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Jānuā hominum et deorum in the Sumerian Mythological Texts

Sì come di vapor gelati fiocca
in giuso l'aere nostro, quando 'l corno
de la capra del ciel col sol si tocca,
in sú vid'io così l'etera addorno
farsi e fioccar di vapor triumfanti
che fatto avvien con noi quivi soggiorno.

(Dante, *Paradiso* XXVII, 67-72)¹

1. *Sumerian Cosmological Concepts*

As for the ancient Mesopotamians in general (Lambert 1975), so for the Sumerians the universe consisted of superimposed, flat tiers. The coherence of this vision in Sumerian thought found confirmation in the position of the infernal regions, which must have been seen as the mountainous lands at the farthest reaches of the cosmos, while the idea of hell as a netherworld, under the ground, is more specific to Semitic thinking (cf. Geller in press).²

In a conception of this type the hierarchical relations between the various levels of existence of the superior beings – namely those indicated with substantives agreeing grammatically with the class A morphemes in Sumerian – must have been expressed in terms of perpendicular verticality. We already had occasion to deal with this aspect, which can be outlined with a geometrical image where the axis, running in a perpendicular line from the Heavens of the gods to the centre where stood the temple erected by the righteous sover-

¹ As in our air the vapours downward snow, / Frozen in flakes, at the time when the horn / Of the heavenly Goat is touched by the sun's glow, / So, jewelling the ether, upward borne / In flakes of fire, those vapours triumphing / Shone, which had come to make with us sojourn (Binyon in Milano 1975).

² I am indebted to Markham J. Geller for having made the still unpublished manuscript available to me and for discussing it with me.

eign,³ represents the link between hierarchically distinct levels of reality. From this centre, thanks to the perseverance of the righteous sovereign, the celestial ordering force capable of constraining the violent forces of chaos radiates to the very limits of the world along radii traced out on the world surface by men and things (cf. Mander 1996; 1999; 1995*a*; 1998-99). Alongside this image, however, another one based more on geographical than on geometrical criteria also recurred, the categories of high and low – or superior and inferior – being represented not by superimposed levels but rather by the flowing currents of the two great rivers. Reference to this type of image is known from the journeys undertaken by the gods to the sanctuary of Nippur to pay homage to the lord of the gods.

In both forms of representation contact between the different levels of beings is represented with ‘gates’ (see Horowitz 1998),⁴ the ideal prototype being that of the – admittedly late – Lahmu couple, Lahamu of the *enūma eliš* being in turn identifiable with specific iconographies.⁵

The aim of this paper is to show that the mythologem of the two – we might say ‘cosmic’ – gates also occurs, albeit not explicitly, in Sumerian literature. As we well know, the theme of the two cosmic gates also recurs in areas neighbouring Mesopotamia, although at some distance in time from the epigraphic attestations, the evidence appearing in such important works as *The Cavern of the Nymphs* by Porphyry and the *Baghavad-Gītā*. We shall see that a few features of the Sumerian tradition are also to be found in the work of Porphyry, and we shall consider as well the structural difference between the two conceptions despite such similarities, while, in comparison, the Neo-Platonic conception appears far closer to the Hindu construct.

2. The Cavern of the Nymphs in Porphyry's Thought

We have already had occasion to note how the Neo-Platonic thinkers of the Hellenistic period may have taken Mesopotamian mythical-ritualistic material as a subject for interpretative speculation (cf. Mander in press *a*).

Here we shall be considering the interpretation Porphyry gives of the passage in the *Odyssey* describing the Cavern of the Nymphs,⁶ echoing far more archaic traditions recognisable in certain details of Mesopotamia's literary heritage. By comparing this material and later occurrences which emerge through

³ The adjective ‘just’ is taken as an extension of the concept of the ‘just war’ illustrated by Jacobsen (1994: esp. 149b).

⁴ Indexes under the entries Heaven-Gates and Underworld-Gates for references.

⁵ Cf. Lambert (1985) with previous bibliography.

⁶ *De Antro Nympharum* = ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΕΝ ΟΔΥΣΣΕΙΑΙ ΤΩΝ ΝΥΜΦΩΝ ΑΝΤΡΟΥ. See the edition with Italian translation by Simonini (1986), henceforth: AN; quotations from Simonini's translation.

transformations and interpretations at different, distant cultural stages, we shall trace out the two ends of the progress of a mythologem, which, although largely spread, retains its morphological unity – namely, the cosmic gates of Sumerian-Babylonian mythology at the outset and then the two cosmic gates of Neo-Platonic thought which re-elaborated ancient mythological-ritualistic material. We will further see the light they cast one upon the other.

