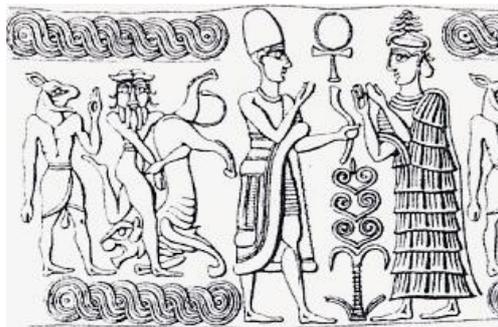


INTRODUCTION

How is it that in Europe and America people live by stories that come from the Middle East? We may be missing intervening European versions that are lost because either not written down, or written on materials that decay, like bark or papyrus. The fact is that all sorts of ancient habits go back to the ancient near east, which is why we feel connected with events there even today, for embedded in our social practices passed down orally is an uninterrupted chain of custom.

So deeply true is the reality of the journey between Life and Death for all humanity that its mystery is one of the everlasting stories coined in different forms throughout ancient and modern history, right up to the present day when even non-Christians celebrate Easter with that particular joy that comes with the ending of the dark days of winter. We have reformulations of the myth from all eras - whether it is about Isis and Osiris, Orpheus and Euridice, Demeter and Persephone, or of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalen - all with a slightly different emphasis and level of message. In the original 3M Sumerian myth, Inanna makes the journey to the Underworld to seek her lover, Tammuz, since his absence has caused all life forms to decline in the world of nature. As she descends she must divest herself, in seven stages¹, of all her dress and accoutrements - such that when she finally reaches her gloomy destination, she is completely naked (depictions of Venus on 2M Syrian cylinder seals show her thus - not to emphasise her fertility, but to allude to this journey). After three days in Nothingness - hanging lifeless like a piece of meat on a hook is the precise description - she revives and brings Tammuz back to Earth, on the way back regaining all



Haematite seal (RS 9.889, 1820-1740BC) found in the 1937 campaign at Ras Shamra in tomb no. LVII under a house at the foot of the acropolis (see Syria XIX pp.227 and 217 fig.9) - Louvre AO19424

¹ In contrast, Osiris is cut into 14 pieces, scattered all over Egypt, which have to be collected by Isis and put together again..

her clothes and jewellery - and life starts all over again as Spring bursts forth. It is at one level a cosmic love story which in the Second Millennium Syria would have been celebrated as the marriage of the Ruler with the Goddess (enacted by a priestess), as so beautifully evoked in the Old Syrian seal above. The petty ruler holding out his boomerang and the interceding goddess/priestess in frilled *kaunakès* pay obeisance to the Ankh symbol for Venus/Life over a Tree of Life. The Mesopotamian group on the left depicts the Enkidu or Gilgamesh figure overcoming the lion, so popular on 3M Mesopotamian seals, here presided over by a Seth or Anubis-like creature in Egyptian kilt of Canaanite type, the scene topped and tailed by two guilloches which in earlier versions consisted of mating snakes.

NEW LIGHT ON EASTER IN ANCIENT SYRIA

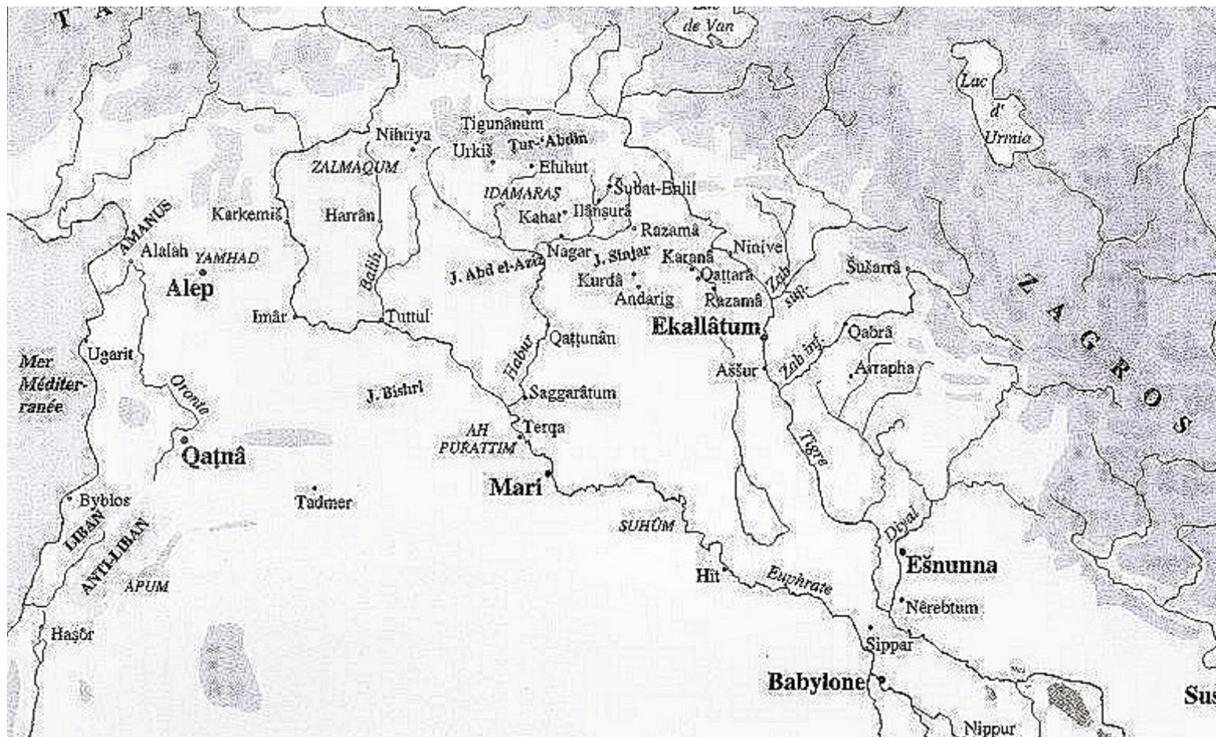
Only comparatively recently have certain cuneiform clay tablets been translated that give an account of how Easter was celebrated at Mari² in second millennium Syria, providing a number of vivid and fascinating precedents that survive even into the current Christian Easter festival - whose very name, even in English, is a reminder that it was originally celebrated in honour of Ištar, before being adapted for Christ! In the Syrian matches between myths, Baal/Jupiter is the equivalent of Tammuz, and Ištar/Venus of his consort, Innana. Knowing the myth immediately throws light on the meanings of the texts and artefacts of the time, and understanding the primacy of this couple's continual Journey back and forth to the Underworld mapping out the shape of the Year, we now attempt to make fuller sense of the newly translated texts describing the ritual for the annual festival of Ištar held at or near Mari in the 2M, given it provided the benchmark for the regulation of the calendar³, crucial for the infrastructure of government. Baal's separate journey and encounters with Mot/Death - at Mari incorporated into the second week of the Ištar Festival - was fully described in [SPECTRA NEWSLETTER 2](#), though parts are repeated here at overlap points.

