SCULPTED PALMYRIAN FUNERARY FEMALE PORTRAITS WITH EXTENSIVE JEWELRY SETS: A REVISIONIST READING OF THEIR MEANINGS AND IMPACT*

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Vladimir in admiration and great Love.

The wearing by women of large jewelry arrangements has been characteristic of eastern Mediterranean civilizations since ancient times. This paper focuses on the meanings and impact of the Palmyrian female funerary sculpture with jewelry arrangements.

I argue that it is most plausible that these representations of Palmyrian women reflect the belief of the patron in Ishtar, a major goddess of Palmyra. Ishtar's jewelry was described in the epic of her descent into the Netherworld. The goddess takes with her the seven divine powers – seven pieces of jewelry – and then hands them over at each of the seven gates to the Netherworld. Then, naked and dispossessed of her powers, she dies, only to be resurrected later. The sculptures of the deceased women of Palmyra, with their rich sets of jewelry, reflect a visual perception that is very similar to the jewelry of Ishtar.

Perceptions of jewelry as a totality continued to exist in the East, where it apparently underwent a change from a ritual of the goddesses to representations of Byzantine-Christian empresses.

It is also possible to detect a resemblance between the systems of head covering, the necklaces interwoven with chains, and the bracelets from Palmyra, and the Berber jewelry of Jewish women in North Africa. This resemblance between the jewelry in Palmyra and the sets of jewelry of the empresses of Byzantium on the one hand, and the appearance of a similar item of jewelry as part of the ceremonial costume of women in the Berber and Jewish communities surviving into modern times on the other hand, is a fascinating phenomenon.

Palmyra, funerary portraits, female portraits, descent of the Goddess Inanna/Ishtar into the netherworld, Byzantine jewelry, Moroccan Berber jewelry

The wearing by women of large jewelry arrangements, comprising chest, head, wrist, and finger elements, has been characteristic of eastern Mediterranean civilizations since ancient times. This paper focuses on one important source of this tradition – the meanings and impact of the Palmyrian female funerary sculpture with jewelry arrangements.

Among the vast quantity of Palmyrian funerary sculpture created between the first and third century AD, female images are depicted in various manners. Some are presented with a veil and draped in the Roman manner, with significant hand gestures, holding the spindle and distaff, while others wear rich sets of head and chest jewelry with bracelets and rings.[1] Recently, significant research was devoted to the meanings of the hand gestures, the holding of the staff and spindle, and to the forms and significance of the headgear.[2] (Fig. 1)

The jewelry sets of these sculptures have been described by various scholars and interpreted as reflecting the social status of the Palmyrian rich merchants' wives, or referred to as being the jewelry of "ladies of fashion."[3] The difference between the Palmyrian and Roman portraits has been little discussed, and scholars have not noted that the Roman female portraits are depicted with very little jewelry. A comparison reveals a significant difference between the visual perceptions of these two centers.[4] There are three principal components in representations of the women's funerary sculpture in Palmyra that do not feature in Roman women's portraits, either Imperial or civilian, nor in Roman Gaul, Germany, or Spain: a) the Roman women's portraits exhibit intricate hairstyles, differing according to place and period; b) these latter portraits are generally not completely frontal, but shown in three-quarter or profile view; and c) they seldom represent jewelry, as neither do depictions of Roman empresses on coins. The Roman women wear one or two necklaces, but not complete sets of jewelry. (Fig. 2) Thus, the particular choices of representation in Palmyra, where numerous jewelry sets feature the same patterns,[5] have not been understood as a deliberate expression of identity and of religious beliefs of the depicted patrons.[6]

The Various Groups of Funerary Female Portraits in Palmyra and the Group of Women Wearing Jewelry

The Palmyrian funerary portraits, scattered today in museums throughout the world, constitute a large corpus of stone sculptures created over a period of more than two hundred years, between the first and third centuries AD, during the flourishing of that city in the period of the Roman Empire. Among the women's funerary sculptures discovered one can also distinguish several groups of sculpted portraits, which feature in common a frontal placement of the figure and a complex head covering. The figures don a turban, topped with a scarf that falls onto the shoulders, with only a few locks of the hair revealed. The head covering displays a variety of jewels. These

groups are also characterized by specific hand gestures, with the figure clasping her scarf or head covering. It should be noted that in the East the head covering constitutes an integral part of the overall costume, while in the West it appears among the Vestal priestesses, worn during special rituals.[7]

