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Paper

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The Sumerian Mother Goddesses and Their Relation to Birth, Death and Power

The mother goddesses in all cultures are in one way or another related to pregnancy, childbirth, children and nursing. Further, although the mother goddesses promote life and birth, they are also commonly closely linked to death. This paper will explore the aspects of birth, death and power as expressed by the Sumerian mother goddesses in the early state formation of Sumer. As a point of departure we will take the assumption of the Assyriologist Piotr Steinkeller that in the pre- and protohistorical period each city had a goddess as its owner and ruler. These city goddesses are further assumed to have ruled every aspect of human life (1999: 113). In the historical period the goddesses had specialized in different areas of life, like mother goddess in a narrow sense (Ninhursaga), goddess of love and war (Inanna) and wife of the king of the pantheon (Ninlil). Are there traces in the textual sources on the goddesses of a former period when they were a sort of mother goddess who ruled all aspects of life, or do we not find support in the sources for this hypothesis?