Other than short references in treaties and correspondence we learn a great deal of new information from the five texts on Mari ritual brought together by Durand and Guichard that spell out fuller details of proceedings at the Ištar Festival, almost certainly dating from the time of Yahdun-Lim. They are damaged and incomplete, but happily their order of events is seen by the authors (on the assessment of their colleague Dominique Charpin) as more or less following on one from the other, and more complementary to each other than duplicative (though there are some overlaps - these help in making the joins). What I have done is to tabulate and timetable below their combined content into what I see as the equivalent of a 'double Easter week', one for Ištar, followed by one for Baal/Dagan. The tabulation is mine, but all the information within it comes from facts revealed by the texts (any misinterpretation is my responsibility).

The first of the two main Mari Ištar Festival texts describes how the statue of Ištar of Irradān/Ekallātum (the key city on the Tigris north of Aššur lying between the Greater and Lesser Zab rivers - see map above - is transported to Mari for the rites, and housed in the Harem for the entire month of the feast thereafter - the ceremonies for its arrival and departure marking the Festival's extreme start and end points. The second main text is associated with the town of Dēr a

² J-M Durand and M Guichard 'Les Rituels de Mari' in *Mémoires de NABU 4 (Florilegium marianum III)* 1997, 19-78

³ See J Cohen's chapter, 'The Amorite Calendar' in his *Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* Bethesda 1993



Detailed map of the Northern zone of the Fertile Crescent at the time of the Amorite Kingdoms -Lafont⁴

few miles outside Mari (not marked on the map) where a key phase of the main Ištar Festival was celebrated (this part of the proceedings often referred to simply as the *Dēritum*). This version of the ritual was more Mesopotamian in character, a key feature involving the recitation of long Sumerian stories and lamentation hymns (*erešemma*) bewailing the destruction of cities in war - as well as lamentations for Tammūz⁵ in his later forms - for which there were specialist singers and other performers to create a backdrop for the utterings of the ecstasies, diviners and astrologers giving predictions about the prospects for the country in the coming year, uttered in the name of Ištar. Durand et al. are not certain from the texts whether both Ištars were concurrently celebrated, or whether one ritual superseded the other over a period of time.

Indirectly related to these, two further texts translated by them describe in surprisingly specific detail the ritual components within the main proceedings - both written for an eponymal month named *šegur-ku/addaru* whose ultimate inspiration the authors think is likely to be Akkadian Tell Asmar/Ešnunna⁶. The first is an account of the *humtūm* ritual concerning respects to be paid to the Goddess as baetyl (Text 5) and the second the *Kišpum* ritual (Text 4) concerning the determination of the start of the month at the New Moon (*biblum*) and days following up to the 7th day, completing the week of the Moon's First Quarter. The *biblum* day was as crucial to the timing of the Ištar Festival as the Paschal Moon is in the Church today for the determining Easter⁷ and was one of the days (Ištar Festival Eve) when it was imperative for the King to be present. It was on the

⁴ B Lafont 'Relations internationales, Alliances et Diplomatie au Temps des Royaumes Amorrites: Essai de Synthèse' in Charpin & Durand (eds) *Amurru 2: Mari, Ebla et les Hourrites: Dix Ans de Travaux: Actes du colloque international Paris Mai 1993* (2 vols) 2001, 213-328

⁵ A tradition maintained in the First Millennium in the Hebrew tradition, reflecting Levantine practice overall.

⁶ All four texts are said by the authors to be presented in the same format with the same overall *facture*, to the extent they must have been written in the same period (Text 3 we need not consider here).

⁷ Ursa Minor could also be used to calculate that date, thus the astronomical link between Venus, Ursa Minor and her sickle.

day of the *gimkūm*, a day or so after the New Moon day (*biblum*), that the *ramūm* for the ancestors was installed, and a donkey killed (in Aleppo that month was called *hi'ārum* - the word for 'donkey' - rather than the more usual month name of *ayyar* and at Ešnunna *kinkūm*). Thus both components of the ancestor rite dovetailed into the *kišpum* ceremony (which made its own sheep sacrifice offering to Šamaš, brother of Ištar) - showing these closely interlinked rites cannot really be separated from each other, despite the distinct purpose of each on its own. A banquet formed part of the ancestor ritual, with the breaking of bread offered to the ancestors by the head of the tribe initiating it (Baruch Margalit⁸ sees a complementarity in the two great feasts held at the start and end of the Festival, considered in the relevant section for the end of the Festival).

ORDER OF EVENTS OF THE IŠTAR FESTIVAL

Having sketched in the overall background we are almost ready to run through the timetable of events as recorded in Texts 4 and 5 describing the Ištar Festival, by using Durand and Guichard's translations and commentary, bearing in mind that the months (given in roman figures) we try to match them to (which could be the Spring months or the Winter months) are based on conflicting records, to be discussed afterwards (these can be left out by the reader if too technical).

The first record is a succinct list from the first year of *Zimrilim's* reign, in essence baldly stating the overall scope of the festival season:

- ✿ Dagan rites were fulfilled at Terqa/Tuttul⁹ 21-x to 27-x (i.e. for one week);
- ✿ then the feast at Dēr 13-xi to 18-xi (for almost another week);, and then
- ✿ the Festival of Ištar would continue at Mari 19-xi to the middle of month xii.

We will see from later commentary that if Month 1 in that era was March, then month viii/8 would be October ; month ix November and x/10 would be December: but if month 1 is the same as our month 1 (January) then month viii is August; month ix September; x October and month xii December . I have provisionally treated the month numbers given in the texts as following the former numbering, fully realising they are open to reallocation - as discussed by Sasson afterwards.

For the Syrian Euphrates region, Durand equates the God Dagan with Enlil and Šalaš (related to the full Moon in divination) with his consort Ninḫursag, sometimes correlated to Gula. Since at times Dagan was represented by a fish, he is on balance more likely to be equated with Ea, but looking at the 3M statues of the couple Abu-Ninḫursag, it could be that Dagan of inland Terqa was a form of El, rather than Enlil, since it works more logically to see Baal as the Levantine form of Enlil (El's son) -often twinned with Reshef/Nergal/Pluto in his Underworld persona.

