INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A METAPHYSICS OF THE ART OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

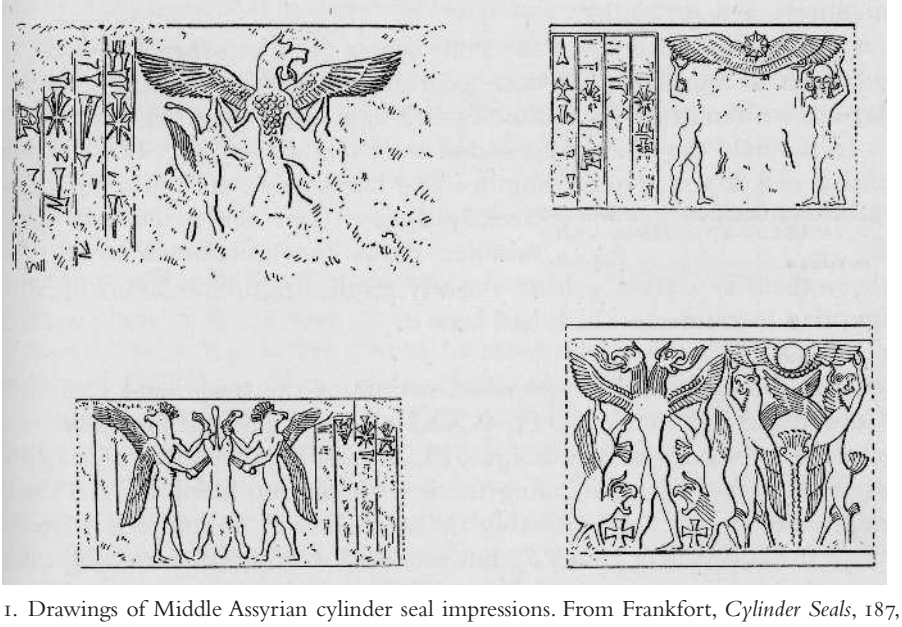
No study on the iconography of the ancient Near East can avoid a critical overview of the current state of the field before laying out its conceptual and interpretive bases. The focused analysis of this artistic tradition is a rather young domain of inquiry. It developed in the first half of the twentieth century, through the studies of scholars such as Elizabeth Douglas Van Buren, Henri Frankfort, Henrietta Groenewegen-Frankfort, Helene Kantor, and Anton Moortgat.[1] Despite the contributions of further generations of scholars, the study of the visual language of the ancient Near East has not fully acquired the autonomy and authority it deserves. On the one hand, the highly positivistic discipline of Assyriology remains a force to reckon with.[2] On the other hand, current trends in Archaeology tend to see the study of images as a non-archaeological category of inquiry.[3]

The scholars who initiated the study of the art of the ancient Near East were themselves great archaeologists. The surveys of Henri Frankfort and Anton Moortgat highlighted a unity of tradition in the art and monuments of ancient Mesopotamia. Through frequent comparison and cross-reference, they examined the works of art of any particular period of ancient Mesopotamian history often in relation to those of other periods, without losing sight of the continuum in figural types and visual paradigms.[4] The work of Douglas Van Buren on the flowing vase and that of Marie-Thérèse

Barrelet on the "investiture" painting from the palace at Mari are excellent examples of a previous generation's diachronic approach to the art of the ancient Near East that acknowledges and engages fruitfully with threads of unbroken continuity in the art of ancient Mesopotamia across the ages.[5] In the later years, Margaret C. Root's 1979 study on the king and kingship in the art of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–331 BCE) also underscored continuity among ancient Near Eastern visual traditions in the forging of Persian imperial imagery.[6] This study not only showed the inherent commensurability of different visual idioms, such as Assyrian and Egyptian, within a new eclectic Near Eastern rubric, but also stressed that the adoption of Mesopotamian and Egyptian visual paradigms by the host culture preserved aspects of their original meaning.

