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# APHRODITE AND INANNA: THE *HOMERIC HYMN TO* *APHRODITE* AND SUMERIAN POETRY ON INANNA

By *Kristoffer Maribo Engell Larsen*

**Summary:** This paper examines parallels recently drawn between the depiction of Aphrodite in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* and depictions of the Sumerian goddess Inanna in Sumerian poetry. It is argued that the parallels are unconvincing, and that the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* most likely is not influenced by Sumerian poetry on Inanna.<sup>1</sup>

During the last thirty years a considerable amount of research has been conducted on Near Eastern elements in early Greek poetry and myth. Scholars such as Walter Burkert and Martin West have greatly enhanced our understanding of the way in which early Greek poetry and myth may have been influenced by Near Eastern motifs.<sup>2</sup> However, not all the parallels drawn during the last decades are equally convincing. For this reason, I will in this brief paper examine the relation between the depiction of Aphrodite in the *Homeric Hymn 5*, commonly known as the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, and

- 1 I am grateful to Professor Stephen J. Harrison for reading a draft of this article and for his valuable comments.
- 2 Particularly West 1997; Burkert 1992; 1984.

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certain depictions of the Sumerian love goddess Inanna, from whom Aphrodite is generally thought to originate.<sup>3</sup>

In the *prooimion* of the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, commonly held to have been composed in the latter half of the seventh century BC,<sup>4</sup> the bard sings that Zeus has grown tired of Aphrodite's habit of continuously coupling the gods – including himself! – with mortals and boasting about it afterwards (*Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 45-52). In order to teach his daughter a lesson, Zeus makes Aphrodite desire the young Trojan Anchises, who is tending cattle on the Phrygian Mount Ida.<sup>5</sup> As soon as Aphrodite sees Anchises, she is seized by an overwhelming desire, and she departs for Mount Ida at once (*Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 56-57). Before setting foot on Mount Ida, Aphrodite visits her sanctuary in Paphos on the Western shore of Cyprus (*Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 58-63):

ἐς Κύπρον δ' ἔλθοῦσα θυώδεα νηὸν ἔδυνεν  
 ἐς Πάφον· ἔνθα δέ οἱ τέμενος βωμός τε θυώδης·  
 ἔνθ' ἢ γ' εἰσελθοῦσα θύρας ἐπέθηκε φαεινάς.  
 ἔνθα δέ μιν Χάριτες λούσαν καὶ χρίσαν ἐλαίῳ  
 ἀμβρότῳ, οἷα θεοὺς ἐπενήνοθεν αἰὲν ἔόντας,  
 ἀμβροσίῳ ἔδανῶ, τό ρά οἱ τεθυωμένον ἦεν.

Arrived at Cyprus, she dived into her fragrant temple in Paphos; there were her sanctuary and her fragrant alter. When she had entered there, she closed the shining doors. There the Graces washed her and anointed her with oil, divine oil, of the kind that surrounds the immortal gods, divine, sweet oil, which had already been perfumed.

- 3 On Aphrodite's likely Near Eastern origins see West 2007: 186; 1997: 91; Kirk 1990: 6; Burkert 1977: 238-43; Otto 1929: 116-17, 127; Nilsson 1921: 146-47; Farnell 1896: 618-29.
- 4 Cf. Faulkner 2008: 49; West 2003: 16; Janko 1982: 151, 200. Allen, Halliday & Sikes 1936: 350-51 estimate that the hymn cannot be older than 700 BC.
- 5 *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 53-55: Ἀγρίσειω δ' ἄρα οἱ γλυκὴν ἴμερον ἔμβαλε θυμῶ, / ὅς τὸτ' ἐν ἀκροπόλοισι ὄρεσιν πολυπιδάκου Ἴδης / βουκολέεσκεν βοῦς δέμας ἀθανάτοισιν εὐκῶς. "He cast into her heart a sweet desire for Anchises, / who at the time on the high-ranging mountains of Ida with many springs / was tending cattle, with a stature like the immortals." I use Andrew Faulkner's 2008 edition of the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* throughout. The translations from Greek into English are my own.

