

# GODDESS INNANA AS *MATRIX* AND *MERETRIX*

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## Abstract

*This section of the myth emphasizes upon Innana's function of the logos element over the eros function that comes naturally to women, which can facilitate women in modern times to excel in education and career. The undertaking of the journey across the realms of heaven and earth contributes to Innana's apotheosis as the "Great Lady" of Sumer who presides over the crafts, strategy in warfare, establishment of political power, embodying the elements of reason and will over the biological instincts.*

*The following myth has been summarized from Wolkstein and Kramer's (1983) pioneering work on Goddess Innana which presents her myths and hymns in poetic form translated from excavated cuneiform records.*

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## Goddess Innana and God Enki

One day Innana had put on her crown and was reclining against the apple tree marvelling at her "wondrous vulva". It occurred to her to set out on a journey to Eridu to visit and honor Enki, the God of Wisdom.

Enki, the Wise One, knew the 'me'—the sacred laws that govern heaven and earth. He foresaw Innana's arrival and instructed his servant to welcome her with utmost hospitality. Both Innana and Enki sat down to drink beer with their bronze cups overflowing, while they swayed and toasted one another. Enki, full of generosity, toasted to Innana and offered her the various *me* one after the other for fourteen times. Innana accepted the holy *me* fourteen times.

He gave her possession over the high priesthood, godship, holy shrine, incantations, the throne of kingship, sceptre, staff, etc, the various arts and crafts such as lovemaking, kissing of phallus, prostitution, cult prostitution, speech, song, music, wood-work, scribe, builder, heroism, power, travel and so on. He also bestowed her with the giving of counseling, decision-making and judgements among others.

Innana soon loaded the 'Boat of Heaven' with the holy *me* and set sail to return to her city, Uruk.

Meanwhile, the beer began to wear off its effect from Enki who enquired his servant regarding the whereabouts of the holy *me*. He was informed that he had given them to his daughter, Innana. Fourteen times Enki asked his servant about the different *me* and each time he was told that he gave it all to his daughter.

Enki realized that he had donated the holy *me* in a state of drunkenness and ordered his servant to bring back the Boat of Heaven to his land along with the *me*.

Innana was furious at being asked to return the holy *me* and instructed her female servant, Ninshubur, to prepare for battle in order to save the Boat of Heaven carrying the *me*.

Six times Enki sent his host of monsters, giants and wild creatures to wage a war with Innana and each time they were defeated by the brave servant and Innana.

As the Boat was approaching the gate of Uruk, Innana called for a grand celebration and festivity with prayers, sacrifices, music, songs and beer. The Boat of Heaven finally, docked at the shrine of Innana and the *me* were unloaded. Innana presented the holy *me* to her people along with the "perfect execution of the *me*".

The seventh time Enki did not send his army to retrieve the Boat, but instead decreed that the holy *me* should from now onwards remain in Innana's land with the people of Sumer. He further announced the alliance of his land Eridu with Uruk, the city of Innana.

### Hypothetical Interpretation

Innana wears her crown at the very beginning that sets the tone for the mythic proceedings to have implications upon her role as a Queen, ruler and her responsibility towards her land and people. Innana's placing of the crown upon her head is an act to manifest deliberations, contemplation and planning regarding a matter as it is also implied by the usage of the modern-day phrase, 'to put on one's thinking cap'. In this case it is her will to travel and access the realm governed by the God of Wisdom.

Innana's adventures conceive in her mind under the tree as the starting point marking the course of events and outcomes that follow contributing significantly to Innana's being and Queenship. In the previous myth of the *Huluppu*-tree and now under the apple-tree, the drama unfolds with the tree as the focal point that germinates in the form of lofty fruits (apple) of the mind or ideas, inspirations, purpose, determination and to seek knowledge for which Innana sets upon a journey to meet the God of Wisdom. The presence of the apple-tree in the beginning of Innana's journey hints towards the transformative properties associated with apples. Among ancient Druid priests, fermented apple was consumed with the belief that it induces an altered state of mind reminiscent of the paradisaical perfection. When the Druid as a Shaman/Magician enters into a mystic voyage, the apple provided facility to journey into other realms. Likewise, in the case of Innana the presence of the apple hints towards a magical aid to prepare for her voyage. Enki, the God of Wisdom is also the God of the Waters implying his function as the creative flow that sustains and fertilizes all of life. Wolkstein & Kramer (1983) calls Enki as the 'Great Shaman' who mediates between Gods and the mortals due to his diverse roles in Sumerian tales as that of a 'Magician', 'Master of Ritual and Incantation', 'Creator' and 'Organizer' of his creations and his profile resembling the properties of water. Therefore, Innana's wish to meet Enki while leaning on the Tree of Knowledge (apple-tree) can aptly be understood as her desire to partake in his qualities of Wisdom for her own becoming and for the growth of cultural, political, socio-religious and spiritual arenas of her governance.