Despite many valuable and innovative contributions to the study of the art of the ancient Near East in many of its facets since its initial emergence as a field of inquiry, what seems to have been lost in the present era of scholarship is the sense of unity in visual language among its periods and geographic areas and the timeless and philosophical concepts conveyed by this language. These concepts form a supra-textual medium of signification, or an underlying mythology, embedded in royal-sponsored art. In a short 1949 monograph, Anton Moortgat highlighted some of these notions under the umbrella term *Unsterblichkeitsglaube*, the "immortality belief."[7] Driving the intellectual agenda of the book is the tenet that notions of regeneration, conquest of evil and death, and immortalization are the overarching, unchanging, and timeless themes of the art of ancient Mesopotamia and adjacent areas, such as Anatolia and Iran. It was primarily the visual guise in which these themes were presented that changed from era to era in accordance with the varying styles and artistic conventions.[8] The relevant concepts were expressed primarily by the hieratic or formulaic elements of the ancient Near East, such as heraldic compositions bringing together animals and plants, "sacred trees," the royal figure in cultic roles, "symposium" scenes, hunt and contest scenes, and the defeat of enemies.

Moortgat wondered how certain key themes conveyed in the art of the Uruk (ca. 4000–3100 BCE) and Jemdet Nasr (ca. 3100–2900 BCE) periods of ancient Mesopotamia endured, finding expression as late as the art of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (883–612 BCE). He posited that the "immortality belief" permeated the artistic traditions of later Mesopotamian antiquity, especially the Hurro-Mesopotamian and Assyrian designs of "sacred trees" surmounted by winged disks (Fig. 1), with the connection between the tree and the sun paradigmatic of that between Tammuz and a solar deity.[9] Moortgat found the relevant ideas in the Iron Age relief sculpture of Tell Halaf and the art of the Achaemenid Persian Empire as well.[10] Indeed, what Moortgat probed in this short monograph is the symbolic language of the art of the ancient Near East,



1. Drawings of Middle Assyrian cylinder seal impressions. From Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, 187, "Text-figs. 56–59."

a much more autonomous and unchanging quality of this artistic tradition than ordinarily acknowledged.

The fundamentals of and continuum in the visual language of the ancient Near East have been largely forgotten or neglected by the trends dominating our scholarship today in favor of approaches that do not encourage exploring those timeless elements so central to systems of intellectual thought and visual signification in the ancient world. This visual language needs to be retrieved and revived. It should be studied again with renewed analytical rigor and with the benefit of the increase in historical knowledge about the ancient Near East since the time of the early scholars. Particularly Moortgat's views of the overarching trends of meaning in the art of ancient Mesopotamia explored in *Tammuz*, as discussed further below, are crucial and worthy of being furthered by fresh inquiry.

In an article on the role of religion in Achaemenid imperialism, Bruce Lincoln has signaled that current scholarship has not come up with updated paradigms for the study of ancient Near Eastern conceptions of kingship and its material or visual correlates beyond axes of politics, administration, and economy.[11] Lincoln's case in point is the relief program at Persepolis, which he basically (re)interprets from an ancient Iranian religious vantage point as the reunification of an ideal world order shattered and fragmented as a result of the primeval attack of evil, the Lie, against it. The restoration of this dissolved world, material and spiritual, for which the Persepolis tribute processions are

a metaphor, takes place under the aegis of a sacral king, "as history ends and a state of eschatological perfection opens onto eternity, thanks to the work of the Achaemenian king, the Persian army, and the tribute bearers of every land-and-people."[12]

Lincoln has further stressed that such an interpretation would constitute a much more appropriate alternative to a "secular model of political economy" driven by conceptions of tribute and domination.[13] As Root's work, *King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art*, had demonstrated, the building blocks of the Persian imperial imagery go back to remoter antiquity and the older empires of the Near East not only in their formal characteristics but also in their semantic implications; and hence the necessity to take into consideration in their study as well theological matters analogous to those tackled by Lincoln. Indeed, Lincoln's illuminating essay could be complemented by Root's reading of the tribute processions at Persepolis as modeled after the Mesopotamo-Egyptian presentation scenes in which devotees in Mesopotamia and candidates of immortalization in Egypt are led by the hand to a supreme divinity.[14] In ancient Egypt, this god is Osiris, Lord of the Netherworld, and the presentation to him is for judgment in the beyond, the successful outcome of which is certainly immortalization, or "apotheosis," a term Root used to good effect in a later study.[15]

Concentrating on the philosophical symbolism of a particular geographic and chronological segment of the art of the ancient Near East, the present book attempts to bring back to its study a renewed impetus in addressing religious perspectives. It proposes to add onto Moortgat's conceptions of immortalization those of sacral time, eternity, and eschatology as closely relevant. My ultimate objective is to delineate a metaphysics of the art of the ancient Near East more thoroughly and systematically than has hitherto been conducted. To that end, my emphasis is on the art of those eras when polities in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Egypt were aligned ideologically and culturally, the Middle and Late Bronze Age, corresponding roughly to the first and second halves of the second millennium BCE, respectively, and the afterlife of their artistic heritage in the Neo-Assyrian Empire of the Iron Age in the first millennium BCE. For the purposes of this study, by the designation "Near East," I refer to Mesopotamia, Syria, Anatolia, and Egypt, without engaging closely with the material culture of Iran.