Among the various groups, that of female figures holding in one hand a distaff and spindle is prominent. Women holding these implements also appear on many Roman tombstones, alongside inscriptions noting that the deceased had diligently managed the household and also engaged in weaving. I would contend, however, that in Palmyra the intention was different. The representation does not relate to women's work during their lifetime, but rather to the role of the goddesses as weaving/spinning the fate of man. Weaving was perceived in Greek culture as the work of Clotho the spinning fate, one of the three Fate Goddesses (the three *Moirai*, or *Moirae*), and thus also already in Assyrian culture. Consequently, I consider it possible to assume that this image of the deceased represents her address to the goddesses, who determine the fate of humankind, to determine her good fate in the world beyond Fate Goddesses.[8]

Thus, I would like to contend that these visual depictions have ancient literary and pictorial sources, and possibly expressed the patrons' belief in a certain goddess—whose cult was current in Palmyra and which is related also to death and resurrection.[9] I shall attempt to demonstrate this through an examination of these female sepulchral images and of the distinct groups and categories of jewelry, and their possible meanings.

Fig. 1 Funerary relief, woman holding staff and spindle in her left hand and head cover in her right hand (2nd/3rd century AD), Istanbul, Archaeological Museum. Courtesy, Dick Osseman, Amsterdam.

Fig. 2 Roman head, 1st century.

The group of women wearing jewelry

In a central and important group of women's funerary sculpture, there are detailed images depicting sets of jewelry on the portrait, constituting a focal point of the sculpted representation. This group depicts women wearing extensive sets of jewelry – on the head, chest, wrists, and fingers.

In contrast to studies devoted to specific aspects and meanings of the female funerary portraits in Palmyra as such, the significance of the clothing of different classes, or the hand gestures of the deceased, which have also been interpreted symbolically, and the images of the jewelry sets depicted on these funereal sculptures have been mainly studied from their formal aspect of patterns and models, but not in regard to their meaning. As noted above, the wearing of jewelry was also suggested as reflecting social status.[10]

Let us take a look at the Palmyrian funerary sculpture of a young woman wearing jewelry in the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. Her face is broad, and above her hair, of which only the ends are seen, parted in the center and combed to either side of the head, there is a decorated ribbon. Above it is a kerchief encircling her head a number of times, and above this a veil, folded and descending to her shoulders. Beneath the kerchief encircling her head and above the ribbon are two chains in a half-circle. The woman is wearing earrings, and in her left hand (now broken) she appears to be clasping the train of the veil. She is attired in a blouse and wears four different necklaces, while a necklace of small beads encircles her neck. A round decorated fibula secures her upper tunic on the left side, and on her left arm she wears a decorative bracelet. (Fig. 3)

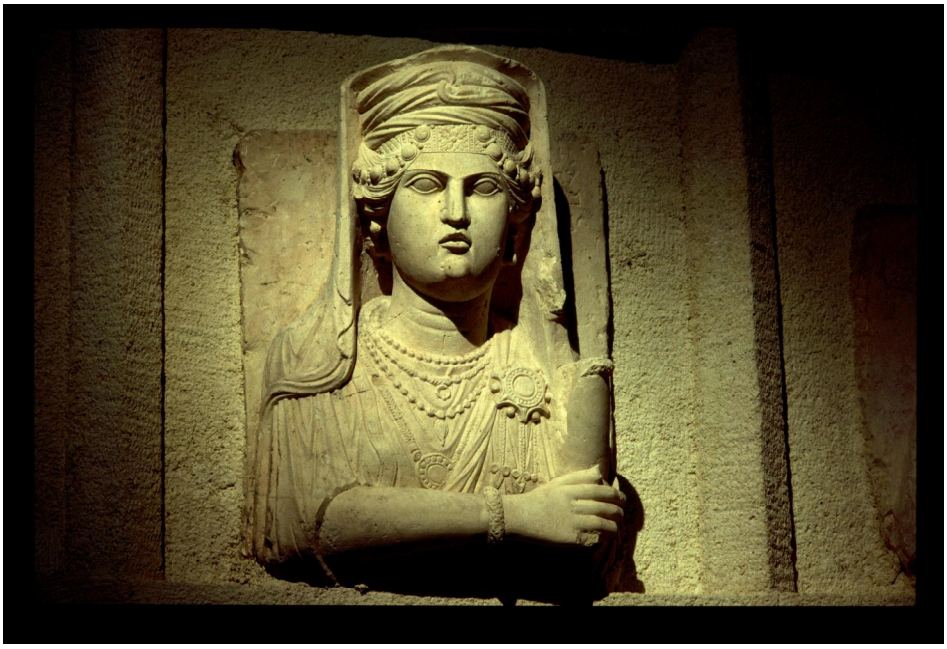

Fig. 3 Funerary bust relief: woman with fibula and chest ornaments (2nd/3rd century AD), Istanbul, Archaeological Museum. Courtesy, Dick Osseman, Amsterdam.