The second record comes in a cultic calendar for Mari in the Asqudum cache for the end months of the year *starting at the end of month ix/September*. This fuller list from the second half of *Zimrilim's* reign quoted by Durand et al. again gives a broad outline of the order of events against more specific dates and month-numbers (highlighted as **RED-LETTER DATE HEADINGS** in the narrative below) which we can in places speculatively (*not necessarily completely accurately*) fill out with

⁸ A Matter of 'Life' and 'Death': A Study of the Baal-Mot Epic Neukirchen-Vluyn 1980

⁹ Just north of Mari - see map

the detail gained from the descriptions of the salient stages given in the Yahdun-Lim rituals (Durand et al.'s *Text 2 for IŠTAR OF DĒR* and *Text 3 for IŠTAR OF IRRADĀN/EKALLĀTUM*) in the small caps format (vacant days not actually mentioned in the text are presumed, and also listed). These texts are laconic, more like check-lists or brief stage directions for the almost theatrical group enactments of the rites taking place over several days that indicate the Easter period was not only solemn, but also associated with all kinds of entertainment. With still not much to go on, a ritual referred to by one word in these two texts can be filled out by comparison with fuller information in yet further textual sources - including seals - for other cities in other periods, so it is worth bringing them all together in a loose patchwork to build up a fuller picture - as we attempt within the section bounded at each end by a line of stars.

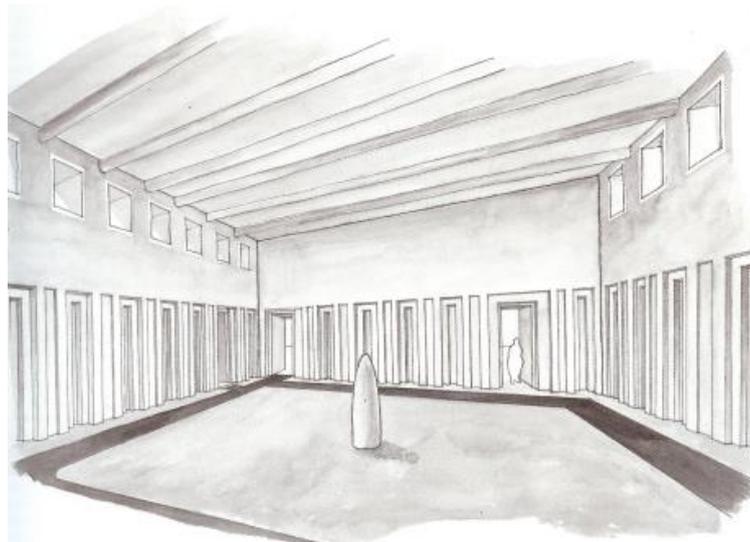
Bear in mind throughout the parallels with the *EVENTS OF HOLY WEEK IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION* (in the order of events below flagged up in the purple subheadings) - which we will sum up in our final paragraph.

DETAILED ORDER OF EVENTS: THE DERITUM AND EKALLATUM RITUALS

RUN-UP TO THE FESTIVAL

MONTH 8 - OCTOBER

Before the festival proper the setting up of one or more standing stones (baetyls - c.f. Hebrew *maššebot*) to honour Ištar had to be arranged, and their transportation ordered from their home locality. This means the Bedouin version of the Ištar Festival coinciding with the Mesopotamian Ištar Festival (documented for Ebla and Emar¹⁰) was incorporated into the Mari ceremony at the very start (hence the relevance of the *humṭum* ceremony (Text 5) for raising the baetyl). Indeed, the Mari palace itself had its own standing stone in the temple courtyard in honour of Ištar (now preserved in the gardens of the Damascus Museum). Oren (see *fn 24*) found traces of *maššebot* at



Top half of the monolith found in the Courtyard of the Temple to Ištar at Mari¹¹ (left), and reconstruction of its positioning - from Margueron¹² figs 252 and 231

¹⁰ (details given in Durand et al. *ibid.* p.36)

¹¹ A Parrot 'Excavations at Mari' Syria XXI 1954 156-7

¹² Jean-Claude Margueron *Mari: Métropole de l'Euphrate au III^e et au début du II^e millénaire avant J-C* Paris 2004

the entrance to the 1M temple at Tell Haror to the west, showing how closely the 1M Temple of Solomon itself (built by Hiram of Tyre) would later have adhered to that tradition by formalizing them into the two huge entrance columns, in Kabbalistic terminology named Ruth on the female side and Boaz on the male side, doubtless heirs to the pair of baetyls in 2M temples representing not only Ištar on one side, but also Baal on the other, as complementary *sikkanāt*.

**30-VIII LAST DAY OF THE MONTH: ARRIVAL OF IŠTAR AT MARI ON THE LAST DAY OF THE NEOMENIA
(EQUIVALENT TO THE FIRST(FEMALE GODDESS) GOOD FRIDAY)**

One can imagine the arrival of the statue of Ištar of Irradān as similar to the parading of the Virgin Mary's statue at religious festivals in the Catholic world today, and that raising her up for the *darshan* (a Hindu term for the presentation of a statue for adoration by worshippers) would have been akin to her rising up onto the mountain, facing out frontally and looking directly at the assembly, as depicted on the seal below (in the *Dēritum* ritual she is described as *Nin-igi-zi-bara* - Lady of direct/just gaze), called thus in Tuttul where possibly under this name she was the consort of its God, Dagan (rather than his grand-daughter as previously thought). Once the statue has arrived at Mari, the text states she is to be offered an evening meal of cereal flours (*mašhatum* and *sasqum*) mixed into a paste with water, given water to drink, and ritually washed by the high priest. The king enrobes and stands holding his sceptre before her, while a rattling tambourine initiates the singing of the *erešemma* for Enlil/Baal as if sung by Ištar herself (during which the King stands, as her servant). Attendants and musicians enter and the female prophetess, or ecstatic, may utter divinations if in the mood (the musicians can be asked to leave if she loses concentration). Further temple officials honour Šamaš, then Ištar; the king having now taken off his robe follows suit, libating to Samas first, then to Istar, accompanied by choral singing. The general meal (presumably by the human officiants) then follows. This is the first feast of the Festival, complementary, Margalit (*ibid.*) believes to the feast that closes it at the end.