The primary era of ancient Iran that would be the most relevant to the present focus on sacral kingship and eschatology is the Achaemenid Persian Empire. The latter, however, would necessitate its own study from this angle, given the richness of its remains and the expansiveness of the scholarship devoted to it. Sources from Iran revolving around the Zoroastrian doctrine are perhaps the most explicit and informative in discussions of eschatology in the wider ancient Near East. I make some use of them here, particularly

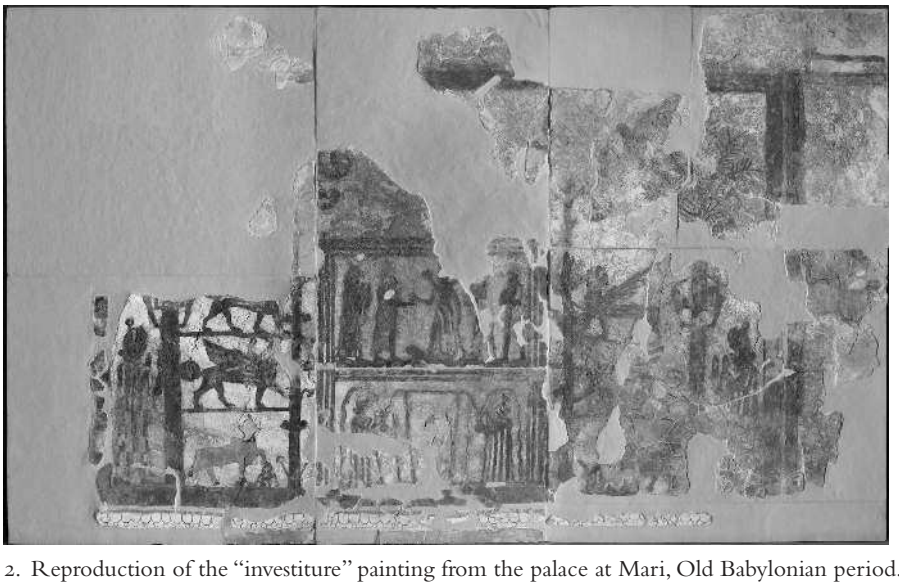
in the footnotes of Chapters 5 and 6, with the understanding, however, that the difficult but much-needed task of reading Achaemenid Persian art against the backdrop of ancient Iranian religious traditions should be undertaken as a separate endeavor.[16] In this respect, while ancient Iranian lore is an indispensable aspect of the present intellectual agenda, the material remains of the Achaemenid Persian Empire lie outside the parameters of chronology and feasibility established for this study.

In *The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art*,[17] I dealt with matters of a symbolic and sacral language embedded in the relief sculpture of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Here, I would like to take both a step forward and backward. Forward in that I would like to extend the same approach to a greater number of artistic traditions belonging to a wider geographic and chronological range, addressing additional themes. Backward in that I would like to step back in time to eras much earlier than the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and explore the background in image and thought that informed this highly complex final crystallization in Mesopotamia of notions of immortalization and eternity before they were summed up in pure emblematic form in the art of the Achaemenid Persian Empire.

THE CORPUS OF IMAGES

Even though in this study I treat a wide range of visual depictions, I concentrate discussions on a few reference or pilot images that guide my analyses. Their prominence here is on account of their being among the most condensed emblematic, even encyclopedic, works of art surviving from ancient Mesopotamia in the expression of hieratic concepts. Central to my study is a thorough (re-)examination of the so-called investiture painting from the Old Babylonian (ca. 1894–1595 BCE) palace at Mari (Fig. 2). Moortgat included this work of art in his study on the "immortality belief" and acknowledged its importance by pointing out that the image contained all the age-old motifs of ancient Mesopotamia, and later of all ancient Near East.[18] Surprisingly, however, his treatment of the work of art is brief, with no extensive interpretive analysis.