Another portrait of a Palmyrian woman (Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen) displays a similar jewelry scheme, including head and breast ornaments fashioned as individual items. On her head, in place of the decorative ribbon, is an ornate chain with an oval frame in its center, apparently once holding a precious stone. This frame is repeated as a brooch pinning the kerchief that functions as a turban, with the additional veil above it. This lady has seven chains on her breast, several of which are composed of individual circles which once held stones. The outermost chain incorporates two medallions engraved with male images. On the upper left part of her breast she wears a round fibula brooch. Her right hand rests in front of her, while in her left hand she holds the train of the kerchief. On both arms she wears two pairs of decorative bracelets, one round and the other broad and conical. She wears a ring on the little finger of her left hand. (Fig. 4)

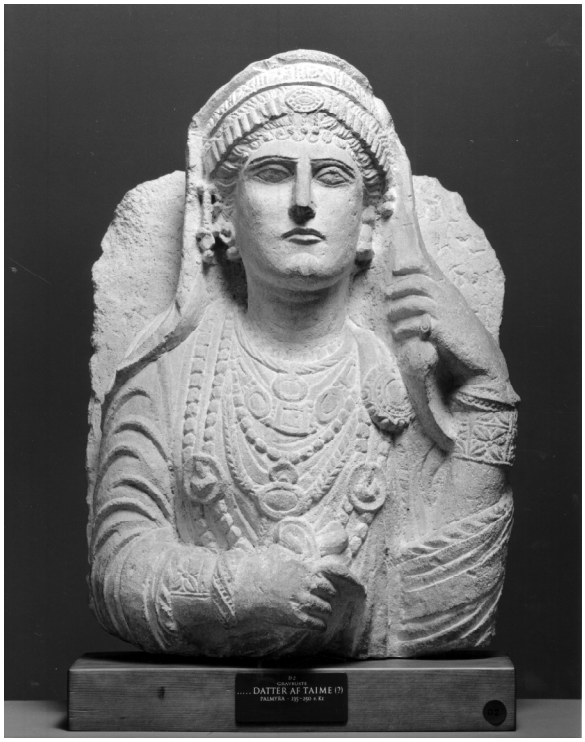

Fig. 4 Funerary relief: woman wearing chest ornaments with two medallions fixed to her chest, necklace installed on her breasts, bracelets, rings and head ornaments. (2nd/3rd century AD).
Courtesy of Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek.

Possible formal and literary-ritual sources

Formal sources: It seems to me that the sets of jewelry, sculpted as part of the female image of dozens of Palmyrian funerary portrait sculptures, engage in a dialogue with formal and mythological traditions. These formal traditions apparently continued the early Phoenician traditions and perhaps even those of a still earlier period. One can note four funerary sculptures of women seemingly Carthaginian-Iberian which show great connections in their headgear and jewelry to Phoenician colonies, mainly in Carthago: that of the Dama from Elche, dated to the fifth century

BC, near the Phoenician colony of Elche in southern Spain;[11] and, similarly, the sculptures of the woman from Baza (fourth – third centuries BC), and an additional woman called the *Dama del Cerro de los Santos (Gran Dama Oferente*) that are Ibero-Phoenician.[12] (Fig. 5) These funerary sculptures represent women wearing extensive sets of jewelry and costumes that cover their entire body. Their heads feature special jeweled head coverings, rare elements in Greek sculpture of the time. It would seem that in relating to this tradition, the sculptures reflect a clear and strong awareness of local identity, even if use is sometimes made of specific components of the Roman or Persian vocabulary of forms.