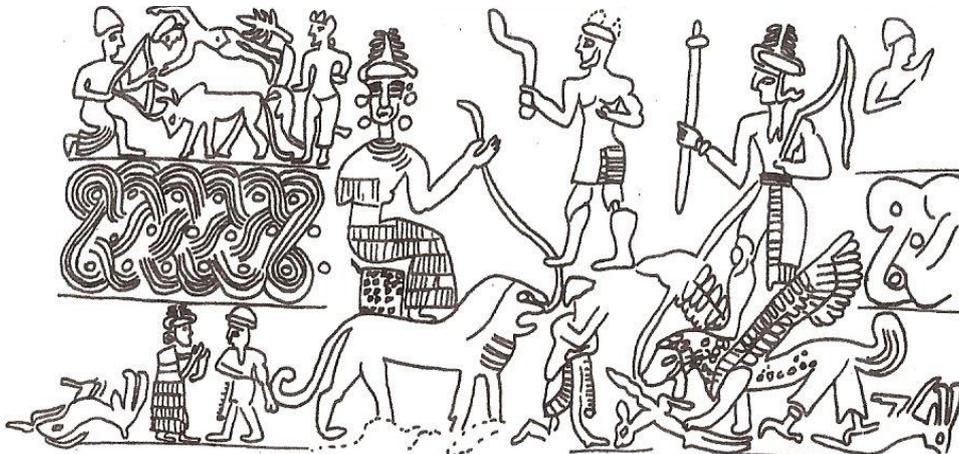
Sacrifices to the dead (traditionally undertaken during the dark of the Moon during the Neomenia) are made on this day, for Mari particularly associated at the time with Dagan of Terqa, to whom only dead meat offerings (*pagra'u*) were made. The ancestor ceremonies also involved the erection of stones as a form of tent-like cenotaph (the *rāmum*) for the ancestor rites where the memory of former kings and even the ancestors of newly federated vassals were all invoked. Hence the relevance of the *kišpum* ceremony immediately following (Text 4) to spot the New Moon, ending the neomenia darkness of the Moon (pigeons, so closely associated with the Goddess) are mentioned in other texts as used to indicate the arrival of the moon). Interesting to note is that the document from Alalakh describing the washing of the female donkey ('donkey of the Goddess' is an alternative translation) in honour of Šalaš is also dated for the equivalent of 30-VIII: so its absorption into the Ištar Festival at the ancestor commemoration stage is a natural dovetail.

**1-IX FIRST DAY OF THE NEW MONTH: FESTIVAL OF IŠTAR BEGINS MONTH OF NOVEMBER
(THE BEGINNING OF IŠTAR'S JOURNEY TO THE UNDERWORLD)**

The day begins early with a ritual cleansing of the temple before sunrise, in which the king, rising early, takes part. The next part of the ceremony takes place inside the palace (Durand likes to

imagine it happening in the *E-ištar*, the Court of Ištar (Room 132), and all the Palace staff are participants, from the top to the very lowest. Precise instructions are given about where each group is to stand in the congregation, including not only cleaners or personal servants such as hairdressers and barbers, but also all types of craftsmen who fashion artefacts from raw materials such as metals, wood, clay, paint and woven textiles. Of course, above these were all the court officials and administrators, and different branches of the temple staff from priests to diviners, singers and musicians, all playing an active part in the gathering - and its processions before and after. It gave an opportunity for all these people, invisible to the outside world, to stand up and be counted as belonging to the King's retinue and his palace community. Indeed, on his accession Zimrilim is recorded as having demanded a complete audit of all palace staff, however lowly, requiring each one of them to renew their vows to him as the new king.

Whilst the assembly might eat take part in a feast, its purpose was to reflect the actual sacrifice¹³ being made to the Goddess, as this audience watches the miming of a meal¹⁴ offering to Ištar made by the professional *ākilum* who eats the Goddess's meal on her behalf with exaggerated eating movements of the face -as if she presides over the banquet, Durand believes. This is accompanied by what we can only characterize as a circus show of fire-eaters, jugglers, acrobats, wrestlers and sword-swallowers, whilst banners with symbols of the goddess were waved, accompanied by dancers and music. (It is at this point in the proceedings that I believe in Western Syria bordering on Anatolia - in cities such as Ebla and Alalakh - the bull-leaping spectacle was a local variation of such entertainments (Paulo Matthiae points out they were held at Ebla in honour of Ištar).



Old Syrian seal in the old-fashioned Mesopotamian style (Safadi¹⁵ no. 126), once in the Arndt Collection in the Munich Münzsammlung, original now lost. It shows Ištar on her lion, Baal on an eagle-winged and back-taloned lion attacking doe and goat, with Reshef/Nergal between: note also the bull-leaping scene

There is even a line describing the cleaners having a moment to clean up the mess before the show continues. There are descriptions of certain people changing costumes (which may correspond to the Ištar ritual translated by Groneberg¹⁶ where men and women exchange dress). During the

¹³ Durand points out that the word used for sacrifice, *nīqum*, usually has the connotation of bloodshed, or revenge - and in the ritual to Ištar given by Groneberg (ibid.) blood spread on the throne dais is described.

¹⁴ This is an example where Durand is not sure whether this is a different meal for a different day - or the same as the one described in the Irradan text for the day before.

¹⁵ Hicham El-Safadi 'Die Entstehung der Syrischen Glyptik und Ihre Entwicklung in der Zeit von Zimrilim bis Ammitaqumma' UV VI 313-

¹⁶ B Groneberge 'Ein Ritual an Ištar' M.A.R.I. 8 1997 291-303

proceedings many different libations of oil and water are made on the ground and to the statues of both Shamash and Ištar - by different ranks of clergy and the king himself.

2-IX SECOND DAY OF THE JOURNEY: FESTIVAL OF IŠTAR CONTINUES

(EQUIVALENT TO EASTER SATURDAY)

Nothing specific is described for this day in Zimrilim's list, but if comparable to Easter Saturday, this is a day of silence and preparation comparable to the dark of the Moon, when the God(dess) is still in the Underworld and uncontactable, but in the process turning round to make Her way back.

3-IX THIRD DAY OF THE JOURNEY FESTIVAL OF IŠTAR CONTINUES

(EQUIVALENT TO EASTER SUNDAY)

Again, the third day is not given a date in the Zimrilim list, but if roughly equivalent to Easter Sunday, then it is the day Ištar starts to return from the Underworld, equivalent in Christian mythopoeia to the Resurrection of Christ from the Dead, but not made as much of in comparison with the Return of Baal from the Dead in the reiteration of the Journey from the male God's viewpoint a week later which, as we will see below, ends in the great feast of the last day of the entire Festival.

4-IX: IŠTAR (HER STATUE) IS MOVED TO THE MARI PALACE HAREM

(EQUIVALENT TO EASTER MONDAY)

This evidently happened once the three-day Journey to the Underworld was deemed to be over, Ištar's time there described in the original myth as lasting three days. Now the journey is over, her statue moves aside, as it were, in readiness for the next phase of the festival.

5-IX: THE PRESENCE OF IŠTAR (HER STATUE) IN THE MARI PALACE IS NOTED

Ištar's change of abode from temple courtyard to harem is a definite and important stage of the Ištar ritual, and her on-going presence is specifically listed on this and the next day as prelude to the story of Baal's Descent.

6-IX THE PRESENCE OF IŠTAR (HER STATUE) IN THE MARI PALACE IS AGAIN NOTED

The presence of Ištar in the palace is specifically noted for the 5th and 6th days of the Festival. These two days are neutral days, which we could consider as the pause before the reiteration of the Journey to the Underworld in the second half of the fortnight - this time by her consort, Baal/Nergal, which in myth is much more violent and dramatic, with the presence of Ištar in the background implicitly required (I add the same Act numbers to the Easter equivalent headings (as originally used by Margalit) for Baal's story in [Spectra Newsletter 2](#).)