While the "investiture" painting is extremely well known within the study of the ancient Near East, there is little familiarity with it in the larger field of art history. The painting is crucial in the history of ancient art in its constituting the foundation to what comes later in the artistic traditions of the Near East in terms of an interculturally shared imagery of rule and cosmos. Furthermore, the image is arguably a visual repository of conceptions of sacral time and eternity. As such, it is the principal index for the ideas explored in this essay. Its fresh treatment would be timely both for opening up its discussion beyond matters of Old Babylonian Mari politics and history within the

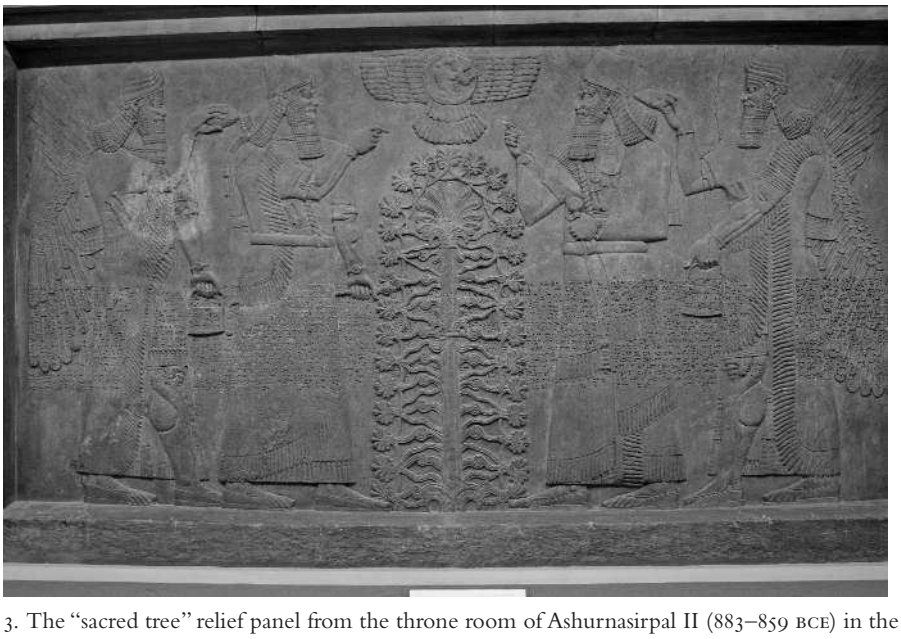


2. Reproduction of the "investiture" painting from the palace at Mari, Old Babylonian period. Paris, Louvre. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

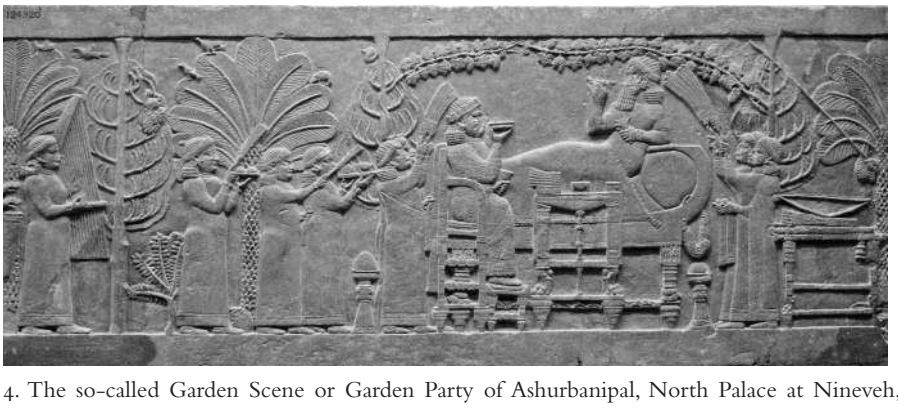
study of the ancient Near East and making it known to a wider audience of art historians.

The second key image is the celebrated "sacred tree" slab from the throne room of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud (Fig. 3), an image of wide-ranging scholarly interest, but so far not approached from perspectives of sacral time and eschatology. I treat it here as a counterpart image to the "investiture" painting from the first millennium BCE on account of their sharing compositional and cosmological traits. As for the third pilot image, it is another well-known work of art from the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the "Garden Scene," or "Garden Party" of Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE) from his North Palace at Nineveh (Fig. 4), also an image that has so far been analyzed and interpreted mostly from the point of view of imperial success and prosperity, but arguably the unobtrusive summation of all the key metaphysical concepts I address in this study.