Aphrodite's sexual encounter with Anchises which results in the birth of their son Aeneias is well known in early Greek epic.<sup>6</sup> This particular scene has further great similarities with a scene in the *Odyssey*, in which Aphrodite departs for her sanctuary in Paphos after she has been caught deceiving her husband Hephaistos with Ares.<sup>7</sup> Aphrodite's close connection with Cyprus in early Greek epic is furthermore attested by Hesiod's *Theogony*, in which Aphrodite is born as she ascends from the ocean onto the shores of Cyprus (*Th.* 193-95, 199).<sup>8</sup> Finally, Aphrodite is called by the epithet Κύπρις once in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* and five times in the *Iliad*, which further emphasizes her relation with Cyprus.<sup>9</sup> Thus, both Aphrodite's sexual encounter with Anchises and her close connection with Cyprus are well attested in early Greek epic.

Andrew Faulkner has recently argued that there are several parallels between this scene in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* and depictions of the goddess Inanna in Sumerian poetry. Faulkner states that Aphrodite's *toilette* in Paphos and her seduction of Anchises find parallels in a cycle of Sumerian love songs about Inanna and her lover Dumuzi.<sup>10</sup> Barbara Breitenberger draws similar comparisons on the basis of Charles Penglase's study on Greek myths and Mesopotamia.<sup>11</sup> Thirty-eight of these Sumerian love songs about Inanna and Dumuzi have been preserved, dating from ca. 2100-1800 BC.<sup>12</sup> Faulkner specifically compares Aphrodite's *toilette* on Cyprus and her later

6 Cf. Hes. *Th.* 1008-10 and Hom. *Il.* 2.819-21, 5.311-13.

7 Hom. *Od.* 8.362-66: ἡ δ' ἄρα Κύπρον ἴκανε φιλομμειδῆς Ἀφροδίτη, / ἐς Πάφον, ἔνθα τέ οἱ τέμενος βωμός τε θυγείς. / ἔνθα δέ μιν Χάριτες λούσαν καὶ χρίσαν ἐλαίῳ / ἀμβρότῳ, οἷα θεοῦς ἐπενήνοθεν αἰὲν ἔόντας, / ἀμφὶ δὲ εἴματα ἔσσαν ἐπήρατα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι. "And the laughter-loving Aphrodite then came to Cyprus, / to Paphos, where her sanctuary and fragrant temple were. / There the Graces washed her and anointed her with oil / divine oil, of the kind that surrounds the immortal gods, / and dressed her in delightful garments, a wonder to behold."

8 Cf. West 1966: 224: "Aphrodite's 'birth' evidently consists in her emergence on land."

9 Hom. *Il.* 5.330, 5.422, 5.458, 5.760, 5.883; *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 2. Aphrodite is the only god called by the epithet in early Greek epic.

10 Faulkner 2008: 18-19, 144.

11 Breitenberger 2007: 46, 57; Penglase 1994: 169-70.

12 The 27 best preserved songs have been published with critical texts, translations and commentaries by Sefati 1998. The texts are furthermore available in Sumerian and in translation on the University of Oxford's electronic database on Sumerian literature, *The Electronic Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL)* (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>).

seduction of Anchises with the love song about Inanna and Dumuzi, which Yitzchak Sefati entitles *DI CI*,<sup>13</sup> where “the love goddess Inanna bathes and anoints herself with oil as she sets out to seduce the mortal shepherd Dumuzi.”<sup>14</sup>

There are several problems with this comparison. First of all, Inanna does not set out to seduce Dumuzi. The subject of the song, which is divided into four parts, is wedding preparations, and it is in this specific context that Inanna washes and anoints herself. In the first part of the song, an unnamed narrator tells how wishes for wedding presents are being spread through the community (1.1-20). In the second part of the song, the poet relates that Inanna’s mother asks her to wash, anoint and adorn herself so that she can be ready to welcome Dumuzi (2.12-20). In the third and fourth parts of the song, it is told how Dumuzi enters Inanna’s chambers and takes her as his wife. Thus, Inanna does not set out to seduce Dumuzi. It is rather the other way around.