Porphyry sees the cavern as representing the Cosmos (*imago mundi*), where the Nymphs (and in particular those of running water, the Naiads, also represented as bees) weave the corporeal forms for the souls destined to descend into it, attracted as they are by its moistness. This is the world of becoming and generation, situated between the two end gates – the first (*jānua hominum*) being crossed by souls descending into the world of corporeal forms, the second (*jānua deorum*) opening for those achieving liberation from the world of becoming once freed from the attraction of the sensible world, or which are traversed by the gods that – as *avatāras* – visit the world of humans. Porphyry places the two gates at the two ends of the solar year, at the point of the two solstices and the two winds: that of the gods is the winter gate, connected with the Tropic of Capricorn and the wind Notus; that of men is the north gate, associated with the Tropic of Cancer and the wind Boreas.

A similar conception is also recurrent in the Hindu tradition (see Piano 1994: 180-82),⁷ where, however, the two solstitial gates – respectively called *pitryāna* and *devayāna* – are apparently in inverse relations as compared with Porphyry's scheme.⁸

Beside the cavern stands an olive tree whose symbolism is dealt with by Porphyry at the end of his work, before the conclusion, which sets out an interpretation of Ulysses' travels according to the same interpretative line.

Both the Neoplatonic and Hindu conceptions placed the mythologem of the cosmic gates and the fate of the soul within broader soteriological conceptions which find no parallel in Mesopotamia.

It is not our intention to take a diffusionist approach, although in broad terms it might well apply,⁹ difficult as it is to document the gradual transitions, nor do we intend to project Neoplatonic interpretations on Mesopotamian material; our aim is, rather, to identify the mythologems that re-emerged from

⁷ Courtesy Francesco Sferra. Without entering into the details of the possible, but undocumentable transmission of this aspect from one region to the other, we may recall, in general, that links between the Veda and Mesopotamian astronomic ideas are in fact documented (cf. Pingree 1982; 1989).

⁸ The counterposition would, however, be merely a matter of appearance (cf. Guénon 1962: chap. 36). During the winter solstice the sun is in the constellation of Capricorn and to the north, at midnight, the constellation of Cancer can be seen in the boreal hemisphere, following the ecliptic at the southernmost point. The opposite happens with the summer solstice. See the diagram in Horowitz (1998: 196).

⁹ For the contacts between Mesopotamian and Hellenistic astronomy see Rochberg-Halton (1988).

remote ages to meet the cultural needs of Late Antiquity, offering them – as it were – body and substance.¹⁰

3. *An Overview of the Parallels Present in the Sumerian Tradition*

3.1. The Cosmos and the Land of the Sumerians

The stars of the heavenly vault were distributed according to their declinations in three major ‘ways’: the Enlil way (stars within + 17 degrees of declination north), the Enki / Ea way, to the south (stars up to – 17) and, finally, the way running between the previous ones, that of An (Walker 1991: 252a). We have no evidence of direct connections between these three ‘ways’ and the sanctuaries of the three supreme divinities at Nippur, Eridu and Uruk. However, given the close links between these divinities and the locations of their temples, we can maintain that there was an indirect relation between the three heavenly ‘ways’ and the three sanctuaries in Babylon. This hypothesis seems to be validated by a documented relationship between the stars and the sanctuaries, as attested to in the Gudea passage in the hymn for the erection of Ningirsu’s temple.¹¹

In the light of what has been said above (§1), it appears that the land of Sumer, as part of the Cosmos, was a level which had to harmonise with the total structure to which it belonged.

As the living heart and nerve centre of religious thought,¹² the sanctuaries were connection points between the level inhabited by man and the upper levels inhabited by the celestials.

3.2. The Land of Sumer as a Level of the Cosmos

Situated below the heavenly levels and linked to them by means of the sanctuaries, Sumer, the land par excellence, must have reflected in itself the higher realities. The centre where the city temple stood must have been at the origin of the centrifugal forces capable of irradiating the cosmic order wanted by the gods and pursued by them even through hard struggles (as attested by the epics of Ninurta and his ‘descendant’ Marduk) and guided by men under

¹⁰ On the interpretative work of the Neoplatonic thinkers on ancient mythological-ritual material, see Sfameni Gasparro (1981).

