

Ancient Goddesses of Sex and War: A Family Tree

Professor Ronald Hutton
Gresham Professor of Divinity



Some Deities Have Biographies

- They also have connections.
- This talk traces a sequence of them across the ancient world, of female deities who shared the —at first sight counter-intuitive— dual responsibility for both love and war (or sex and violence).
- We start with the earliest of them, the Sumerian goddess Inanna.





Inanna

- By her appearance in literature – 2200-2000 BCE – already complex.
- She begins as the protectress of the agricultural storehouse: the barn goddess.
- So, a major deity and natural partner of Dumuzi, god of farmlands.
- This translated to city life from the countryside, with the ritual wedding of the city king to the goddess.

The Sacred Marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi

The text called
'Dumuzi's Wedding,'
from Nippur





Then, Inanna Grows

- Goddess of rain and thunder
- Goddess of war
- Goddess of sex
- Planetary goddess
- Finally- a personality

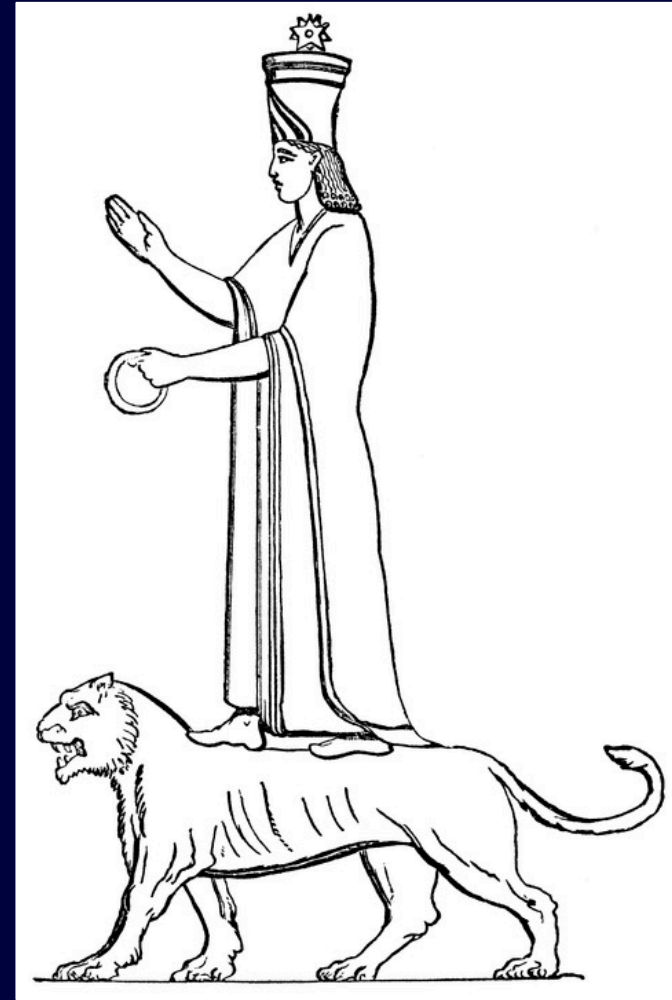


A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black, flowing, off-the-shoulder dress, stands barefoot in an ancient stone temple. She is holding onto a large, fluted column with her right hand. The temple features large, fluted columns and intricate carvings of figures on the walls. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights, creating a mystical atmosphere.

The Myth of the Descent of Inanna

Then, She Becomes Ishtar

- Akkadian conquerors blend her with their own chief goddess, Ishtar.
- Thus, she becomes greater and fiercer.
- Eventually, a or the chief goddess of Babylonia and Assyria.



Then, Confrontation Between Ishtar and Gilgamesh



The Western Semitic Double-Act

- Ishara: Love and sex (and Dumuzi, alias Tammuz).
- Astarte: War and rulership (and hunting, and Baal).



The Advent of Nudity

- Widespread in Western Semitic lands, and mysterious.
- Usually upright and facing observer.
- Hands raised, with necklace.