7-IX: THE CHARIOT OF NERGAL (AMŪM) IS LED OUT IN PROCESSION ON THE 7TH DAY OF THE FESTIVAL *(ACT I, EQUIVALENT TO THE SECOND, MALE GOD GOOD FRIDAY)*

Nergal's feast was a holy day not local to Mari which after attempts to displace it, was merged into the main Festival because locally popular, and crucial to insert since associated with the male side of the Journey to the Underworld. In the context of the Festival's proceedings I will spell out only the key stages of the story¹⁷ (with some repetition) as given in full in [SPECTRA NEWSLETTER 2](#) which

¹⁷ I have not filled in the corresponding details for Ištar's Journey to the Underworld under the first days of the Festival, as its stages are common knowledge and not described in the Mari texts (I recommend William Sladek's translation).

would have been at the back of the minds of participants over the two to three days following the entry of the chariot of Nergal/Baal (note how it is an aniconic chariot that represents the God, rather than a statue). We do not have an account of actual rituals involved, so the matching of known text to dating can only be counted as a series of rough approximations.

In the Ištar ritual texts we are using as our frame of reference, nothing is listed for the 8th and 9th days of the month, but these blank days are implicitly the darkness in space and time during which Baal now starts to go through many vicissitudes in his struggle to get free of Mot. This second three-day block in the Festival can be thought of as allowing for Baal/Nergal's journey to be commemorated at the palace of Mari- in mind if not in deed - just as Ištar's is, in a second period of what Gray calls 'temporary suspension of order' that twins with the first one presided over by Ištar, already played out once in the first block of three days.

8-IX SECOND DAY OF BAAL/NERGAL'S JOURNEY

(ACT II: EQUIVALENT TO EASTER SATURDAY)

Despite 'the day turning to darkness' at what Margalit deems the start of the Second Act, though Baal has already started to lose power after being bitten, in a vain attempt to maintain his rule over the Gods, he relents, stating he will pay tribute to Mot. He sees it is now his destiny to descend to the 'twin hills at the edge of Earth and 'be counted among the descenders to ... Mot's city' at the 'bottom of the Earth'. Meanwhile, up on Earth the lament goes up for Baal, a section of the story well-known in its annual re-enactment all over the Middle East, led by Ištar herself at the Festival of Ištar in her part of the Festival.

What we do firmly know about staging of the Festival overall is that in the first six days, the bewailing of Baal's loss by Ištar forms a central part of the event. In the Ugaritic version of the story, summing up the bond between Baal and *Anat* in only a few lines, in a rare moment of stasis we see them at a juncture in the story where Yam is conquered, and Mot yet to come. Almost as an ominous prelude to what will then unfold, Baal enthroned contemplates everything under his purview as Anat puts on her coral necklace and gets ready, at this point in the story, to sing, not in sorrow for her lost love, but in praise of his divine looks. The authors refer to T J Meek's idea¹⁸ that the songs in the Bible's Song of Songs 'originated in the Tammuz cult - in its Palestinian manifestation', being the liturgical reason for the Jewish tradition of reading the Canticles at Passover/Easter. They compare the two texts, pointing out that love songs of this period in praise of the male are rare, a strong clue to their original ritual nature in association with the cult of Tammuz and Ištar (the much earlier Inanna myth describes his coral-red clothing as he plays a lapis lazuli flute whose haunting notes express her yearning).

What follows the throne scene emerged from a text analysed by John Gray¹⁹ spelling out the nature of Baal's own journey to the Underworld during the saga of his two battles with Mot, and portraying lesser-known aspects of the Baal myth written down separately from the main body of the story's central events. The text concerns the revenge taken on Baal - following seven years of successful

¹⁸ 'The Song of Songs and the Fertility Cult' in *The Song of Songs* ed. W H Schoff Philadelphia 1924, 48-79

¹⁹ 'Baal's Atonement' *UF* III 1971 62-70

rule after an initial victory over Mot - by the 'Devourers and Renders', demonic bulls with humps and bull-faces like Baal himself, intent on tearing him to pieces and pulling out his eye (a direct parallel to Seth pulling out the Eye of Horus, amptjer primordial story about the struggle between Chaos and Cosmos). Baal troes to hunt them down but is felled like a dead bull by these vengeful predators and sentenced by his own father, El, to seven years in the Kingdom of Death - at which point 'The land ran headlong into waste: the watercourses of the fields were parched', with the same association between Mot and the desert as made in Egypt between Seth and the *deshret*.

9-IX THIRD DAY OF BAAL/NERGAL'S JOURNEY

(ACT III: EQUIVALENT TO EASTER SUNDAY)

In Dantesque terms, where before Baal was in Purgatory, now he has gone to Hell proper, but as the right time of the Year arrives, Baal comes to life with the spring rains as the seeds sown in the furrows start to sprout. Lament turns to praise and thanksgiving at his return.

Coming back to continuity of tradition in Israel, Meek suggests in lines in the *Song of Songs* such as

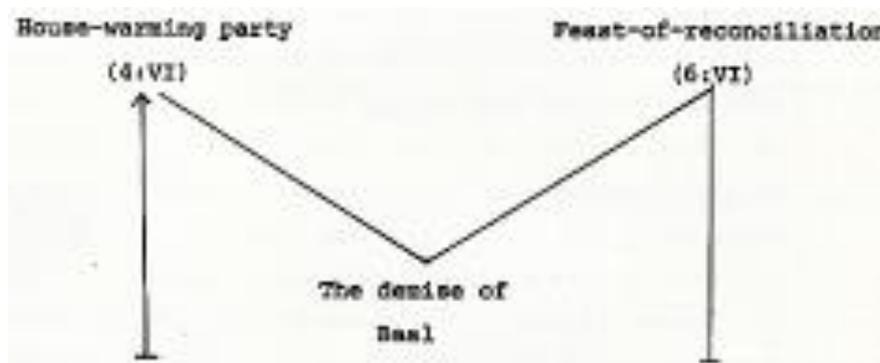
Arise, my love, and come away; for lo, the winter is past;
The rain is over and gone: the flowers appear on the earth. (*Canticles* 2, 10/11)

we are looking at a song in remembrance and thanks for precisely this moment, when Earth is comes to life again on the return of Baal.