¹¹ Cylinder A iv 22-26 e v 22-vi 2, where the goddess Nisaba is described holding in her hand the tablet on which she has inscribed the stars with her stylus, in relation to the temple design. On the persistence of this concept up to the later periods, cf. Hunger (1975: 413). On the relationships between geographical points and the stars in later evidence see Weidner (1963).

¹² One should bear in mind the function of the city temple; its construction is the highest deed carried out by man, represented by the sovereign, who is the one who leads his people to fulfil the divine will (see Matthiae 1994).

the leadership of the sovereign.

The fact that even political events found reflection in the gods' celestial vault, or – in other words – that mythology was 'adjusted' to bring earthly events into accordance with the divine world,¹³ affords further, extreme evidence of the need to recognise the image of the heavens on earth.

This reflection cannot have been a mere image but must have rather been an organic whole whose parts, united by relations syntactically organised in a hierarchy, made it a living expression of the heavens. In this respect the journeys made by the gods to honour the sanctuaries of the highest divinities can be considered. For example, the journey made by the god Nanna from his city, Ur, to the sanctuary of his father Enlil, king of the pantheon, is an important step in the transmission of the divine power, the lower god drawing upon the celestial power of the higher god, who manifests it with his blessing.

3.2.a The Cosmos. Fish and Birds

In Porphyry's symbolic representation the cavern is the image of the world. It is described as a dark place, moist and lovely.¹⁴ The features described by Porphyry, in this as well as in other passages of his work, recall an image from a Sumerian poem of obscure meaning, called by scholars 'the Home of the Fish'.¹⁵ It is described as a 'place of happiness' (ki-šà-húl, l. 4), at the same time wet – naturally enough, being an environment for fish – and circumscribed, like the cavern (cf. ll. 2-3: ku₆-mu é ma-ra-an-dù ara[h ma-ra-dù], é-a kisal-diri-ga amaš-gíd-da ma-r[a-dù] 'My Fish, I have built a house for you, a granar[y I have built for you], in the house, an extra court (and) a large sheepfold I [have built] for you'). The loveliness of the place is emphasised by the exhortation to the Fish (ll. 24-25, 33-34): ku₄-ra-ma-ni-ib dumu-ki-ág-mu, ku₄-ra-ma-ni-ib dumu-ša₆-ga-mu 'Enter, my beloved son, enter my goodly son' (ll. 24-25; ibid. 33-34). The long list of fish names closing the composition (verses 69 ff.) may be considered an allusion to the multiplicity of forms that 'the Fish' may assume in the present world.¹⁶

¹³ As demonstrated Wilcke (1993).

¹⁴ Cf. AN §6 διὰ μὲν οὖν τὴν ὕλην ἡεροειδῆς καὶ σκοτεινὸς ὁ κόσμος, διὰ δὲ τὴν τοῦ εἶδους συμπλοκὴν καὶ διακόσμησιν, ἀφ' οὗ καὶ κοσμος ἐκλήθη, καλὸς τέ ἐστι καὶ ἐπέραστος 'Because of matter, therefore, the cosmos is dark and murky, but is beautiful and delightful in the interweaving of forms adorning it, on account of which it is called the cosmos' (Simonini 1986: 45).

¹⁵ See the edition of Civil (1961). Our interpretation is not in contrast with that attempted by Thomsen (1975), who sees the composition as the song of a fisherman who thereby means to lure the fishes into a closed basin and trap them; however, the two interpretations work at different levels, which may be taken as complementary. They show how Sumerian poetic material could cover different levels of interpretation, parallel yet distinct one from the other.

¹⁶ Cf. Civil (1961: 154), who compares this list with the episode in the Bible where Adam gives a name to each creature in Eden.

The watery environment of the Sumerian composition recalls Porphyry's interpretation of the cavern, including the importance of the liquid element in it: AN §10 'They (the theologians), in fact, held that all souls settled on water which is divinely inspired as Numenius tells us, pointing out that for this very reason the prophet, too, declared that "the divine breath moved on the waters"'.¹⁷ It is also worth recalling two dictums of Heraclitus, one cited by Porphyry AN §11 'the dry soul is the wisest',¹⁸ the other, matching it, by Emperor Julian in *To the Mother of the Gods* (cf. Fontaine, Prato e Marcone 1987; Ugenti 1992): 'for souls becoming wet means dying' (§5).¹⁹ With his ample exposition of how the liquid element attracts souls to the world of generation, Porphyry²⁰ thus sets out to associate himself with older schools of thought.