Literary-ritual sources: I would like to contend that the women's funerary portraits with the represented sets of jewelry express the belief of their patronesses or patrons in Ishtar – very close to Inana – who was venerated in Palmyra,[13] and in her myth. Scholars of the Palmyrian pantheon concur that the cult of Ishtar, which seems to be very similar to that of Inana, was introduced during an earlier period from Sumerian Babylon to Palmyra, and accept the assumption that already in the epic tale of Gilgamesh there was a syncretism between these two goddesses.[14] Ishtar is also identified with the Syrian goddess Atargatis and even with Aphrodite.[15]

I introduce here a section from the Sumerian myth of the goddess that describes her preparations for her descent into the Netherworld, the descent itself, her death, and resurrection. The similar Babylonian myth of the goddess Ishtar also portrays her descent into the Netherworld and what followed. Researchers noting certain differences between these two epics, note also much similarity.[16]

Fig. 5 Dama del Cerro de los Santos (Gran Dama-Oferente), 2nd century BC, Madrid Archaeological Museum (Photo: author).

The following section depicts the preparations by Inana for her descent into the Netherworld. A clear picture arises of her jewelry set, some pieces of which are given seductive names and thus perhaps refer to the fertility ritual connected with these goddesses.

Inana's descent into the Netherworld

> [14-19]She took the seven divine powers. She collected the divine powers and grasped them in her hand. With the good divine powers, she went on her way. She put a turban, headgear for the open country, on her head. She took a wig for her forehead. She hung small lapis-lazuli beads around her neck.
>
> [20-25]She placed twin egg-shaped beads on her breast. She covered her body with a *pala* dress, the garment of ladyship. She placed mascara which is called "Let a man come, let him come" on her eyes. She pulled the pectoral which is called "Come, man, come" over her breast. She placed a golden ring on her hand. She held the lapis-lazuli measuring rod and measuring line in her hand.
>
> [26-27]Inana travelled towards the underworld. Her minister Nincubura travelled behind her. (In: The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

The reference to the jewelry adorning the goddess' limbs establishes them as divine items in her attire: the crown encircling her head, the earrings, the necklace around her neck, the beads on her breast, the breast jewel calling the man to come, the bracelets, and only then the mention of the dress and cloak. All the noted jewelry here also appears on the women's funerary portrait sculptures at Palmyra.

I argue that it is most plausible that these representations of Palmyrian women wearing rich sets of jewelry reflect the belief of the patron in Ishtar, a major goddess of Palmyra. Ishtar's jewelry was described in the epic of her descent into the Netherworld, which continued the Sumeric epic of Inana entering the Netherworld. In both epics the goddess takes with her the seven divine powers – seven pieces of jewelry – and then hands over one piece after the other at each of the seven gates to the Netherworld. Then, naked and dispossessed of her powers, she dies, only to be resurrected later. In the literature discussing the descent of the goddess to the Netherworld, I found no consideration of the jewelry as such, not of the individual item nor of the whole set.[17] The sculptures of the deceased women of Palmyra, with their rich sets of jewelry, reflect a visual perception that is very similar to the jewelry of Inana or Ishtar described in their descent to the Netherworld.

Furthermore, it is possible that such representation of these women on their tombstones is intended to manifest their journey to the Netherworld and their praying to the goddess to be

resurrected. In other words, this representation of the jewelry on funerary sculptures has a symbolic value and expresses the belief of the deceased in life after death that is parallel to jewelry placed in the tombs, also with the belief in resurrection.

Moreover, this perception of the symbolic significance of sets of jewelry continued to persist in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire, acquiring new meanings in the Byzantine Empire. The images of the dead women, probably expressing identification with the goddesses descending into hell and being resurrected later, seem to have been transferred to the images of the queens and empresses of the eastern part of the empire. These queens all wear sets of jewelry and not only single pieces.

Perceiving of the jewelry as a totality that included items for the head, breast, hands, and feet continued to exist in the East, where it apparently underwent change from a ritual of the goddesses and representations in funerary portraits of the women of Palmyra adorned with jewelry, to representations of the empresses in the eastern Roman Empire, as well as the Byzantine-Christian empresses. It is possible that these sets of jewelry of the goddesses became sets that symbolized the regal status of the queen. Indeed, already in writings describing the Palmyrian Queen Zenobia being conducted as a prisoner to Rome, there is mention of her extensive jewelry.[18]

Among the Roman and Byzantine-Christian empresses, we should note, for example, images on coins of Empress Aelia Eudoxia, consort of Emperor Arcadius. A similar process can be traced in various other examples, for instance among the queens associated with Theodosius in the fifth century, such as Licinia Eudoxia, wife of Valentinian the Third.[19] The depictions of these empresses feature extensive sets of head and neck jewelry, in addition to the figures wearing the fibula that displays their patrician status.