10-IX: ALL THE GODS ATTEND THE PALACE [AS THE IŠTAR FESTIVAL DRAWS TO A CLOSE]

(EQUIVALENT TO EASTER MONDAY)

The return of the assembly of Gods on the last day of the Ištar Festival overall dovetails perfectly with the last scene in the grand finale of the Baal story as presented by Margalit - when finally all wrongs are put to right. Baal *Redivitus* bludgeons the 'arrogant' and the 'creeps' who have gathered in his absence and takes on his final battle with Mot, 'eyes burning like coals' after he has unsuccessfully tried to sit on Baal's throne himself. Baal now has the strength to overcome Death, and 'they butt like buffaloes'. Seven years later Mot still has the nerve to show up again and complain about his treatment, saying he couldn't help his part in the plan, ordained by El.



Ill.7- 1 Margalit's diagram for the symmetry of the two feasts.

Finally the wine of reconciliation is drunk, and the Gods come back as Baal reascends his rightful throne, 'chair of his dominion'. The second feast closing off the Festival proper mirrors the complementarity of the two feasts at the beginning and end of the story which Margalit (Illustrated

above) sees as the frame for the rise and fall of Baal, and which we could see as coinciding with the beginning and end points of the overarching Ištar rites.

The ten-to-eleven day period covered by the Ištar Festival marks precisely the shortfall between lunar and solar calendars and is what we could call ‘the Babylonian New Year measure’ within the Ištar Festival. The mention of all the Gods as present for, we could say, the tenth to eleventh mornings marks the end of the Ištar Rites proper in a final crescendo, being the second-last item mentioned in the Ištar Festival programme we are using as our guide, denoting a final calm pause for the resetting of the calendar to Day Zero and the return to normal life in the coming year.

The first line readable from the Dēritum ritual text after a broken-off piece at the beginning describes the installation of the Goddess’ bed on which the king is allowed to lie, implying, as Durand says, an impending sacred marriage which we only know about fully from Mesopotamian practice but not described any further in the Mari Ištar Festival texts. The second Ištar ritual text of Durand and Guichard has a colophon with instructions to the king about the specially made heavy woollen cloak he should wear at the event and how he should behave, not simply at the private rituals linked to the sacred marriage, but also at the public “Durbar” where he would need to display himself before the assembly of the country’s regional representatives, at the time all the Gods themselves are reassembled.

30-IX: IŠTAR LEAVES MARI

Although long over, this is the final date given for the Festival in the text, and the final end-point in its order of events, revealing that the visiting statue of Ištar of Ekallātum remained in Mari for a full calendar month - in other words until the following neomenia, no doubt determined by another *kišpum* ceremony.

PURPOSE OF THE IŠTAR FESTIVAL

Heralding the First Millennium Now *Rūz* celebrations at Persepolis in Achaemenid times, already in the Second Millennium at Mari there were several reasons for holding the Ištar festival, which was the key religious and administrative event of the year. Firstly, it had an astronomical basis, to resynchronise the calendar with the natural seasons - in the name of both Shamash and Ištar/Venus, planetary markers of the New Year along with fine-tuning by the Moon (even more so given intercalation in the early stages had been neglected at Mari - see below). It also gave the opportunity for an overall social audit whereby vassals were reminded of their oaths of fealty, and the king took the opportunity to assign new offices. Finally, it had a practical material and economic basis as the time when tribute in kind was brought in by vassals for the government coffers, whether as farm produce, raw materials, artefacts or textiles. Overall, at the highest level the Festival celebrated the myth of Inanna and Tammuz, in terms of its contemporary variation of Ištar and Baal - a myth the Kingdom lived by, germane to the rise and fall of the Seasons of the Year on which the economy of the kingdom relied. On its final day, all rites of thanks and propitiation were ratified by the full Pantheon of Gods with Ištar and her consort at their head,

because of the astronomical prominence of Jupiter and Venus along with Sun and Moon in running the calendar.

ACTUAL CALENDRIAL TIMING

To cope with the ambiguities of what time of year the Festival was held, in what follows we simply need to bear in mind the two-month discrepancy spotted by both Durand (ibid. p.30) and Charpin before intercalation during the reign of Zimrilim put his predecessor's counting of the calendar back on an even keel.

Sasson²⁰ writes '... the festivities for Ištar during the year 'Hatta' took place in "the king's garden" during the first two days of the 9th month We know that festivities in honor of Nergal/Reshef followed those of Ištar. As a rule of thumb we might think that the early days of the first week of *Līiatum* were dedicated to Ištar, while the last ones were consecrated to Nergal'. But elsewhere he reckons that although the festival might have taken place in the first month of the Mari calendar, *Līiatum* (April-May), he shows from correspondence how orders for foodstuffs began in January/February well in advance of the feast. Annually at the Feast of Ištar, at some point between the Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox, all vassals would have been required to attend and renew their oaths with great ceremony before the Great King, bringing produce and tribute in the guise of gifts as exchange for the privileges and favours granted by their overlord. We must try to establish the timing of the event more certainly if we can.

Linked to the *kišpum* ceremony is an interesting letter to King Zimrilim himself - as guardian of some kind of formula or table for New Moon computation. Surviving from the office of the high official Yasīm-Sumū, who needed to calculate in advance the likely new moon date for the start of the *Dērītum*, it runs as follows:

La lune est arrive le 2, ce qui est plus que la normale! Le jour où j'envoie cette tablette de moi, c'est à Mari le 3 courant du mois. Il faudrait que mon Seigneur m'envoie le comput qui'il garde en sa possession afin que je fasse le décompte des jours pour les sacrifices de Dērītum' (Durand LAPO 18/981)

The fact that this letter is later, from Zimrilim's reign, leads us to an important caveat in our presentation of the information given in Durand and Guichard's Texts 2-5: as already hinted, we do have conflicting information about when this festival was held, just as in the case of Achaemenid Persepolis (where it is still not absolutely clear whether this was a Winter Solstice or Spring Equinox Festival). Thus Sasson says it was held mainly during the month of *Līiatum*, corresponding to our

MONTH NO. AND NAME	EQUIVALENT ZODIAC MONTH AND ROUGH MONTH END DATE	EQUIVALENT ZODIAC MONTH UNDER ZIMRILIM
INTERCALATION POINT *		
I: Uraḫum	II 21 MAY	
II: Malkānum	☾ 21 JUNE	
III: Laḫum	♋ 21 JULY	

²⁰ Jack Sasson in 'The Calendar and Festivals of Mari during the Reign of Zimri-Lim' in Powell & Sack (eds) *Studies in Honor of Tom B. Jones* 1979

IV: Abum	♄ 21 AUGUST	VIII
V: Ḫibirtum <i>Intercalated 2nd Ḫibirtum if needed</i>	♅ 21 SEPTEMBER	IX
INTERCALATION POINT *		
VI: ḏIGIKUR	♆ 21 OCTOBER	X
VII: Kinūnum	♇ 21 NOVEMBER	
VIII: ḏDAGAN	♈ 21 DECEMBER	
IX: Līliatum	♉ 21 JANUARY	
X: Bēlet-bīri	♊ 21 FEBRUARY	
XI: Kiskissum	♋ 21 MARCH	
XII: Ebūrum <i>Intercalated 2nd Ebūrum</i>	♌ 21 APRIL	

III.7- 2 Tabulation of the Mari months as given by Sasson, contrasted with assignment of Ištar Festival month numbers (viii, ix and x) given by Durand and Guichard (ibid.)