Porphyry also compares the Nymphs (cf. §6a) with the souls, and similarities are found again with the Sumerian-Babylonian world. In fact, Porphyry compares the Nymphs with bees, in Mesopotamian thought the flies clearly representing the souls of the dead (cf. Kilmer 1987),²¹ and the dragonfly hovering on the water being explicitly evoked to represent the destiny of man in the epic of Gilgamesh (table X 312-316):

For how long has the river risen, bringing floods? So that the dragonflies can hover over the rivers gazing at the face of the sun god? Suddenly there is nothing. Prisoner and dead man are alike. Death in itself cannot be described but Lullû – man – is imprisoned.²²

Finally, bearing in mind that for ancient Mesopotamians all flying creatures come within the same classification, namely *mušen*, literally 'bird' – whether insects, stag beetles or mammals like bats,²³ we find recurrent soul/bird similes: 'the soul flies from the body of Dumuzi as a hawk flies at another bird'.²⁴

¹⁷ ἡγοῦντο γὰρ προσιζάνειν τῷ ὕδατι τὰς ψυχὰς θεοπνώφ ὄντι, ὡς φησὶν ὁ Νουμήνιος, διὰ τοῦτο λέγων καὶ τὸν προφήτην εἰπηκέναι ἐμφέπεσθαι ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος θεοῦ πνεύμα.

¹⁸ αὐτὸς δὲ φεσιν 'Ἡράκλειτος' ξηρὰ ψυχὴ σοφωτάτη.

¹⁹ ψυχῆσι<v>θάνατος ὑγρῆσι γενέσθαι. (Translation according Fontaine, Prato e Marcone 1987).

²⁰ Cf. Porphyry, AN §10: ὄθεν καὶ Ἡράκλειτον ψυχῆσι φάναι τέρψιν μὴ θάνατον ὑγρῆσι γενέσθαι 'hence the dictum of Heraclitus: "for souls it is a pleasure, not death, to become wet"' (i.e. descend into generation; cf. Simonini 1986: 50-51).

²¹ See also Kramer (1969: 8); the similitude mentioned there is connected with the world of the dead: the sexless (like the evil demons and the spirits; cf. Jacobsen 1976: 12 f.) creatures created by Enki to save Inanna from imprisonment in the infernal regions, make their way down there as flies and ghosts (cf. Sladek 1974: 131 f. *ad ll.* 228-29).

²² As translation by Lambert (1980: 55). For a different interpretation cf. George (1999: 87). See Mander (1995b) for further remarks on this passage.

²³ This taxonomic principle emerges clearly in the earlier lexical texts, such as the list of names of *muše n*; cf. Pettinato (1981: 105-23 [= texts 39-42] and 254 [text 64, for which see Civil 1981: 275 ff. and id. 1982: 17 ff.]).

²⁴ Cf. Kramer (1969: 7); cf. also Heimpel (1968: 420 ff. §73.1 and 74.1). The Akkadian version of 'Inanna's Descent to the Infernal Regions' describes the dead clothed with feathers, like birds (verse 10).

Both fish and bird, as from their figurative use, together combine into the image of Porphyry's water Nymphs (Naiads). The relationship between the two images is problematic: a clue can be provided by the final verdict of the *disputatio* between Bird and Fish, where the victory of the Bird is decreed,²⁵ and by the recurrent similes in the *lamentationes*. In this genre the departed are compared with fish, and the god abandoning the city with a bird (which confirms the latter's superiority in accordance with the *disputatio*).²⁶ These similes could indicate two different levels in the use of the two images.²⁷ We may also add the 'Bird-call Text', in which the bird songs re-evoke the divine word (cf. Lambert 1970: 113 ff.).

In this context we may also recall the function of the ocean depths, from which the foetus figuratively emerges at the moment of birth (cf. Dijk 1973: 502-7), thus taking the world of water in contraposition to the present world – a world of embryonic life also attributable to the departed, whose heritage is transmitted through generations.