Innana then marvels at her 'wondrous vulva' before beginning her journey as an affirmation of the powers of the sacred feminine. The vulva as the mystical *Matrix* conceals what will take birth, emerge and reveal in due course of the myth. The mythic association of the apple-tree and the vulva highlights the fertilizing qualities of both. When an apple is cut lengthwise into two halves, the centre resembles the *yonis*.

As soon as Innana reaches Enki's land she is warmly welcomed and both father and daughter begin to drink. Their drinking spree lead to Enki's giving of the holy *me* one by one to Innana who acknowledges her acceptance of it. Innana's motive of travel becomes clearer when she loses no time in taking leave with the holy *me*. Initially it was the God of Wisdom who was the sole authority in possession of the holy *me* that regulated various aspects of culture, civilization, arts, crafts, skills, vegetation, agriculture, religious life and so on. But now with Innana as the emerging 'Queen of Heaven and Earth' it became integral for her to possess the *me*. In order to ensure fertility and flourishing of her land she uses her wit and courage to partake in the virtues of the God of Wisdom. In mythologies across the world, wisdom is essentially feminine like the Greek and Gnostic goddess Sophia, Roman Sapientia and Minerva, Saraswati in India, *etc.* Although Innana is not known as the goddess of wisdom but this myth signals the expansion of Innana's repertoire as the patron deity of various arts and crafts, *etc.* to establish a strong civilization of which wisdom is an underlying aspect.

The dynamics between the father-daughter duo that transpire during their soiree is instrumental to the showering of blessings upon Innana. The events can be divided into three stages: the pre-drunken state, the drunken state and the recovery phase.

The pre-drunken state marks the foresight of the great Father God to welcome the young queen and make preparations for sowing of the seeds for a magnificent civilization. Innana previously sitting under the tree beholds her vulva already realizing that it is about time to beget. This stage is the point of inception in Enki who knows that his young daughter Innana is coming of age and hence, he makes arrangements for the Feast of Blessing. With the instruction from Enki, his servant greets Innana warmly as she enters into the threshold of the holy shrine.

The drunken state is the elevation or elated state of being wherein apotheosis of Innana as the 'Queen of Heaven and Earth' takes places rising her up to the status of Great Goddess of Sumer. This stage marks the transpiring of the blessings from father to daughter in a subtle state of being which is different from a mundane state and this is dramatized as being drunk in the myth. Subsequently she becomes the *matrix* of Sumer civilization—the Queen of her people whom she is meant to bless with knowledge and crafts.

In the recovery state the Father sobers up from drunkenness and wants back all the blessings he had bestowed upon his daughter. But Innana is unwilling to part with it and even fights to hold on to it. This stage marks Enki's testing of Innana who must now struggle (war in the myth) to utilize all the blessings in the outer world. Wisdom is a come down that seeks feasibility; it seeks investment and manifestation; it compels channelization. God the Father wants everything back means that he is testing the Queen-daughter for libidinal investment for which she must prove herself through a fight. Wisdom is given to Innana in the form of the holy *me*, but what the God of Wisdom wants to check is if she can obtain the benefits of the wisdom, if she can unload the holy *me* and deliver it to the people for daily living. Enki is herein, encouraging his daughter to recover what is given to her. She must fight for the recovery and for knowledge-sake. The warfare that goes on in this stage is the hallmark of the recovery and recollection of wisdom which at the subjective level Innana must show through her dealing with the world. Innana must show to Enki the manifestations of the wisdom blessed upon her through the medium of distributing the holy *me* among the masses. Consequently, the people must struggle and fight to survive in a professional sense with the utilization of the *me* to build a great civilization collectively.