January/February, whilst Durand²¹'s translated documents point to it being held in month X²², corresponding to the run-up to Winter Solstice in November/December. But Durand himself points out that there were discrepancies of two to three months in the Mari calendar at the changeover to Zimrilim's reign which took some drastic intercalation to iron out in coming years in order to get the months to correspond again to the season they were meant to mark - a well-known problem in the history of the regulated calendar. The table above gives the Mari months as tabulated by Sasson (*ibid.*) with their roughly equivalent zodiac months in relation to present dates - Durand and Guichard's suggested month numbering (just for the Ištar Festival season) is laid against them in the third column. The two-month dislocation between the two is confirmed, but still leaves us uncertain about precisely in which season it was celebrated - but Durand and Guichard (*ibid.*) bring in two useful mentions in the official correspondence referring to its taking place *in the winter*, emphatically worth noting.



Baal and Ištar mutually acknowledge their Journeys to the Underworld - (PierPointMorCat no. 967)

²¹ J-M Durand (ed. & trsl.) Documents Épistolaires du Palais de Mari (3 vols) 2000-2002 = Litteratures Anciennes du Proche-Orient [LAPO] Vols 16/17/18

²² LAPO 18 124-9

The 30th of month viii is reckoned by Durand to be October while (from the table above) Sasson would put it at the neomenia of 19-20 December at the close of the month of Dagan (we have just referred to two mentions about the Festival of Ištar taking place during the winter) on the eve of the start of *Liliātum*, as announced by the new crescent moon. If in fact the month numbers are wrongly assigned, and we are talking of the Festival taking place to correspond to the Old Babylonian New Year at the Spring Equinox, as is mentioned for the Festival of Ištar once in the reign of Yasmah-Addu, then we could just as well be talking about its starting point at the turn of March into April at the Spring Equinox which fits the season better. For Persepolis there is a similar gap, from conflicting evidence, between the two possibilities, and we bear these uncertainties in mind in suspended animation against the day they can be resolved.

Just as in the West at Christmas/New Year two successive festivals follow each other, taking up 11 days also, so it seems to have been for the Mari Ištar Festival. It had long been customary during the dark of the Moon of the last Neomenia of the Year for the Bedouin under the aegis of Dagan to honour the spirits of their ancestors²³ - part of an unbroken tradition going back to Neolithic times and marked by the erection of a tent-like structure (*ramūm*) supported by standing stones and dead meat (*pagrā'u*) offerings made at the cult centre (still today Easter is connected with both Death and Resurrection). This was closely bound up with the *kišpum* ceremony to determine the end of the neomenia at the rising of the New Moon signalling the first day of the new month and at New Year marking the start of the main 10-11-day long celebration of the New Year under the auspices of Ištar - as herself or under her many local names.

SYNCRETISM OF THE MARI IŠTAR FESTIVAL

Interestingly in North-West Syria, a donkey sacrifice was performed around the same season - seemingly linked to these two ceremonies. We have on record known instances of such sacrifices addressed to Hadad at Aleppo, Ugarit and Emar, but the example from Alalakh of the king's lustration (washing) of 'the female donkey of Šalaš/Ninḫursag' (in other words, Ištar) leaves the animal alive, perhaps because female. This Bedouin ritual was enacted specifically to seal bonds of consanguinity, not only with one's own relatives, but more especially with allies made at oath-taking ceremonies, thereby locking them into their own network of ancestors. In *Catalogue C* we describe how donkey ritual was much favoured in West Syria, though recently it has been attested as far south as Tell Haror by Eliezer Oren²⁴, and as far north-east as Tell Brak by Roger Matthews²⁵.

Everything we can glean about what went on before, during and after the Ištar Festival reveals how cleverly a second millennium-type government like Mari - although underpinned by mainline Mesopotamian mythology - because now closely associated on many fronts with vassals in the Syrian hinterland made syncretic insertions to take into account their nomadic vassals' differing cultures,

²³ Indeed, it appears every month a minor celebration of the ancestors took place during the dark of the Moon until the new crescent rose.

²⁴ In his address to the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society on 23 January 2012, he showed from his 2011 excavation in the courtyard just outside its Temple the remains of a buried female donkey and foal, and established from a fallen wall that it must have been three stories high, and cube-shaped like the Ka'aba of Mecca (a late form of Canaanite temple - itself standing on the site of former stone circle).

²⁵ In a lecture to the British School of Archaeology in Iraq on 23 March 2012 he also described a donkey sacrifice of this period in the temple context of Tell Brak - this talk in honour of Rachel Maxwell-Hyslop will be summarised in the 2012 volume of its journal, Iraq.

bolting on or merging competing cults rather than suppressing coincidental local holy days. For instance, Durand et al. suppose that the Dēr focus of the Ištar Festival must have had something to do with its location in Bensim'alite heartland - a situation where it was diplomatic not to try to change such long-held festivals - or even move its location -hence meld it into the overall proceedings. So the overriding New Year Ištar programme absorbed in due order already existing Dagan and Nergal cults, as well as local forms of Ištar worship in surrounding towns, amongst them Ištar of Nagar/Nineveh (specifically mentioned as represented by a standing stone).

