

OF CAPTIVE STORM GODS AND CUNNING FOXES: NEW INSIGHTS INTO EARLY SUMERIAN MYTHOLOGY, WITH AN EDITION OF NI 12501

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This paper publishes the *editio princeps* of an Early Dynastic IIIb tablet from Nippur, which contains a unique yet fragmentary Sumerian narrative about the storm god Iškur's captivity in the netherworld, from which he appears to be rescued by Fox. While the incomplete state of preservation prevents a reconstruction of the plot, individual motifs can be traced across the entire cuneiform corpus, allowing for a preliminary case study of continuity and change over more than two millennia of Mesopotamian mythological literature.

1. “Another Enlil myth, still unpublished”

When Samuel Noah Kramer published his popular book *From the Tablets of Sumer: 25 Firsts of Man's Recorded History* (1956), he chose to adorn the dust jacket with a fragmentary tablet dating to about 2400 BCE – perhaps, because its intricate archaic characters beautifully embody the incredible antiquity of Sumerian civilization, to which he credits so many firsts.¹ But the tablet's ragged contours also serve as a vivid reminder that, while Sumerian literature is both astonishingly present in its physical remains, its contents often remain elusive.² Kramer refrained from translating the tablet, but his short description next to the photo reproduced in black-and-white as fig. 6 on p. 106 (see fig. 1 below) captures the pioneering spirit of the time, characterized by a seemingly never-ending streak of discoveries: “Another Enlil Myth [...], still unpublished” (my italics).

Further elaborating, Kramer (1956: 280) correctly dated the tablet, succinctly summarized the plot, and compared the role of Fox to that in the Sumerian narrative now known as *Enki and Ninhursaga*, which is attested on manuscripts from the early 2nd millennium BCE:

“It contains a portion of an Enlil myth which, as far as the fragmentary contents can be made out, tells of the disappearance of his son, the storm-god Iškur, to the Kur. Enlil gathers the gods known as the Anunnaki and asks which of them will bring back his son from the Kur. It is probably the fox who undertakes the task – a motif used in the “Paradise” tale inscribed on a tablet dating some seven centuries later.”

His publication aroused the interest of many, and yet a comprehensive edition and analysis is so far lacking. This may partly be because of the tablet's fragmentary state of preservation, which promises insights and frustration in equal measure. Partly, however, it is probably also due to the fact that the tablet was first presented to the world in a book aimed at a popular audience, without mention of its museum number. This he only supplied five years later (Kramer 1961: 259 n. 2) – a reference I owe to Andrew George. It is hence my pleasure and privilege to dedicate this study to him, master of Mesopotamian literature and mythology.

¹ Abbreviations follow the convention of the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*. Whenever possible, tablets are identified by their P-number, under which they can be found on <https://cdli.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/> and related platforms. For bibliographical information on Sumerian literary texts, see Attinger 2021; 2023, 19–57. I had the pleasure of reading this text with the members of the London Cuneiform in 2022, from whose expertise I, as always, benefited. I also gratefully acknowledge the constructive feedback of the two peer

reviewers, which considerably helped to improve this article, as well as the expert advice and support by Iraq editor Mark Weeden. Needless to say, all remaining mistakes and misconceptions are mine.

² I use the term “Sumerian literature” as reference to works composed and transmitted in the Sumerian language, without implying anything about the ethno-linguistic origin of the traditions.

6a. Another Enlil Myth. This fragment, still unpublished, contains a portion of an Enlil myth from about 2400 B.C. The fragment is now in the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient.