3.3 The Cosmic Gates in Mesopotamia

The term 'Cosmic Gates' embraces a wide range of contexts. For our purpose we shall draw a distinction between the gates leading to non-sensible realities and those situated where the heavenly bodies (the Sun, the Moon, Venus) rise.²⁸ In Mesopotamia, besides these gates, we find the concept of the Cosmic Gate precisely as a level of 'creation', i.e. the initial transition from the amorphous, primeval reality to what begins to assume a form associated with the state of consciousness, and thus of 'name'. This point of transition is well documented in the poem *enūma eliš*, the divine couple associated with gates, Lahmu and Lahamu, rising from the mingled mass of salt and fresh waters (cf. Lambert 1985: 189 ff.).

²⁵ The Bird = high / Fish = low contrast is for obvious reasons common to many cultures; the account in this *disputatio* recalls the Etana legend about a serpent that attacks the nest of an eagle with which it had signed a live and let live pact, much like the *disputatio* where the Fish destroys the Bird's nest. Vanstiphout (1992: 351) sees in the clash the contrast between 'pleasure' (= Bird) and 'utility' (= Fish), which fits in well with the relationship defined here.

²⁶ It is worth recalling that in the composition 'Enlil and Namzitarra' the god appears to Namzitarra in the form of a bird (a raven). Cf. Klein (1990: 57-70) with references to the preceding literature.

²⁷ Cf. Heimpel (1968: 458-63) for examples where human beings in critical situations are compared with fish; for the divinity as bird, cf. Jacobsen (1976: 97).

²⁸ Here we follow the distinction drawn by Horowitz (1998: 266 ff.).

3.3.a The Gate of Nippur

3.3.a.1 Nippur as *jānuā hominum*

A few aspects connect the sanctuary-city of Nippur with *jānuā hominum*, the place where, according to Porphyry, the souls descend. The two places that he mentions in this context are *dur-an-ki* and *uzu-mú-a*, where, in the ‘Hymn to the Hoe’, Enlil performed his anthropogonic action. They stand, respectively, for the ‘link between heaven and earth’ and the ‘(place) where flesh grows’, their function as transition from heaven to earth and the place of generation being perfectly evident. Considering that Nippur lies well to the north of southern Babylon, where Porphyry situates the *jānuā hominum*, the two traditions appear to show some analogy.²⁹ The anthropogonic poem KAR 4 also mentions the same place names describing the god Enlil’s act of creation.

A further factor to be attributed to Enlil as god and creator bears out this identification. In the poem on the ‘Contest between Summer and Winter’ the god is said to animate the stony ground with his breath (cf. Jacobsen 1976: 99 and n. 100), that is, to breathe life into it. In this respect we may recall that Porphyry associated the *jānuā hominum* with the wind of Boreas, and that Enlil is called either the ‘wind of the east’ or, more relevantly here, the ‘North wind’ (cf. Jacobsen 1989: 271a). Again, the mythologem is referable to the territory of Nippur,³⁰ since Ninhursag, the goddess ‘representing’ the stony ground is none other than the *paredra* of the god, i. e. Ninlil, as is told in the great poem *Lugal-e*. The victory of Winter over Summer in this *disputatio* might be correlated with the solstitial gate of the Tropic of Capricorn, which is in fact that of winter.

3.3.a.1.a The Nippur Puns

Wilcke has pointed out the frequent occurrence of puns in the ‘Hymn to the Hoe’ (Wilcke 1975: 36; cf. also Cavigneaux 1987: 245 f., and Dijk 1983: 44). Starting from his observation, one may further note that the god Enlil uses the hoe to dig up the *sag*³¹ of humanity. The humble tool is praised for its versatility, even in comparison with the plough, thanks to which the fields can

²⁹ AN §23: ἔστι δὲ τὰ μὲν βόρεια ψυχῶν εἰς γένεσις κατιουσῶν, καὶ ὀρθῶς καὶ τοῦ ἄτροπου αἰ πρὸς βορᾶν πύλαι καταβαταὶ ἀνθρώποις ‘The northern regions belong to the souls that descend into generation, and thus the gate of the cavern facing north is rightly accessible to men’ (Simonini 1986: 66-67).

³⁰ On the relativisation of the mythological traditions, apart from the works by Hallo (1994) and Wilcke (1993), see also van Dijk, who divides the cosmos-anthropogonies into two traditional lines, of Nippur and Eridu respectively. For the harmonisation of the two traditions, which appear to reflect different levels of creation, cf. Mander (1998: 231 f.).