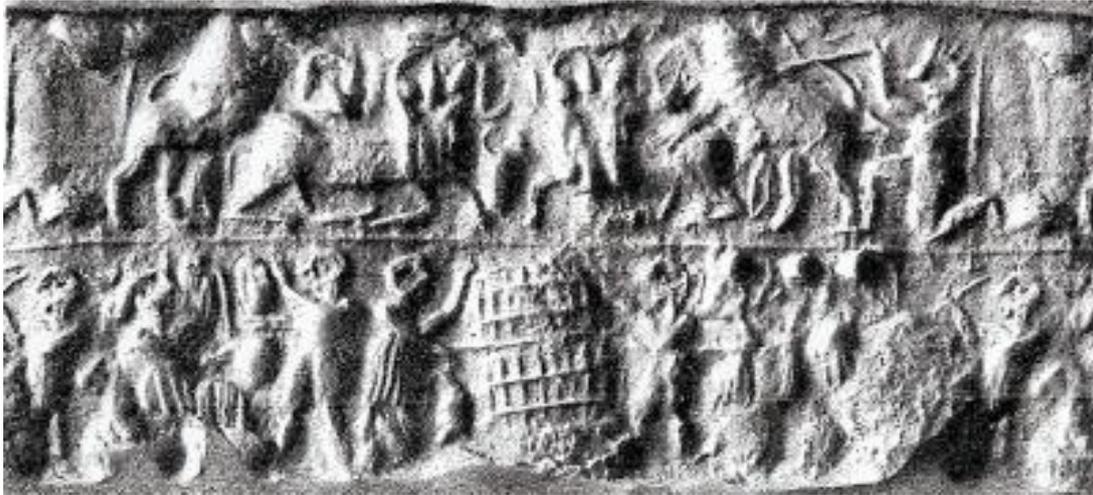
As sketched out earlier, evidence for the Feast of Ištar being celebrated at the Winter Solstice comes from Sasson (*ibid.*) who cites the record of such a celebration for the Zimrilim Year 'Benjaminites I' on 3 *Līiatum*. However, he also cites M.Birot's evidence for its taking place in the month of *Kiskissum*, which is when the New Year was canonically celebrated in Mesopotamia - at the Spring Equinox - when the end of month XII was the point at which an intercalary month would be inserted if required, closer to the numbering given in the two main texts we have relied on. Sasson notes that the opportunity also came in the Mari calendar to insert an intercalary month halfway through the year (as indicated in the table) but before, rather than after, month VI (around the Autumn Equinox). He also noticed that ancestor ceremonies in the run-up to the *kišpum* - which in Babylon mostly seem to have taken place around *Abum* (month IV) - in Mari seems from the records to have been marked almost every month, which makes more sense if we take Durand's interpretation of the ceremony as a New Moon protocol to establish the start of any month. As Durand et al. (*ibid.*) conclude, whilst the documentary evidence they translate give instructions about what was to happen in the rituals comes from the preceding reign of Yahdun-Lim, it is the later information we have about the Festival from Year 1 of *Zimrilim's* reign (and again from correspondence near the end of his reign) that provides calendrical dates for its progression - so we cannot match up these two sorts of information in a hard and fast form. However, I trust we have at least attempted some rough linkages between known timings and the ritual texts to breathe a level of actuality to the facts given on the tablets.

EARLIER PRECEDENTS FOR THE IŠTAR FESTIVAL IN THE DIYALA

What went on at Mari had earlier precedents in Sumer, which I suggest can be seen in visual form on the Early Dynastic II sealing below from Tell Asmar (like Ekallātum, also in the Diyala region). Many 2M seals involve the divine couple Baal-Ištar (whose story in the following millennium is replaced only in name-change by Venus and Adonis or Artemis and Endymion in more condensed form) and involving the iconography of their representative animals, the lioness and bull. The limestone EDII seal from Tell Asmar²⁶ below deserves a closer look as possibly illustrating this event. On the top register are two lion and prey groups. The human-headed bulls, usually taken to represent the mountains of the East, are heraldically placed either side of a Scorpion, Sign of the Autumn Equinox. The catalogue entry says a Moon crescent floats in the sky (difficult to see). Following the convention so common on ED Uruk Stance seals a hunter enters the fray, kneeling to

²⁶ Frankfort SCSCat.758, according to the catalogue entry found West of zone E 22:1 of the site

spear the lion on the right - something to do with pinpointing a particular date in time. Behind him is a space left blank for an inscription.



Ill.7- 3 Tell Asmar - Henri Frankfort SCS seal no. 758

The lower register is unusual in depicting on the left what at first glance looks like a horned, possibly bearded, King or God on an animal throne, flanked by attendants and a beer pot with straw, watching a procession of people approaching a ziggurat. Frankfort's Catalogue of Diyala seals entry says the seated figure is measuring a plano-convex brick held up to him by a naked builder priest and that the two figures either side of the ziggurat are adding bricks to it, but this interpretation is too far-fetched, since the person before the enthroned figure is more likely to be making a libation, and the pair either side of the ziggurat lift their hands to heaven, a gesture, we know, of calling up the presence of God or Goddesses as witness. The procession of people coming in from the right could equally well be involved in a ritual celebrating an astronomical event related to the ziggurat's function (they seem to be carrying baskets on their heads, not necessarily with bricks in them, but offerings of all kinds). Given the lion attacks feature so prominently on the top row, rather like a heading for a poster, I believe the scene shows the enactment of a key calendrical moment such as the New Year celebration (one and the same as the Ištar Festival itself). We could thus be looking at a conflated image of the ceremonies just analysed above for the Mari Ištar Festival programme, and in fact a different text (from Uruk this time) gives other details of a section of the Ištar Festival, translated by Sylvie Lackenbacher²⁷ in the following lines, quite firmly describing the procession of Ištar to the *Bīt akīti* (*New Year House*) on the 8th and 9th days of the Festival:

'... Les Filles de l'Eanna et d'Uruk [and many others] se lèveront, puis à la cour intérieure descendront, puis... quand le soleil se lèvera, les dieux tous ensemble se dirigeront vers Ištar; le roi intronisera le grand prêtre.... '

Further lines follow that describe the ensuing feast and libations. Ištar's enthroned statue is placed at the door of the sanctuary and all the Gods in the courtyard process towards it as further libations and offerings are made to it, very much on the lines of the texts we have referred to as our main guide. *The piece ends with a cup being offered to Ištar.* Looking at the Tell Asmar seal

²⁷ 'Un Nouveau Fragment de la 'Fête d'Ištar' RA LXX 1976, 39-50

with this text in mind - and remembering also that the lion-bull attack on seals can be used as Venus' identifying attribute - the pair of them over the ziggurat scene emphasizes to me that the event in the second register under is in honour of this Goddess as synchronizer of the calendar, and that the enthroned figure is more likely to be a female divinity - a contemporary view of Venus herself in the form of Inanna with her long locks.

PERENNIAL THEMES IN THE CHRISTIAN CELEBRATION OF EASTER

The stages of the myth always remain the same - the content being the journeys and struggles between Life and Death, whether physical, on the level of the soul, or of spirit (at each iteration of the story the level changes). The hero or heroine remains in the Underworld for three days - the length of the Neomenia, or dark of the Moon. In the rituals the sacred feast plays a part - in Christian terms, it is the Last Supper, a contractual meal in the Syrian tradition between Christ and his believers. The Amorite inclusion of the donkey interestingly has echoes in Christ's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, signifying his kingship, walking over a way strewn with palm leaves - the sacred tree of both Baal and Ishtar (each level of leaf growth measures a year). The place of the tree is at times taken by a standing stone (baetyl), in Christianity by the Cross. Any cenotaph in remembrance of the Dead is both baetyl of the dead ancestors and variant on the Cross referring to Eternal Life. I believe the Christian story is given greater depth when we understand how much of its clothing belongs to a tradition stretching back, not centuries, but millennia, in Syria.