Empress Theodora, too, in her familiar sixth-century representation in the mosaic in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, is wearing extensive neck, breast, and head-covering jewelry in addition to her crown. (Fig. 6) I contended elsewhere that her breast jewelry resembled that of Egyptian royalty, while her head covering appeared Eastern.[20] It is certainly reasonable to assume that Theodora – like Zenobia the queen of Palmyra, who considered herself a descendant of Cleopatra[21] – wished to call to mind the image of Cleopatra, despite her not being a Christian image, and to posit once again the ideal and the uniqueness of the Oriental Empress, compared with the Western perception. In other words, the sets of jewelry confer a sublime value upon the unique status of the queens of the East.

Finally, I avail myself of the type of research currently termed archaeological /anthropological, which studies the extent to which ancient findings of the material culture have

continued to exist into modern times, in order to examine the meaning of their continued existence in the twentieth century.[22]

Moreover, historians of Palmyra and anthropologists have maintained that there is a link between Palmyra and the Yemen through the nomadic Arab tribes that wandered between these two regions already in the first centuries AD, as well as later, when the town was under Islamic rule. Mordechai Narkiss and other scholars of Yemenite jewelry, as well as those of the Eastern Jewish communities, also pointed to the possible influence of Palmyrian on Yemenite jewelry.[23]

Fig. 6 Mosaic panel of the Empress Theodora on the left apse wall of San Vitale Church, Ravenna, 6th century AD.

Connections between Palmyra and North Africa had already existed during the hundreds of years following the establishment of the Phoenician colonies in North Africa. Moreover, various scholars perceive the existence of Berber culture over hundreds of years in North Africa, simultaneously with the Phoenician colonies there, as an autonomous culture[24] that preceded the Roman occupation, and certainly during the period of the Roman Empire.[25] These local cultures also continued to exist under Islamic rule. Various sources inform that Jews settled in these colonies as well as in the Berber settlements in North Africa.

The noted anthropologist Jean Besancenot[26] determined the Berber jewelry in North Africa to be pre-Islamic, and Berber/Moroccan jewelry – mainly in the creation of sets of chains, bracelets, and rings – indeed brings to mind those of the Palmyrian funerary sculpture. (Fig. 7, Fig. 3)

Indeed, in my own research I was able to distinguish that at least one item of jewelry had clearly been introduced from Palmyra to the sets of Berber jewelry and continued to exist also in modern-day twentieth-century Morocco. This finding is supported by the study of a particular item of jewelry whose images appear in the funerary portraits of the Palmyrian women and also in Berber jewelry in present-day Morocco. (Fig. 8, Fig. 4)

Fig. 7 A Moroccan Jewish woman in traditional costume, adorned with an array of chest and head jewelry, bracelets and rings. Tahala, Morocco, 1947. Courtesy, Israel Museum Collection, Jerusalem (Photo: J. Besancenot).

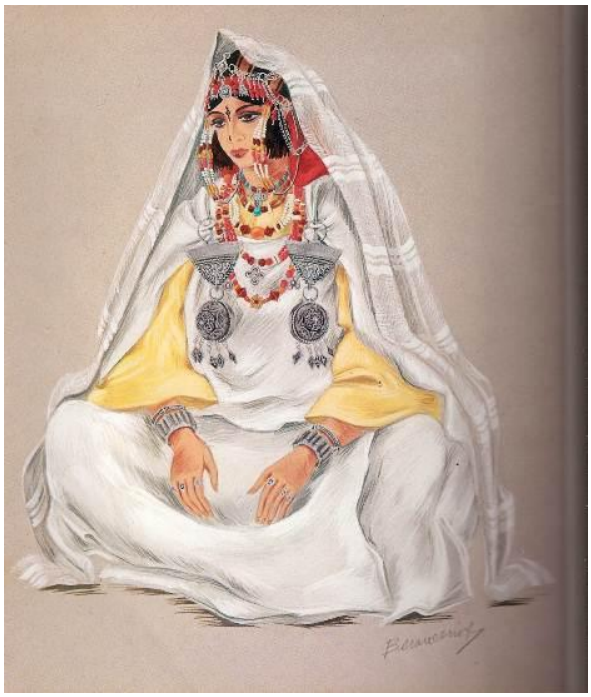

Fig. 8 A drawing of a Moroccan Jewish woman in traditional costume, adorned with a two round ornamental objects on each of her breasts, each hanging on a triangle fibula carried by a chain. In addition she wears an array of chest and head jewelry, bracelets and rings. Tahala, Morocco, 1947.Courtesy, Israel Museum Collection, Jerusalem (Drawing: J. Besancenot).