³¹ On this topic in the present context, cf. Mander (1998: 232 and n. 36). One should add some further considerations on the Akkadic rendering – not only with *bunu*, but also with *reštū*, i. e. an active principle (cf. Dhorme 1923: 33) and expressions like *sag-tuk* = *ašaredu* (cf. Falkenstein 1956: 163).

be tilled on a vast scale, as stated in the final part of the ‘Plough against Hoe’ *disputatio* (Civil 1956). A basic tool, either meant for tilling the land or destroying it, as observed elsewhere in Sumerian literature,³² the hoe well befits the character of Enlil, the supreme principle that makes life possible but whose inscrutable designs can bring about fearsome disasters.³³ A point to bear in mind here is that the act of opening up the earth is to be seen as a demiurgic action, like the first differentiation in the undifferentiated *hyle*, or primordial matter.³⁴ In the KAR 4 myth Enlil kills two divinities by the name of ^dAlla (Pettinato 1971: 29 ff. and 74 ff.)_x³⁵ whose blood he uses to start the anthropogenic process. Now, the term for hoe in Sumerian is ^{giš}a1, and the two words have the immediate effect of evoking one another. Worth considering are also the puns on the word for ‘oak’, ^{giš}a1-la-an or ^{giš}NAGAR (= *alla?*), *allānu* in Akkadian with reference to the concept of life (Aartun 1981). Even more significant is the name of the constellation of Cancer, ^{mul}AL.LU₅, precisely that in which the solstitial point appeared from 2.200 BC to the beginning of the Christian era, providing a strikingly evident pun on the name of the Alla divinities and the word for hoe, ^{giš}a1. This set of puns about Enlil's anthropogenic mythology suggests that Nippur should be closely associated with the *janua hominum*, a possibility further borne out by the documented relation between Enlil and the Tigris,³⁶ the two rivers being connected with the constellation of Cancer (cf. Foxvog 1993: 107).

However, a direct, automatic identification would be misleading, considering the various aspects opposing it (see below).

3.3.a.2 Nippur as *jānuā deorum*

As we have seen, certain frequent features in the Sumerian literary tradition suggest that Nippur is to be more closely associated with *jānuā deorum* than *jānuā hominum*, the most remarkable being the ‘prison’ of the goddess Nungal where man, no longer in contact with his own god, rediscovers his lost

³² See Kramer (1969: 8; cf. also Michalowski 1989: Glossary s.v. ^{giš}a1) and Jacobsen (1989: 271 and n. 24).

³³ See the description of the god's character in Jacobsen (1976: 98-104).

³⁴ In Mander (1995a) are examined the opening up of the ground with a hoe and tracing the sign of the clay tablet, seen as actions qualifying man as substitute for the minor gods in governing the Cosmos, reflecting the divine will. Similarly, in the *Oracula Chaladaica*, the celestial reality is the pre-condition for cosmic reality, on which it traces out the plan: OC 37 (translated by des Places): ‘... le Souverain a fait préexister au monde multiforme un modèle intelligent imperissable, dont le monde s'est empressé de suivre la trace dans son désordre et est apparu avec sa forme, *ciselé* par des Idées de toute espèce’ (my italics).

³⁵ On the rendering of ^dNAGAR as ^dAlla, cf. Lambert (1969: 595). On this divinity see also id. (1980: 63 ff.). Cf. also al-Rawi and George (1996: 149).

³⁶ Cf. Gudea Cyl A I 9 (see Jacobsen 1987: 388, and Livingstone 1986: 46: nāru -> narru = Enlil).

purity through expiation and a final river ordeal.³⁷ Again, Nippur, as the seat of Enlil, is to be seen as the place where a ‘long life’ is dispensed to the righteous man (cf. Kramer 1985), a ‘long life’ meaning the restoration of a condition of primordial purity.³⁸

On the comparison between the location of Nippur and the solstitial cosmic gates in the Hindu and Neo-Platonic traditions, we can conclude that the cosmic gate aspect of the sanctuary of Enlil is to be deduced from its role in context (which also includes the other cosmic gate, Eridu), and that its mere identification as *janua hominum* or *deorum* is to be ruled out.