The myth provides a detailed enlisting of the various *me* that were crucial to the ancient Sumerians for the building and smooth operation of the society. They believed that the holy *me* were devised by the Creator Gods in order to ensure a coherent and continuous functioning of cosmic and cultural affairs. Wolkstein & Kramer (1983) describes the *me* as a "set of universal and immutable rules and limits which had to be observed by god and man alike". The following is a categorization of the different *me* mentioned in the myth divided under domains pertaining to statecraft and socio-religious life:

Domain	The holy <i>me</i> given to Innana
Religion	High priesthood, godship, princess priestess, divine queen priestess, incantation priest, noble priest, libations priest, cult prostitute, holy shrine, holy tavern, holy priestesses of heaven, holy purification rites.
Ruler/ Warfare	Noble enduring crown, throne of kingship, sceptre, staff, measuring rod and line, high throne, kingship, dagger, sword, standard, quiver, bitter-toothed lion.
Travel/ Medium	Descent into the underworld, ascent from the underworld, <i>kurgarra</i> (androgynous creatures who aid Innana), travel, secure dwelling place, rebellious land, plundering of cities.
Arts	The art of lovemaking, kissing of the phallus, art of prostitution, art of women, allure, song, musical instrument, the art of adorning, slanderous and forthright speeches.
Adornments	Colourful garment, black garment, loosening of hair, binding of hair.
Crafts	Shepherdship and sheepfold, woodworker, copper worker, scribe, smith, leather maker, fuller, builder, reed worker.
Emotions/ Attributes	Heroism, power, treachery, straightforwardness, lamentations, rejoicing of heart, deceit, truth, kindness, power of attention, dismay, fear, consternation, strife, heart-soothing, handling fire.
Propagation	Procreation and family.
Implementation	Giving of judgements, decision-making, counselling, perceptive ear, perfect execution of the <i>me</i> .

The above chart shows the many blessings received by Innana from the God of Wisdom that eventually contributes to her becoming a multi-dimensional goddess presiding over diverse domains including love, sexuality, harlotry, fertility, agriculture, statecraft, warfare and so on. It is noteworthy that along with the *me* she is also given the blessing of how to implement the *me*. She not only possesses the wisdom but also manifests it. Although the acts of decision-making, passing of judgements, execution are considered to be masculine qualities involving the solar ways of thinking, but Innana embodies all of it that still continues to build and maintain the world. She encompasses both the lunar ways of subtle arts, emotionality and also the fiery spirit of the sun as expressed in the myth through her excellence in warfare and good governance.

The gifts of the holy *me* related to the arts highlight Innana's role as the *Meretrix*—the Sacred Harlot. She represents the primordial image of the prostitute and the cult of temple prostitution is attributed to her in the myth. As the shining Evening Star, Innana is known as the *Hierodule* (holy harlot of the gods akin to *apsaras* in Indian mythology) of heaven. Her glory is sung as, "O harlot, you set out for the alehouse, O Innana, you are bent on going into your (usual) window (to solicit) for a lover." (Kinsley, 1995). As *Matrix* of the day Innana begets the world of works and as *Meretrix* she the patroness of prostitutes who sets out to the public-house in the evening to seek lovers.

Prostitution, considered as one of the earliest professions known to humankind, is a gift and blessing from the God of Wisdom. Although in the present-day context, the understanding of the term is usually grim, but the myth points towards its divine origin. Mircea Eliade (1959) rightly remarks that human behaviour is an unceasing replication of the acts and events initiated by the gods as latent in our myth. Thus, this myth contains the archetypal image of the 'art of prostitution' which is continued till date. Prostitution is presented in a very sublime manner in the myth calling it as an art form with underpinnings of creativity, aesthetics and sacrosanctity.

The daughter-queen Innana is blessed with so much abundance including the arts which reminds of the sixty-four arts and sciences mentioned in the Indian erotica, *Kama Sutra*. Besides the art of lovemaking and decorum of courtesans, the *Kama Sutra* emphasizes upon diverse arts, crafts, skills and sciences that young maids and women should be acquainted with. Just like the enlisting of the *me* in Innana's myth, the Indian erotica enlists arts such as: singing, playing of musical instruments, writing, composing of poems, knowledge of dictionaries and vocabularies, reading, chanting and incantations, art of speaking by changing the forms of words, tailor's work, carpentry, architecture, chemistry, arithmetic, art of cock/ quail/ ram fighting, martial arts (practicing with sword, stick, staff, bow-arrow), sports and games, gymnastics, art of war, arms and armies, magic/sorcery, ways of gambling, knowledge of the rules of society, etc. to name a few among the sixty-four types. Burton (2012) writes that a public woman who is well-versed in these arts earns the title of a *Ganika*—"a public woman of high quality who receives a seat of honour in an assemblage of men...and becomes an object of universal regard". The image of the refined and aesthetic courtesan as portrayed in Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* bring to mind the Greek *Hetaira*—the Love Goddess.