Chapter 1 introduces the Mari painting and highlights its crucial role in the present essay within an overview of the intellectual agenda of the book. Chapter 2 provides an interpretive description, or iconographic analysis, of the Mari painting, presenting it as a highly original production that looks both backward and forward within the continuum of ancient Near Eastern visual traditions. Chapter 3 lays out the ancient Mesopotamian Flood myth as a paradigm for analyzing the Mari painting and for approaching notions of sacral time and eternity expressed in it. It also offers a parallel analysis of the Assyrian "sacred tree" slab from the throne room of Ashurnasirpal II within the same framework.



3. The "sacred tree" relief panel from the throne room of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud, Neo-Assyrian period. London, British Museum. Photo: author.



4. The so-called Garden Scene or Garden Party of Ashurbanipal, North Palace at Nineveh, Neo-Assyrian period BCE. London, British Museum. Photo: author.

Chapter 4 is a study on ornament, with a focus on the motif of the running spirals in both the Mari painting and other counterpart traditions, especially the artistic record of Egypt and Anatolia. It regards the running spiral design as a macro-cosmic visualization of sacral time in both its fundamental aspects of linear duration and cyclical revolution, arguing for it a key role in the iconography of the Mari painting. Chapter 5 integrates the visual analyses conducted in the previous chapters more directly with a discussion of possible conceptions of eschatology and the apocalyptic in the ancient Near East. This is also the chapter that focuses on the visual record of the Late Bronze Age empires of the Near East, particularly Egypt and Hatti, in establishing conceptual

and chronological links between the Mari painting and the art of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. It proposes to see the Mari painting as the earliest extant apocalyptic image in a programmatic sense in the history of art. Chapter 6 is a focused interpretive analysis of Ashurbanipal's "Garden Scene," the chronologically latest work to be addressed in this book. As the final chapter, it offers the ground for a syncretistic treatment of notions of immortalization, paradise, and eschatology within the wider ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds, particularly through the exemplar of Vergil's "empire without end."[19] On account of its featuring the mural crown, the relief also enables a discussion of conceptions of the sacred, or "eternal," city, central to Near Eastern modes of eschatological thought.

QUESTIONS OF TEXT AND IMAGE

Conceptions of sacral time and eschatology in the ancient Near East may have found far better and more systematic expression in the condensed emblematic modes the visual arts offer than the textual format would allow. In the ancient Near East, purely philosophical or speculative writings in the discursive mode hardly existed.[20] Texts would not have been devoid of traces of these notions, however, so they should certainly be mined as thoroughly as possible to that end. But the purest and most direct expression of the relevant concepts should be sought in expressions of visual thinking, images. In this sense, the visual language of the art of the ancient Near East is supra-textual. Not every answer or interpretive referent about images is available in texts, since images contained special knowledge.

We need not rehearse the long-standing views and statements on text–image relations in the study of the art of the ancient Near East. It has by now been fully established that despite many overlaps between them, images are not illustrations of texts. As expressed succinctly by Irene Winter in her contribution to *Assyria 1995*:

> the visual domain contains within it primary information, as well as unique structures of knowledge – oftentimes in parallel or complementary with, occasionally even quite distinct from, the textual record. Consequently, the visual needs to be studied with the full analytical arsenal available to us – art historical, archaeological, anthropological, and textual – and *on its own terms*.[21]

Once we have ascertained that we will not be able to find all the solutions to understanding images in texts, we should develop methods and perspectives to analyze images from the ancient Near East as corpora of information with much greater autonomy than has hitherto been attributed to them by Assyriology. In the study of the art of ancient Mesopotamia, such an

endeavor might entail the combined effort of following the visual cues in the relevant compositions in hearkening to their semantic potential; engaging in comparisons with other, earlier and later, ancient Mesopotamian images of similar compositional and symbolic principles; making use of some of the deep-seated affinities in modes of thought and visual representation between ancient Mesopotamia and other counterpart traditions such as Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia; in addition to making the most of the mythological texts and royal inscriptions of ancient Mesopotamia in drawing referents that would inform the analysis.