Several of these Palmyrian funerary portraits depict a piece of jewelry comprising a breast chain incorporating two circles or medallions located next to or on the two breasts. The medallions feature images of men. This item is similar in form to that described in the epic of Inana's descent into the Netherworld:

20-25 *"She placed twin egg-shaped beads on her breast"… "She pulled the pectoral which is called "Come, man, come" over her breast."*[27]

Among the Berbers of North Africa such jewelry acquired a ritual value, symbolizing the traditional roles of women, and is also known in the Maghreb among Jewish women: attached to the chain by two special fibulae are two silver circles, resting on the two breasts. It is reasonable to assume that the item of jewelry described as part of the costume of the goddesses and featuring on the Palmyrian funerary sculptures as part of the ritual of death, reached North Africa and the Jewish communities there as part of the ceremonial costume.

It would thus also seem possible to find a resemblance between the systems of head covering, the necklaces interwoven with chains, and the bracelets from Palmyra, and the Berber jewelry and ceremonial jewelry of Jewish women in North Africa. This resemblance between the jewelry in Palmyra and the sets of jewelry of the empresses of Byzantium, on the one hand, and the appearance of a similar item of jewelry as part of the ceremonial costume of women in the Berber and Jewish communities surviving into modern times, on the other hand, poses a fascinating phenomenon.

* To my most beloved Vered Lev-Kenaan, who introduced me to Inana's descent into the Netherworld.

[1] Henri Seyrig, "Palmyra and the East," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 40, 1–2 (1950): 1–7; Anna Sadurska and Adnan Bounni, *Les sculptures funéraires de Palmyre* (Rome: G. Bretschneider, 1994).

[2] Maura K. Heyn, "Gesture and Identity in the Funerary Art of Palmyra," *American Journal of Archaeology* 114, 4 (October 2010): 631–61; Cynthia Sue Finlayson, "Veil, Turban and Headpiece: Funerary Portraits and Female Status in Palmyra" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1998).

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[8] Judith Lynn Sebesta, *Weavers of Fate: Symbolism in the Costume of Roman Women***,** Harrington Lecture, 42 (Vermillion, SD: College of Arts & Sciences, University of South Dakota, 1994).

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[13] Kaizer, Religious Life.

[14] Javier Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 60; Christides Vassilios, *Religious Syncretism in the Near East: Allat-Athena in Palmyra***,** Analecta Gorgiana 997 (Cordoba: Gorgias Press, 2004),74–79; Michał Gawlikowski, "The Athena of Palmyra," *Archaeologia* (1996): 21–23.

[15] Charles Penglase, Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod (London: Routledge, 1994).

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[17] "Descent of the Goddess Ishtar into the Lower World," in Morris Jastrow, *The Civilization of Babylonia and Assyria: Its Remains, Language, History, Religion, Commerce, Law, Art, and Literature*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott, 1915).
Compare with: **Inannas's Descent Into Netherworld,** translated by James W. Bell, 2004

> Innana abandoned her temples
> And prepare to descend.
>
> In her hands,
> She gathered the seven Mes of office.
> On her head,
> She placed the ***shugurra***, the crown of the steppe;
> And arranged the dark locks of hair across her forehead.
>
> She tied small lapis lazuli beads around her neck
> And a double strand at her breast.
>
> Gold bracelets she slipped on her wrists
> And strapped on breast-shields named,
> 'Come hither, man, come hither.'
>
> She wrapped the robe of queenship around her body
> And daubed her eyes with an ointment of kohl
> Called 'Let him, come, let him, come.'
>
> Taking the lapis measuring rod and line in hand,
> Inanna set out for the Netherworld.

[18] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* Bk. 1, ca. 500 AD. (London: Printed for J. Davis by W. Green and T. Chaplin,1814), (http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/zosimus01_book1.htm). Zosimus' account provides the most through history on the time of Zenobia. Most of what we know about Aurelian's campaign comes from Zosimus; *Historia Augusta*, sections on Aurelian and Zenobia. Translation by David Magie. (http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/home.html); Glanville Downey, "Aurelian's Victory over Zenobia at Immae, A.D. 272," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 81 (1950): 57–68.

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[25] Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, *Rome, la fin de l'art antique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 215–97.

[26] Jean Besancenot, *Bijoux arabes et berbères du Maroc* (Casablanca: Éditions de la Cigogne, 1951).

[27] In: The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (C:\Users\user\Documents\palmyra text\Inana's descent to the nether world translation.mht)**.**