3.3.b The Gate of Eridu

If not the southernmost city of Babylon, Eridu is among the cities of the far south, and in Porphyry’s cosmic view the south is the location of the *janua deorum*.³⁹ Moreover, the well-known relation between Enki / Ea and the goat-fish (see Wallenfels 1993: 286; Foxvog 1993: 107) relates Eridu to the Capricorn solstitial gate. It is difficult to attribute such a distinctly specialised role by analogy in the Mesopotamian tradition: Eridu is certainly a gate, and indeed a cosmic gate, as witnessed by the presence of *lahmu* (the ‘hairy one’), subsequently, with the counterpart *lahamu*, constituting a cosmic gate in the process of creation in the *enūma eliš* (cf. Lambert 1985). Again, in the hymn to the temple E’engura, the temple gate is the only architectural element extolled, while the temple itself is defined as the threshold between sea and terra firma.⁴⁰ Whether as an element in purification (the appanage of Enki, god of Eridu) or the issue of an ordeal (in the end the same thing), or of an exorcism (cf. Jacobsen 1976: 86, 112; Lambert 1985: 201), water is qualified as ‘water of life’ (cf. Sládek 1974: 18, 22 f.)⁴¹ – a definition that might arguably be seen

³⁷ There is quite an extensive literature on the hymn: Sjöberg (1973); Komoroczy (1975); Castellino (1978); Hallo (1979; 1985); Alster and Walker (1989: 7-10); Civil (1993); the translation ‘prison’ (‘Big House’) is by Hallo (1985).

³⁸ On this topic, I am preparing a paper (‘Spazio e tempo nel pensiero religioso sumero-babilonense’), for the conference ‘Un nuovo cielo e una nuova terra. Fine dei tempi e cicli cosmici nei mondi religiosi’, which will be held in Milan on March 1-3, 2000.

³⁹ For the sake of clarity we can however name them thus, while considering AN § 23 τὰ δὲ νότια οὐ θεῶν, ἀλλὰ τῶν εἰς θεοῦς ἀνοστών, διὰ τὴν αὐτὴν δ’ αἰτίαν οὐ θεῶν εἶρη ὁδοί, ἀλλ’ ἀθανάτων, ὁ κοινὸν καὶ ἐπὶ πτυχῶν ἄς οὐσῶν καθ’ αὐτὸ ἢ τῇ οὐσίᾳ ἀθανάτων ‘the southern regions are not places of the gods, but of those who return to the gods, and for this very reason the poet said that in it is not the way of the gods but “of the immortals”’ (Simonini 1986: 66-67).

⁴⁰ Respectively verses: 26-32 e 53-54, 57. See edition by Al-Fouadi (1959) and translations in Bottéro and Kramer (1989: 143-44). The threshold aspect finds explicit reference in verse 43: zà-dū₉-zu á-múš-ku-á-n-na ‘ton vestibule, c’est la “barrière” émicelante du ciel!’ (Bottéro and Kramer 1989: 144). See Falkenstein (1953: 134); Castellino (1977: 211); Ferrara (1973: 126). See also a different interpretation in Kramer and Maier (1989: 225-26).

⁴¹ L. 66 relate that Enki ú-nam-ti-la mu-ua-zu a-nam-ti-la mu-ua-zu ‘knows about the life-giving plant and the life-giving water’ (ibid.: 158).

as matching the gate of the gods, *jānua deorum*, through which Porphyry has souls departing from the world of generation. In fact, here 'life' refers to a cultic aspect, namely the condition of purity.

Further evidence in support of this interpretation comes from Berossos' mythological reference to the *apkallu*, mythical beings who arrive to complete the work begun by the mythical Oannes when he taught men, who had hitherto lived like animals, the principles of the arts and institutions of civilisation. Indeed, both Oannes and the *apkallu*, are said to come from the south, from the sea (i.e. the Persian Gulf), where the land of Dilmun is situated. Now, the *jānua deorum* is open to those beings that intend to descend into the world of generation to perform the functions of an *avatāra*.

Finally, let us recall that Porphyry interprets the tree rising beside the Nymphs' cavern (AN §§ 32-33) as representing the wisdom of the Demiurge in organising the sensible world. A similar function is celebrated in the poem *Enki and the Order of the World*, the first verses of which contain praises of the god for having planted the mes tree in Abzu.⁴² In this context we may also recall a *grun*, the dwelling of Enki, a dark, watery dominion where demons and constellations issue forth (cf. Caplice 1973: 299 ff.). It is, clearly, the constellations, with their turning movement, that determine becoming in the world of generation.⁴³ This image has striking analogies with the cavern and the tree rising by it.