To that end, we ought to approach images as though we were solving puzzles. We should always be suspicious of the presence in images of matters that we might not expect to find in them within the current spectrum of predictable and familiar explanations, such as political ideology, ethnic and social identity, successful kingship, the king's upholding the cosmic order, the king's constituting a bridge between society and divinity, legitimacy, glorification, apotropaic functions, fertility of the land and abundance of natural resources (the list can be longer). Unless we take the inevitable risks of over-interpreting or not hitting the mark in such an alternative endeavor, we are doomed to remain in the comfort zone we have created for ourselves. In this respect, engaging with the language of images is by definition and nature a double-edged endeavor. It is a domain of inquiry for which "evidence" as such is hardly a definitive criterion. Unless one interviewed the artists who produced the relevant images, we might never know what they are about. Therefore, any judgment of interpretive analyses of images along the axes of "right" or "wrong" and "convincing" or "unconvincing" is inevitably subjective as well.

The language of images has an inherent crypticism. Not that crypticism does not exist in texts; certain texts in ancient Mesopotamia do identify themselves as containing esoteric knowledge.[22] Through figure, ornament, color, and composition, an image could "write everything out" and be straightforward, with no tricks, in visual language, and still maintain its opaqueness. It is far more practical to keep a visual language internal and secret than a verbal one. In this study, I make extensive use of texts inasmuch as they have the capacity and authority to illuminate images, without losing sight of that vast domain of signification that belongs to images alone. The analysis of that domain is not without a speculative, indeed intuitive, dimension, as acknowledged and established by Erwin Panofsky's seminal 1939 study on iconographic method.[23]

TAMMUZ AND GILGAMESH

In addition to the designation "immortality belief," Moortgat referred to the philosophical notions embedded in the art of ancient Mesopotamia as the "Tammuz belief," seeing in Tammuz the prototype of all ancient Near Eastern

vegetal symbols of life and regeneration.[24] He juxtaposed Gilgamesh, the model for many for the failure to find immortality, with Tammuz, the Semitic name of the Sumerian Dumuzi, the god who dies with the harvested grain every summer and returns with the sprouting of vegetation in the spring, the paradigm for cyclical regeneration. Moortgat pointed out that Gilgamesh was the antithesis of Tammuz. With Gilgamesh, there was a turning point in the cultural tradition of ancient Mesopotamia; a king was created out of the priest, an enemy of Inanna/Ishtar grew out of her consort. Thus, Gilgamesh was a "tragic hero" in his "failure" to attain eternal life, the transformation of the god-man represented by Tammuz into a royal and heroic figure.[25]

Arguing for a greater relevance of a pristine Tammuz-based model to the perennial aspects of the art of the ancient Near East than a Gilgamesh-based one, Moortgat posited that it was the survival of the "Tammuz belief" in ancient Mesopotamia that had its stamp on the visual arts. He indicated that the "Tammuz *mysterium*" never came to an end; rather, in time it was translated into state religions dominated by gods such as Enlil, Marduk, and Shamash. The turning point in this regard is identified by Moortgat as the Old Babylonian period, when the mysteries of Inanna and Tammuz were assimilated into conceptions of astral deities, hero gods, and creation myths.[26]

The artistic record is perhaps the best evidence that speaks against the widespread perception in Assyriology that in ancient Mesopotamian culture, based especially on a literal reading of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the view of death was about man's accepting his fate that he could not find immortality.[27] Accordingly, it was at most through his deeds, accomplishments, and progeny that man could make a name for himself on this side of time, conceptions that all too readily strike a chord with modern perceptions of human existence. Discussions of immortalization in the artistic record and intellectual perspective of the ancient Near East, however, need not be confined to those centered on becoming undying in the flesh. In ancient Mesopotamian texts, it is only the Flood Hero who reaches this state. His physical immortalization is commensurate only with a supra-sensory locale, the so-called Mouth of the Rivers according to the Standard Babylonian version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from the Neo-Assyrian period, and the Dilmun of the *Sumerian Flood Story* from the Old Babylonian. Ancient Mesopotamian thought clearly depicts godlike immortalization attained by a living human being solely within the context of a primeval era, the benchmark for which is the Flood, and in a paradisiac terrestrial domain.

In the epic, Gilgamesh is a post-diluvian "aspirant," the sage of an era when the capacity of attaining immortality while still alive was unavailable. His making the journey to the land of the Flood Hero, however, is already indicative of his special status, as he is two-thirds god, and the land of the Flood Hero is not within ordinary human reach. In other words, Gilgamesh's journey is