

# Dance in Textual Sources from Ancient Mesopotamia

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The textual sources from Mesopotamia portray dance both as a private act of spontaneous joy and play and as a cultic act performed in religious rituals. Its connection with sexuality can be seen in a few passages where the dance of girls and women is mentioned in a sexual context and in passages describing the cult dances performed by the cross-dressing personnel of the goddess Ishtar.

The joy and vitality associated with dancing is illustrated in a letter to King Assurbanipal (seventh century BCE) in which the Assyrian scholar Adad-shumu-usur describes the reign of his king as a golden era:

A good reign, righteous days, years of justice, plentiful rains, enormous floods, a good market price! The gods are appeased, there is much reverence of god, the temples abound; the great gods of heaven and earth have been exalted in the time of the king, my lord! The old men dance, the young men sing, the women and the girls are merry and happy; women are married and provided with rings, boys and girls are brought forth, the births thrive! (translation adapted from Parpola 1993: 178).

Adad-shumu-usur goes on to mention the aid that the king bestows on his people, pointing out that his own son Urad-Gula however has not benefited from the king's beneficence. Adad-shumu-usur asks for a post for him and expresses a wish that he and his son can be happy like the rest of the families in the kingdom: "We too should be merry and dance with all the people, and bless the king, my lord!"

In this letter, the dance of old men is symbolic of the utopian nature of the king's reign. That dance was considered a joyful activity and indicative of a happy, normal life, is further seen in the Old Babylonian version of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Here, the hero, devastated by the death of his friend, Enkidu, travels to the end of the world seeking the immortality that will spare him from the same fate. On the shore of the waters that encircle the world, he arrives at a tavern. He tells the tavern-keeper of his sorrow and of his fear of death. The tavern-keeper answers him:

"O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?

The life that you seek you never will find:  
when the gods created mankind,  
death they dispensed to mankind,  
life they kept for themselves.

But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,  
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!  
Make merry each day,  
dance and play day and night!

Let your clothes be clean,  
let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!  
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,  
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!

For such is the destiny [of mortal men]"  
(George 1999: 124).

Gilgamesh's liminal state—he is unbathed and wearing animal skins—is contrasted with the blessings of a mortal life, which include family, food, enjoyment and cleanliness.

In other contexts, dancing was a sign of irresponsibility and disrespect, as in a letter dating to the first half of the second millennium BCE. In this letter, Namram-sharur and the elders of the city write to Shapirini complaining about a certain woman: "The woman has greatly aggravated the matter. In addition to dancing about every day, she has slighted us greatly by consistently behaving thoughtlessly" (cited in CAD R: 167 s.v. raqādu).

Elsewhere, dancing is an act performed by young men or women. Two Mesopotamian literary texts, the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal and a Sumerian love song, describe the dance of young girls. Although the verb used in these two passages literally means "play," its semantic range includes dance as well.<sup>1</sup>

In the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal (first millennium BCE), the god Nergal enters the Underworld and becomes Ereshkigal's lover, but he later escapes and goes up to heaven. When Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld, realizes that her lover has escaped, she summons her messenger, the god Namtar, and orders him to go up to heaven and demand that Nergal return to be with her in the Netherworld. In a dramatic speech she tells Namtar to deliver the following message to the gods in heaven:

Since I was a young girl,  
I have not known the dance of maidens,  
Nor have I known the frolic of little girls!  
[That god whom] you sent to me has lain with me, let  
him sleep with me!  
Send me [that god], that he may be my husband, that he  
may spend the night with me!"  
(translation adapted from Foster 1996: 424–25).

In an early second-millennium BCE copy of a cultic Sumerian love song, the goddess Inanna tells of her meeting with her lover, the god Dumuzi. After he takes her in his arms and embraces her, Inanna asks him to set her free so that she can go back home to her mother. But

Dumuzi instructs her to tell her mother a lie so that she may not find out where her daughter has spent her time:

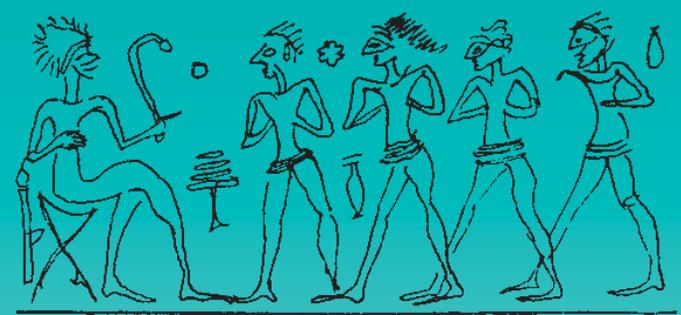
Let me teach you, let me teach you!  
Inanna, let me teach you the lies of women:  
“My girlfriend was dancing with me in the square,  
She ran around with me, playing the tambourine  
and the recorder,  
Her chants, being sweet, she sang for me,  
In rejoicing, sweetness, I passed the day there  
with her”—  
This as a lie do you present before your own mother.  
As for us—let me make love to you by the moonlight!  
(lines 13–20; Sefati 1998: 186)

Both passages refer to dance as a natural and naïve act performed by young girls, yet at the same time, both are connected with sexuality and intimacy. By juxtaposing the innocent dancing of young girls with adult sexual activity, both passages portray dance with some ambiguity.

As a part of cultic ceremonies, dance plays an especially important role in the cult of Ishtar. In ritual texts from the late-first millennium BCE, we find two of Ishtar’s cultic personnel, the *assinnu* and *kurgarrû*, taking part in performances, including ecstatic masked dancing and possibly cross-dressing, as part of both cultic activities in temples, and of magic and healing activities, where these personnel have participated in chasing away disease or demonic influences from the patient (see, with references, Maul 1992). But dancing in Ishtar’s cult was not limited to these special personnel. In an Akkadian myth belonging to the first half of the second millennium BCE, we hear of the goddess Saltum who confronts the aggressive war goddess Ishtar, called *Agushaya* in this myth. In order to commemorate the event, the god Ea commands the people in the street to perform a ceremony including a whirl-dance (which in Akkadian is a word play on the name *Agushaya*), and he tells Ishtar:

Let a whirling dance take place in the ... of the year.  
Look about at all the people!  
Let them dance in the street,  
Hear their clamor!  
(lines 16–20; Foster 1996: 90).

These and other references, which are not cited here, can shed some light on the sociological and cultic settings of dance in ancient Mesopotamia. As revealed by the textual sources, dance was closely connected to the concepts of “play” and “frolic.” Its performance evoked joy, vitality and sexuality, and could also be used in cult as a symbol of mythical events.



Drawing of a cylinder-seal impression showing dancers with a seated instructor. Early cuneiform lists of professions include dancers in both the secular and religious spheres. Louvre Museum. Drawing by M. Matousová-Rajmová. After Kilmer (1995: 2609).

## Note

1. The verb used in these passages is *mēlulu* in Akkadian and e.ne-dug<sub>4</sub> in Sumerian (glossed by Akkadian *mēlulu*). Although the verb *mēlulu* literally means “play,” it can include the meaning “dance” in some contexts (and note the the same root is used for Hebrew *māḥōl* “whirl, dance”), see Landsberger 1960: 119–20, n. 30). Note also the lexical equations of Sumerian e.ne-di.di with Akkadian *raqādu* (“dance”) and *sāru* (“whirl”), and the equation of *mēlulu* with *sāru* (see CAD M/II:16, lexical section and Attinger 1993: 471). For a survey of the Akkadian vocabulary for dance, see Kilmer (1995: 2609).

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