ENHEDUANNA
THE FIRST KNOWN AUTHOR
These seven hymns are among the forty-two “Sumerian Temple Hymns” attributed to the high priestess Enheduanna, 2300 B.C.E. While some literary texts have been found in what was ancient Mesopotamia, dating from 2600 B.C.E., the texts of Enheduanna are the first by a known author. There is strong evidence that the Sumerians invented and developed the first written script in the final third of the fourth millennium B.C.E. The territory of Sumer encompassed the southern half of present-day Iraq. Enheduanna was the daughter of the first king to build an empire, Sargon. He appointed his brilliant daughter, Enheduanna, to the position of high priestess at the temple of the moon god, Nanna, in the ancient city of Ur. There she presided for forty years over the prestigious temple in Ur. Holding the most important religious office in the land, she spread her theological ideas throughout the country, writing hymns to each of forty-two major temples.

Each hymn is written to the temple itself, as though it were a living being with power and influence over its divine occupant, in most hymns the patron deity of the city. Enheduanna addresses the temple in the second person: “O house you wild cow,” she says in Temple Hymn 22. The temple seems to listen as she describes its resident: “your lady a water bird - sacred woman of the inner chamber,” she says in TH 40 as she describes Inanna to the temple in the intimate conversation that characterizes each hymn.

The expression ‘wild cow’ as a description of the goddesses comes up over and over again. Inanna is the principle ‘wild cow’. The image conveys the unpredictability which the goddesses all embody in one way or another. With Nanshe, the hymn describes her paradoxical character. She is carefree playing in the waves, but also a great storm / strong dark water. The Sumerians had great respect...
for the whims of nature on whom they so depended. The wild cow is unexpected in a docile herd, but there she is!

Each hymn ends with an identical two-line colophon, except for the final hymn 42. There, instead of ending with a colophon, Enheduanna signs her name, saying she herself gave birth to this composition, something never before created.

Note: Betty Meador worked with a specialist in the Sumerian language at the University of California, Berkeley, John Carnahan, to create a word-for-word literal translation of each hymn based on variants from numerous tablets, from which she rendered the final poetic version.

**Temple Hymn 7**

**The Kesh Temple Of Ninhursag**

The Lofty

high-lying Kesh
in all heaven and earth you are the form-shaping place
spreading fear like a great poisonous snake

O Lady of the Mountains Ninhursag’s house
built on a terrifying site

O Kesh like holy Aratta
inside is a womb dark and deep
your outside towers over all

imposing one
great lion of the wildlands stalking the high plains
great mountain
incantations fixed you in place

inside the light is dim
even moonlight (Nanna’s light) does not enter
only Nintur Lady Birth
makes it beautiful

O house of Kesh
the brick of birthgiving
your temple tower adorned with a lapis lazuli crown

your princess
Princess of Silence
unfailing great Lady of Heaven
when she speaks heaven shakes
open-mouthed she roars

Aruru sister of Enlil
O house of Kesh
has built this house on your radiant site
and placed her seat upon your dais

13 lines for the temple of Ninhursag of Kesh
Temple Hymn 15
The Gishbanda Temple Of Ningishzida

ancient place
set deep in the mountain
artfully

dark shrine frightening and red place
safely placed in a field
no one can fathom your mighty hair-raising path

Gishbanda
the neck-stock the fine-eyed net
the foot-shackling netherworld knot
your restored high wall is massive
like a trap

your inside the place where the sun rises
yields widespread abundance

your prince the pure-handed
shita priest of Inanna heaven’s holy one

Lord Ningishzida
his thick and beautiful hair
falls down his back

O Gishbanda
has built this house on your radiant site
and placed his seat upon your dais

10 lines for the temple of Ningishzida in Gishbanda

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Temple Hymn 17
The Badtibira Temple Of Dumuzi

O house
jeweled lapis herbs fleck the shining bed
heart-soothing place of the Lady of the Steppe