The Burney Relief



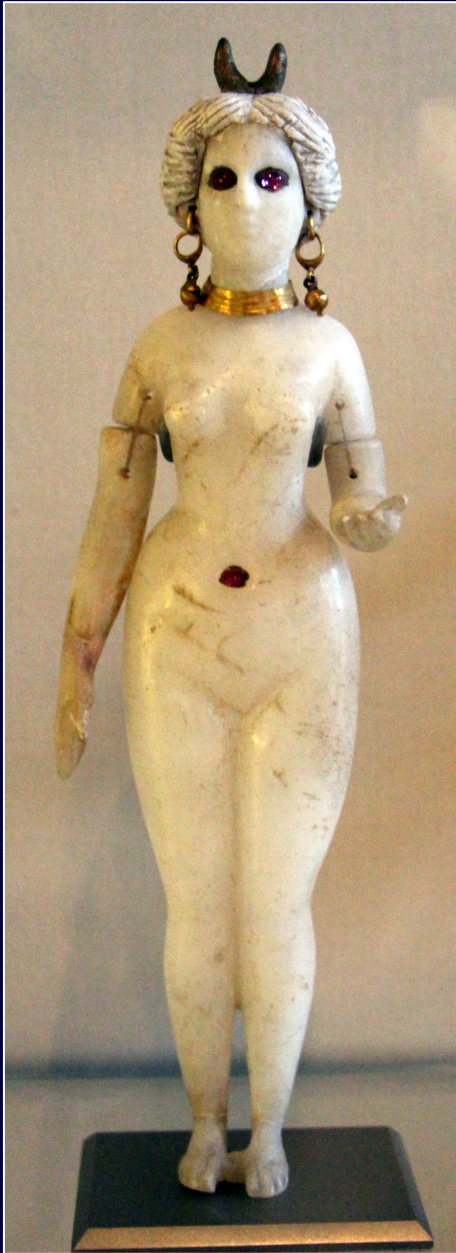
Aphrodite

- A latecomer to the Greek world, appearing between the thirteenth and eighth century.
- Greeks agreed she arrived from the east, via Cyprus, Crete and Cythera.
- A native goddess to Cyprus, originally called Kypriis.



**Her Original Icon
from Paphos:
Explains why she
marries
Hephaestus and is
called 'golden.'**





**She Is Then
Transformed By
Ishara and Astarte
(as Stephanie Budin
has shown)**

Yet Aphrodite is Different

- Not widely associated with war or government – Homer gets her wounded by Diomedes. Still, a war goddess in a few places.



Other Differences

- Not associated with lions but with birds.
- Associated with minerals.
- Above all, the goddess of sexuality and love.





Miranda (as Aphrodite) by Thomas Francis Dicksee R.A.

The Greeks and Love

- To them, not necessarily a good thing.
- They distinguished sex, affection and passion.
- The first two were positive, though a real man had to be dominant.
- Real love, *eros*, however, meant loss of control, and was scary- and so therefore was Aphrodite.



The Amazing Phryne

- A leading courtesan
- Bathed in public at Eleusis
- Tried at Athens



Phryne as Aphrodite

- In painting: *Aphrodite Anadyomene* by Apelles
- In sculpture: The *Aphrodite of Cnidos* by Praxiteles



The Complex Birth of Venus

- Begins as a sexless spirit of the vegetable patch.
- Blends with the Etruscan to become feminine, pretty, and patroness of flowers.
- Blends with Aphrodite and takes on her iconography and mythology.





**Yet Not Quite
Aphrodite
– a lady of flowers and
greenery
rather than minerals
and the sea**

Her apotheosis as that: The *Pervigilium
Veneris*, the Night Watch of Venus.



The final version of Venus, as a war goddess, planetary goddess, and mistress of life and death: Inanna's greatest daughter.

- War goddess.
- Lady of the morning and evening star.
- Mistress of life and death

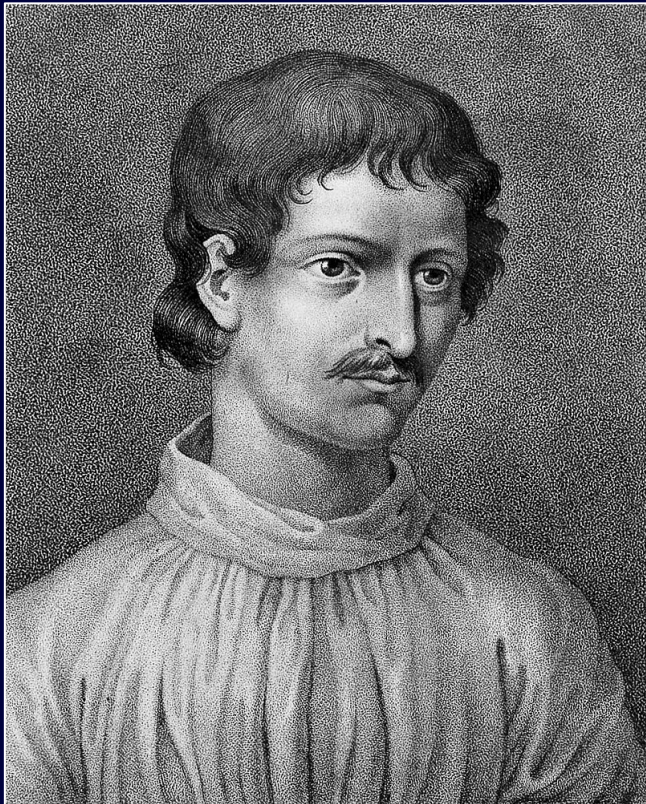


The Fully-formed Venus

- Venus Obsequens
- Venus Victrix
- Venus Libitina
- But also matters as mundane as racetracks and sewers



The Invocation to Venus by Giordano Bruno (1584)



The Birth of Venus by Sandro Botticelli (1486 - Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy)