 | p. 50|.
"Bison" lament: 3 | pp. 89-91 and 170-74|.
First Geshtinanna passage: 22 | p. 228|, lines 42-46|.
Second Geshtinanna passage: 10 | p. 68|.
Ninsun lament: 10 | pp. 54-55|.
"In the Steppe Among the Early Plants": 10 | pp. 63-66|.
Ninisinna mater dolorosa lament: 6 | No. 19|.
First Ninhursag mater dolorosa lament: 10 | p. 105|.
Second Ninhursag mater dolorosa lament: 18.
First Lisin mater dolorosa lament: 5 | No. 144|, 10 | p. 106|.
Second Lisin mater dolorosa lament: 19.

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This is a detail of the stele of Ur-Nammu shown on page 69. The king is represented twice. On the right Ur-Nammu stands as he pours libations before the moon-god Nanna. The seated figure’s multihorned headdress and his throne, decorated like a temple facade, indicate he is a god. In his right hand Nanna holds the “line and the rod,” surveying instruments used to build a temple. This scene is mirrored on the left with Ur-Nammu facing the opposite direction toward Nanna’s consort, the goddess Ningal. In each case, Ur-Nammu is followed by a minor goddess with uplifted arms. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.