Emush brickwork glistening and pure
its burnished clay placed firmly (on the earth)

your sky-rising wall sprawls over the high plain
for the one who tends the ewes
and over the Arali House for the shepherd

your prince radiant one of the Holy Woman
a lion pacing the steppe back and forth
the wonder-causing pure breasted one
the Lord spouse of pure Inanna

Dumuzi master of the Emush
O Badtibira (fortress of the coppersmith)
has built this house on your radiant site
and placed his seat upon your dais

10 lines for the house of Dumuzi in Badtibira
Temple Hymn 20
The Lagash Temple Of Ningirsu

Eninnu
right arm of thick-necked Lagash in Sumer
with heavy-cloud bird Anzu’s eyes
that scan insurgent mountains

Ningirsu’s crowd-flattener blade a menace to all lands
battle arm blazing storm drenching everyone
battle arm all the great gods the Annuna
grant again and again

so from your skin of bricks
on the rim of the holy hill green as mountains
you determine fates

a holy whirlpool spins in your river
blowing whirlwinds spawn from your glance

at the gate facing the Holy City
they pour wine into fine stone vessels of An
out under the sky

what comes in cannot be equaled
what goes out never ceases

at the fiery face of the Shugalam gate
its radiant brilliance the fate-cutting site
Lord Ningirsu besieges with hair-raising fear

all the Annuna appear at your great wine festival

your prince furious storm-wind
destroyer of rebel cities
your king angry bull flaunting his brawn
savage lion that makes heads shake

warrior the lord of lords who plots schemes
king of kings who mounts victories
mighty one great hero in battle has no rival
son of Enlil lord Ningirsu
O Eninnu
has built this house on your radiant site
and established his seat upon your throne

22 lines for the Ningirsu house in Lagash
Temple Hymn 22
The Sirara Temple Of Nanshe

O house you wild cow
there to conjure signs from divination

you arise splendid to behold
bedecked for your princess

Sirara great and princely place
you dream-opener
highly prized in the shrine

your lady Nanshe

a great storm
strong dark water

born on the shore of the sea

laughing in the sea foam
playing playing in the waves

divine Nanshe mighty Lady
O house of Sirara

has built this house on your radiant site
and placed her seat upon your dais

10 lines for the temple of Nanshe in Sirara

Temple Hymn 26
The Zabalam Temple Of Inanna

O house wrapped in beams of light
wearing shining stone jewels wakening great awe

sanctuary of pure Inanna
(where) divine powers the true me spread wide

Zabalam

shrine of the shining mountain
shrine that welcomes the morning light
she makes resound with desire

the Holy Woman grounds your hallowed chamber
with desire

your queen Inanna of the sheepfold
that singular woman
the unique one

who speaks hateful words to the wicked
who moves among the bright shining things
who goes against rebel lands

and at twilight makes the firmament beautiful
all on her own

great daughter of Suen
pure Inanna

O house of Zabalam
has built this house on your radiant site
and placed her seat upon your dais

12 lines for Inanna in Zabalam
this shining house of stars bright with lapis stones
has opened itself to all lands

a whole mix of people in the shrine
every month
lift heads for you Eresh
all the primeval lords

soapwort the very young saba on your platform
great Nanibgal Nisaba Lady of Saba
brought powers down from heaven
added her measure to your powers
enlarged the shrine set it up for praising

faithful woman exceeding in wisdom
opens [her] mouth [to recite] over cooled lined tablets
always consults lapis tablets
[and] gives strong council to all lands

true woman of the pure soapwort
born of the sharpened reed

who measures the heavens by cubits
strikes the coiled measuring rod on the earth

praise be to Nisaba

the person who bound this tablet together
is Enheduanna
my king something never before created
did not this one give birth to it

14 lines for the house of Nisaba in Eresh
1. Ninhursag was the great goddess of nature, wild and tame. Wild animals were her children. She watched over human birth in all its aspects, as germ-loosener, blood-stauncher, mother-spreading-the-knees, and mother-who-has-given-birth. By the mid-third millennium B.C.E., she was among the trio of the great deities, along with An of heaven, and Enlil of the wind. She attended to form-shaping, both in the womb and in the dark interior of her temple. The Sumerian word for womb, arhush, also means compassion. She was patron deity of the important city of Kesh in the mid-portion of the fertile alluvium of Sumer.