The second problem with the comparison is that Dumuzi is not a mortal shepherd, as both Faulkner and Penglase state.<sup>15</sup> Rather, Dumuzi is a shepherd *god*. Dumuzi’s divine nature appears several places in the song cycle about Inanna and Dumuzi, for instance in verses 11-22 of the song *DI I*, which relates a row between the two lovers.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Inanna and Dumuzi are two equal parties, whereas Aphrodite is a goddess and Anchises a mortal man in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, parallels cannot be drawn between the relationship of Aphrodite and Anchises and that of Inanna and Dumuzi.

Faulkner finds a further parallel between Aphrodite’s sanctuary on Cyprus and Inanna’s “island retreat of Dilmun,”<sup>18</sup> which is mentioned in an

13 The song is translated by Sefati 1998: 286-93 and is also available in translation at *ETCSL* (nr.: 4.08.29).

14 Faulkner 2008: 19.

15 Faulkner 2008: 19; Penglase 1994: 169-70. See also Faulkner 2008: 144 where Dumuzi is called Inanna’s “mortal lover.”

16 The song is translated by Sefati 1998: 196-98. Cf. Black, Cunningham, Robson & Zólyomi 2004: 361, in varying spelling: “Dumuzid, the shepherd god, lover of the goddess Inana and brother of the goddess Gestin-ana.” See also Kramer 1961: 62, 101-3.

17 On the unequal relationship between the goddess Aphrodite and the mortal man Anchises see *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 45-52, 185-90.

18 Faulkner 2008: 19. Cf. *id.*, 144-45 where Dilmun is called Inanna’s “mountain retreat.”

unnamed Sumerian song from the latter half of the second millennium BC.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of the song, which is structured as a monologue by Inanna, the goddess sings about her terrifying talents in warfare. Then she mentions *en passant* that she washes her head and adorns herself with pearls in the mountains of Dilmun:

La ville que j'ai pillée, sa tête (jamais plus) ne se lève,  
le (simple) énoncé de mon ordre sublime  
détruit à tout jamais le pays ennemi.

Dans la fontaine des pays montagneux j'ai remué la boue,  
dans la fontaine du pays montagneux de Tilmoun  
je me suis lavé la tête  
(et) je me suis ornée de pierres *igizangou*.

Moi, la souveraine, quand je crie dans le combat,  
qu'au milieu des montagnes je crie,  
les dieux de la montagne de toutes parts trébuchent.<sup>20</sup>

Inanna does not relate why she is in Dilmun, nor does she tell whether she has any particular connection with the place. From the context it seems that she has first conquered and plundered Dilmun in war. Then she seems to have washed herself in Dilmun's fountains and adorned herself with Dilmun's pearls, before resuming her martial activities in the mountains. Another reading could be that Inanna washes off the dirt and adorns herself with pearls in Dilmun, after she has plundered and raged in the war, and that she after her stay in Dilmun resumes her ravings in the mountains.

The song does not inform us whether Inanna has any particular connection with Dilmun. While Cyprus, as shown above, is frequently mentioned in early Greek epic in relation to Aphrodite, Dilmun is not generally associated with Inanna in Sumerian mythology.<sup>21</sup> In fact, this particular song seems to be the only place in the preserved Sumerian literature, in which

19 The song is most recently translated into French by Labat 1970: 247-50.

20 Labat 1970: 248.

21 Cf. Black, Cunningham, Robson & Zólyomi 2004: 361.

Inanna is associated with Dilmun.<sup>22</sup> I agree with Faulkner that it is tempting to draw a parallel between the island of Cyprus, where Aphrodite adorns herself, and the island of Dilmun, where Inanna adorns herself in this song. But I do not agree that Dilmun can be called Inanna's "island retreat," or that her sole attested stay at Dilmun can be paralleled with Aphrodite's frequent stays in Paphos on Cyprus, where in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* she is washed, anointed and adorned by the Graces, before she sets out to seduce Anchises. Thus, these parallels drawn by Faulkner, Breitenberger and Penglase between the depiction of Aphrodite in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* and depictions of Inanna in Sumerian poetry must in my opinion be regarded as misleading.

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22 By searching in *ETCSL* I have not been able to find any other places in which Inanna's name is mentioned in relation to Dilmun.

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