Many of the above arts find resonance and overlap with the ones mentioned in the list of the holy *me*. Hence, Innana's profile as the *Meretrix* encompasses not only aspects of beauty, sexuality and fertility but also the cultivation of the mind, talents and accomplishments. The ancient Sumerian's conceptualization of the harlot takes us back in time wherein the prostitute earned respect, gained education and functioned as an integral part in socio-religious activities of the state.

The beloved Innana of the Sumerians was the youthful virgin goddess epitomizing beauty and sensuality. She was not viewed as the *Mater*, but interestingly the present myth implicates her function as the *Matrix*—the womb that ferries and delivers new inventions or order to society. The myth unfolds with the image of Innana's vulva and ends with her unloading of the *me* from the Boat of Heaven. In the subsequent parts of Innana's life events, she refers to her vulva as the 'Boat of Heaven' during her courtship with the Shepherd Dumuzi.

In the beginning of the myth, Innana marvels at the potency of her vulva to generate a great civilization which is later followed by her womb (boat) being sown and blessed by her father /God of Wisdom and eventually begetting a civilization from her womb-boat. She becomes the womb of various trades, skills, professions, talents which substantially contribute to the region of Sumer justifiably earning the designation of the "cradle of civilization" as labelled by Kramer (1983). Innana is the *Matrix* of the constituents of a civilization like arts, professions, religion, social order and many more blessings with which people should be endowed with to rise as an efficacious civilization.

Navigating in the waters of life, Innana's Boat is a harbinger of new beginnings for her city of Uruk. She ensures security and stability of her people amidst the chaotic formless waters of existence to usher a new order of creation. The ancient Sumerians were an industrious, resourceful and gifted race who knew how to use inventiveness to reach the zenith of development according to the spirit of their times. Their beloved Queen Innana as the *Matrix* facilitated the perfect environment within her *Matrix* for this incubation and development. Her Vulva/Boat of Heaven as the fertile vessel is the repository of knowledge which is consecrated with the holy *me* by the God of Wisdom himself. Her voyage along the flowing waters represents the passage of time and progression of consciousness that culminates in the completion of gestation.

The intimate association of the boat to that of the feminine form can be understood due to the role of the Goddess who acts "as the source of movement, becoming, and consequently, the pilot of the boat" (Mead, 2005). The boat/ship symbolism as the container of new life and the crib links it to the enveloping/protective aspect of the womb. Neumann (2015) remarks that is the reason why Greek ships had names focussing on the "saving function of womanhood" such as "Salvation, Grace, Bearer of Light, Blessed One, Virgin, Savioress..." Gimbutas (2001) presents a plethora of images and artefacts of boats/ ships from Neolithic and Paleolithic sites from Greek Islands to Northern Europe correlating the vulva—the sacred womb of the Goddess—with the boat, both integrated into the Mother Goddess cult. The Goddess Durga in Indian mythology is believed to arrive for her autumnal festival riding either of her *vahana* (vehicle) which foretells the state of the land and people. When the Goddess arrives on a boat it is considered to be a lucky omen that would bring ample rainfall to fertilize the crops, ensure good harvest and overall prosperity.

In the Devi Mahatmyam, (4:11) the Goddess Durga is depicted as the boat/ womb—*durgabhavasagaranaurasanga*—ferrying the souls across the ocean of life and death. The *Matrix* of the Great Mother of the Vedas, Goddess Aditi is compared to a divine boat/ship, "well-fitted with oars, free of defects, and admitting no water" wherein She provides refuge, safety and protection to the people. The womb-boat of the Goddess is the "incomparable Earth-and-Heaven" floating in the cosmic ocean (Kali, 2003).

The myth thus, beautifully symbolizes Innana's role as the progenitor whose blessed womb is akin to the divine Boat of Heaven, cradling in the amniotic waters, and begetting crucial aspects of civilization for her people to foster their nourishment.

The range of Innana's profile is incomplete without mention of her significant role as the patron deity of war which finds expression in the present myth. For the ancient Sumerians, battle was known as the "Dance of Innana" (Kinsley, 1995) which reminds of the imagery of Lord Nataraja as the Cosmic Dancer who is known for his dance of creation and destruction. Similarly, Innana's war-dance holds implicitly the cyclical destruction and creation of life. The battle ground is her sacrificial altar wherein she consumes the vital life-blood to replenish herself in order to regenerate the lives of crops, animals and humans. The Goddess's bloodthirstiness is also conveyed through her acceptance of sacrifice of animals like oxen and sheep as mentioned in the myth.