2. Ningishzida, a frightful deity of the Netherworld, held the important position there of chair-bearer, who carried notable persons arriving in that unsavory place. The hymn implies that the Netherworld came into being at creation, calling it ki-ul, primeval place, set deep in the mountains, the mountains east of Sumer that were, when the earth was flat, believed to be the place the dead would reside. Later, the underworld lay under the abzu, the sweet water ocean beneath the earth.

3. Dumuzi, the epitome of the young dying gods, was spouse of the inimitable Inanna, Enheduanna’s personal deity. This hymn focuses on Inanna, the “Holy Woman,” whose heart will be soothed on Dumuzi’s “shining bed.” Inanna banished Dumuzi to the underworld as ransom for her freedom, when she discovered him basking in her royal robe on her royal throne, not mourning her loss at all.

4. The hymn describes Ningirsu as a ferocious warrior. In other contexts he was the gentle god of the plough. Here he entertains the great gods in a ‘great wine festival.’ War and refinement, savage destruction and divine revelry cohabit under his roof. His temple dominated the territory of Lagash, as one ancient inscriptions says, “The Eninnu, its dread covered all the lands like a garment.”

5. Nanshe is goddess of the sea, notable for spanning the unreachable distance between the conscious civilized society and the dark and demonic waters of the unknown sea. She is the dream inter-preter of the gods and adept at divination. The poet Enheduanna in her role as high priestess, like Nanshe, interpreted dreams. Nanshe also cared for the socially disadvantaged, exerting her concerns for social justice and order.

6. Three of the 42 Temple Hymns feature Inanna, Enheduanna’s personal deity, each highlighting one of her salient characteristics: the sensual, astral, or warrior goddess. Inanna, some say, was the most important deity in the ancient world, her temple at Uruk dating from the fifth millennium B.C.E. until the Common Era. All of Sumer’s initial deities were astral beings; the first three were cosmic lights, the moon, the sun, and the radiant morning and evening star – Inanna. Her jeweled mountain temple at Zabalam houses the axis mundi, the opening through which the celestial rotation emerges. Inanna opens the gate each morning at this nodal point of the cosmos. She is the epitome of desire, the energizing force that animates creation and fuels the heavenly procession. Suen/Nanna is her father the moon.

The me (a Sumerian word) were the many aspects of the known world, both the natural world and that of civilization. Each deity was given dominion over a portion of the me. In this hymn, Innana’s sanctuary guards her portion, her dominion.

7. Nisaba is the venerable goddess of writing who watched over the Sumerians’ remarkable achievements in the arts, sciences, and literature. Evolving from record-keeping tabulations, stamped or drawn into damp clay, true writing began to emerge in the late fourth millennium B.C.E. The first literary tablets discovered are from 2600 B.C.E. A new profession, the scribes, emerged. They worshiped Nisaba as their protector, guide, and inspiration. Her realm encompassed all scholarly pursuits – from the creative and intellectual achievements of literature and science to the practical recording of the elements of civil life. As purveyor of creative thought, she came to be known as the goddess of wisdom. The ‘saba’ portion of her name, the sacred soapwort plant, is written in Emesal, a dialect of the Sumerian language used to record the speech of women, and in this case, the names of goddesses. This final Temple Hymn omits the usual colophon and adds Enheduanna’s personal signature.

Notes

1. Ninhursag was the great goddess of nature, wild and tame. Wild animals were her children. She watched over human birth in all its aspects, as germ-loosener, blood-stauncher, mother-spreading-the-knees, and mother-who-has-given-birth. By the mid-third millennium B.C.E., she was among the trio of the great deities, along with An of heaven, and Enlil of the wind. She attended to form-shaping, both in the womb and in the dark interior of her temple. The Sumerian word for womb, arhush, also means compassion. She was patron deity of the important city of Kesh in the mid-portion of the fertile alluvium of Sumer.

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