In conclusion to this study on the two sanctuaries of Nippur and Eridu, which we have considered as cosmic gates, we may define their relation in terms of a two-level descent. The first, upper level is at Nippur, where Enlil creates not so much mankind as the Form for it, and the second to the south, at Eridu, where the process 'descends' into earthly fulfilment.⁴⁴ The course of the two great rivers, which is roughly from north to south, must have had a key role in determining this hierarchy. This does not mean, however, that such qualities as ritual purity, characterising only one gate if we understand Porphyry in the right way, is not present in both centres. Thus we cannot directly compare the solstitial gates in Porphyry and in the Hindu tradition with the two sanctuaries of Nippur and Eridu. The latter are 'specialised' in two anthropogonic stages, while the two gates of *jānua hominum* and *jānua deorum* are 'specialised' in two distinct phases of the soul's transit into the corporeal world.

⁴² [lu]gal mes abzu-a dū-a kur-kur-ta il-la 'Oh king, who planted the mes-tree in the abzu, which is elevated in all the lands'. Cf. Benito (1969) and the commentary on p. 139. A similar concept can also be found elsewhere: cf. Caplice (1973: 302), in this case the tree is a *kiškanū*.

⁴³ Jacobsen (1976: 95 ff.) relates the turning of the constellations with the calendar and the care the sovereign takes over the cult calendar, his capacity to rule deriving in fact from An. The sovereign is to implement the divine designs in the world of men.

⁴⁴ See, as the conclusion to this process, the creation of the 'first new-born' by Enki (cf. Kilmer 1976).

4. *Conclusions*

As emerges from these indirect observations, no specialisation can be attributed to the two limiting points to the north and south (respectively, Nippur and Eridu). These limits are similar to but not the same as those of the Neo-Platonic and Hindu thought. Whereas in these latter the soul's transit into the world of generation takes place through one specific door and the soul departs through another, in the Sumerian tradition such a rigid division is not apparent. The reason is that a psychological doctrine, like those, which characterised the Neo-Platonic and Hindu worldviews – that are similar in this respect, notwithstanding their different cultural contexts –, is absent in the Mesopotamian world.

The existence of cosmic gates is of central importance to the view that a process of regeneration and contact with the divine world was expressed in spatial terms. The temple of the goddess Nungal at Nippur and the E'engurra temple of the god Enki at Eridu embrace the whole land of Sumer, and both play a particularly important role in the relations between the human and the divine world. Such relations are more evident here than in other temples.

On the basis of these points it would seem that rather than being the two extremes of a given course, the two centres of Nippur and Eridu constitute two hierarchically superimposed levels corresponding to two distinct anthropogenic stages (cf. Mander 1998: 231 ff.). A significant point here is that superimposed levels are at the basis of Mesopotamian cosmology, since there is no notion of circularity, such as that of the orbiting planets or the round vault of the heavens. The Babylonian cosmos is conceived, as consisting of superimposed levels (cf. Lambert 1975: 48-49), the possible movements being, therefore, along the vertical axis or on the horizontal plane, following a 'warp and weft' scheme:⁴⁵ the circularity of the arc followed by the soul in transit, which enters at one point and exits at the other to re-ascend once again (a characteristic marking Neo-Platonic thought) could have never been conceived within Mesopotamia's cultural frame.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the lack of circularity also means a flattening of time. In fact, while the two Neo-Platonic (and Hindu) cosmic gates are associated with the course of life and the turning of the year, the two Sumerian gates are seen as a static image in space, corresponding to a time cycle enclosed in the path of the sun from one solstice to the next.

Thus the two centres of Nippur and Eridu should be seen, rather, as 'mental maps' (Michalowski 1986: 130-35),⁴⁶ whose particular meaning can only be found within the context of the culture that created them. Here we may see the contrast with the Neo-Platonic and Hindu traditions, which both emphasize the temporal aspect. Conversely, in Mesopotamia the temporal dimen-

⁴⁵ On the importance of this scheme, cf. Mander (1995a).

⁴⁶ Courtesy M. Molina Martos.

sion is necessary only to indicate the succession of eras before the age when Enlil came to reign over the gods and the cosmos. The genealogies of the primordial gods represent the primordial eras (cf. van Djik 1964; Wiggerman 1992: 282),⁴⁷ while the transition from the upper to the lower levels is spatially represented in the era of Enlil.

⁴⁷ Courtesy Markham J. Geller.

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