The Amazonian nature of Innana and her female attendant Ninshubur gets highlighted when they bravely fight all the monsters and giants sent by Enki that guard the treasures of *me* in his holy shrine. Innana, known for her 'tempestuous radiance' in her hymns, is often associated with the raging aspect of nature such as storms, thunder, flood and earthquake. Her restlessness, motion and fury manifests in the form of wild nature and war. She is depicted with a lion which is one of the *me* (bitter-toothed lion), received from her father, signifying her dominance and control over untamed nature.

The war in the myth is a dramatization of not only the revolutionary changes in the existent social order but also the process of transformation of the young queen to attaining fullness of being. Her odyssey represents not only her will to assert her power and establish her religion and cult formally but also stands as a rite of initiation to test her readiness for assuming the role of the Great Queen. The vestiges of such a tradition still exist in modern Western cultures wherein the youth must undergo military training and service to prepare for war and warfare.

With the successful completion of her quest, Innana emerges as the victorious Queen, undergoing the passage from one stage to another, from maidenhood (who marvelled at her vulva) to being the begetter through her Vulva-Boat. Pleased by her heroic spirit and proving of her abilities, the God of Wisdom himself amicably gifts her the holy *me* for the welfare of the masses, ensuring harmonious functioning of society and to inspire her Queendom to reach greater heights. It is significant to note that the myth mentions about the 'perfect execution of the *me*' which is integral to ensure proper utilization of wisdom and gifts received by Innana; more so due to her role as a ruler to provide good counsel, make decisions and pass judgements.

This particular role of Innana as the ruler, strategist and protectress of her *polis* makes her the Sumerian equivalent to the Greek Athena—the Goddess representing wisdom, statecraft, executive and warrior who protected the city of Athens and supervised over skills and crafts such as weaving, spinning, pottery, goldsmithery, *etc.* Bolen (2014) writes that when a woman is thinking rationally, planning, or is attuned to her *logos* function, she is not assuming the role of a man, but behaving in accordance to the archetype of Athena who stood for mastery of the intellect, determination and purposeful thinking.

Pattanaik (2000) emphasises on the “fertility” aspect of the feminine that makes “woman, earth, and goddess divine”, implying that it is not her “personality” that contributes towards her divinity. Innana, the goddess who is strongly associated with fertility and sexuality, looks at her vulva in the beginning as the symbolic vessel of pleasure and creation. Women’s power to fertilize the crops, land and life is celebrated in many cultures. At the Kamakhya temple in Assam, the goddess’s menstruation is held auspicious and observed as a three-day festival every monsoon season. Campbell (1968) writes that for women the individuation process is not only a “social requirement” but is a “biological necessity”. Verily, it is imperative for a woman to embrace her earthly roots as her body syncs to the rhythms in nature be it the phases of the moon, changing of seasons, etc. She must take care of her bodily and subjective well-being. However, for the contemporary woman who seeks to explore the world outside the circle of home and family, her talents, skills and overall personality plays a significant role. This is displayed in the myth when Innana transcends much beyond her bodily functions by introducing diverse professions (woodworker, scribe, builder, smith, priest/priestess, etc) in the society and encouraging all the forms of statecraft. Likewise, women in present times who seek to make a mark in the professional sphere of their lives and aim to attain something beyond the biological fixation, the archetypal image of Innana can inspire to bring a merger of both the aspects. Just like in due course of the myth, Innana’s personality profile displays that her sacredness encompasses a range of characteristics which are not limited to biologically defined roles. She is not only the sex-goddess but also of professional life, of which personality is an underlying element. Hence, Innana exemplifies both fertility and personality as essential components for the modern woman’s being-in-the-world.

Innana stands as the archetype of the ambitious young woman who seeks to test her limits and capabilities. A symbolic quest is integral to traverse into one’s previously set boundaries and see what lies beyond in order to expand the territories, both within and without. Usually in mythologies, it is the men who set out on heroic adventures, defeat monsters/slays dragons and brings back gifts of prosperity to his people after being elevated to a new level of existence. But this myth provides us with a feminine prototype of this passage and journey towards wholeness. With the possession of the holy *me* and knowledge, she transcends her previous status, now embodying all the *me* and safeguarding it. The God of Wisdom thus, ultimately proclaims her as the rightful ‘Queen of Heaven and Earth’.

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