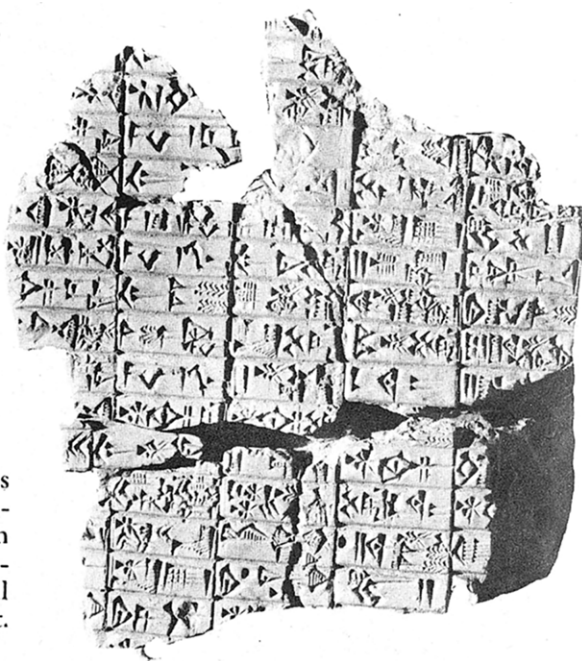


Fig. 1. Photo and caption reproduced from Kramer 1956: 106

Ni 12501 (P221771), as we now know it, was probably excavated during the 19th century excavations in Nippur³ and is now kept in the Istanbul Archaeological Museums, where I had the opportunity to study it in spring 2022.⁴ Several scholars have worked on the tablet based on the photograph published by Kramer, and I have profited from their insights. Adam Falkenstein (1965: 133 n. 70) was the first to build on Kramer's summary quoted above. In his study on the Anuna gods he transliterated and partially translated the episode in which Enlil addresses them (iv 4'–12'). A full transliteration and translation of iv 7'–12' was then offered in PSD B 130 s.v. bar – tab. The most substantial treatment published so far is by Daniel Schwemer (2001: 179–80), who in his monumental study of the storm god transliterated and translated sections mentioning Iškur (ii 10'–13', iii 7'–13', and iv 4'–12'). In the commentary, I will only highlight instances where I differ from his results. The edition prepared by Gianni Marchesi mentioned by Schwemer (2001: 179 n. 1257) has not appeared but will inform his treatment of the text in his forthcoming book on literary Old Sumerian.⁵ Szilvia Sövegjártó (2019: 288–89) in her study on the fox in Sumerian literature elaborated on Kramer's observation that Fox plays a similar role in Ni 12501 and *Enki and Ninhursaga*. She offers a slightly revised transliteration and translation of those sections that mention Fox (iv 4'–13' and v 3'–4'). As I was preparing this article, a copy of Ni 12501 was published by Aage Westenholz (2023: 291) based on the photograph in Kramer (1956: 106) and additional photographs supplied by Marchesi. While Westenholz' elegant copy is, as always, of high quality, a few improvements based on my collation of the original can be made.⁶ They will be apparent from my own copy prepared in 2022 (see fig. 2 below).

³ On the tablet's provenience, see section 2.

⁴ Permit number E-76252222-155.02-2108443. I am grateful for permission granted by the Turkish Ministry for Culture and Tourism and the Istanbul Archaeological Museums to prepare an edition and study of the tablet's contents. Müze müdürü Rahmi Asal ve küratörler Müge Özcan Maşalı, Emine ve Dinçer Cevher'e gösterdikleri yardımseverlik ve misafirperverlikten dolayı çok teşekkür ederim.

⁵ Pers. communication G. Marchesi. His *Literary Old Sumerian: The Texts*, intended to be published in the series OrientLab Series Maior, will be a much-needed study of this difficult corpus.

⁶ [I]M in i 9', missed erasures in i 7' and iii 9'; šembi₄ in ii 8' is written TA×SIG₇ instead of TA×IGI; the elusive signs in iii 5' and v 1' are not KU₆, DEŠ instead of DA₂ in iii 6', TI instead of NA in iii 10', as well as minor details, particularly in the badly preserved first lines of iii'.

In the following, I aim to present a comprehensive edition and analysis, which also considers those text sections that hitherto had not been transliterated and translated, specifically columns i and ii, as well as parts of columns iii and iv. Although the fragmentary preservation of Ni 12501 prevents a reconstruction of the plot, individual motifs can be traced across the entire cuneiform corpus, allowing for a preliminary case study of continuity and change over more than two millennia of Mesopotamian mythological literature.

2. *Characteristics of Ni 12501 in context: reconstruction, tablet layout, palaeography, orthography* For all we know, Ni 12501 is one of few Early Dynastic (ED) IIIb literary texts found during the late 19th century excavations at Nippur conducted by the University of Pennsylvania. The poorly understood corpus yet awaits systematic study.⁷ According to Kraus (1947: 114), the Archaeological Museums in Istanbul preserve seven pre-Ur III literary texts from Nippur, which remain unpublished to this day. Ni 12501 is presumably included in that number.

Ni 12501 was reassembled from several fragments. As assumed by Westenholz (2023: 291), one small fragment was forgotten in the process and can no longer be inserted in its original place, which is why it is kept loose. In my drawing (fig. 2), I have placed it where it belongs. Wherever most complete, the tablet measures 13.7 × 12.2 cm. The preserved lefthand edge measures 3 cm. in thickness but the tablet is nearly twice as thick at the break on the right; the impressive profile indicates that this was once a massive tablet.⁸ Judging from the curvature, less than one third of the tablet is preserved. Upper and lower part, as well as the righthand half are missing. Fortunately, enough is preserved of the lefthand edge to confirm that the first column is indeed col. i. Not too much seems to be missing at the top, which places the first preserved lines in col. i close to the beginning of the text. There, is however, a considerable gap at the end of each column, which prevents an uninterrupted reconstruction of the narrative. What is preserved of the reverse is entirely uninscribed, but it is possible that the now lost righthand half of the tablet contained columns on the reverse.⁹ At present, 69 lines (or rather, narrow cases) are partly or fully legible.

Discounting literary excerpts, the closest currently known parallels to Ni 12501 are OSP 1: 1, 3, 4, and 5, the so-called Barton Cylinder (MBI 1; P222183), and a cylinder fragment in three pieces from Adab (OIP 14, 53; P222241).¹⁰ The Barton Cylinder, measuring 16.1 cm. in length and 12.7 cm. in diameter, was found during the 4th expedition to Nippur, probably on the southern edge of Mound I (Alster and Westenholz 1994: 15–17). Though the bottom of the cylinder is lost, it preserves remnants of 20 columns and around 250 fully or partially preserved lines. While the Barton Cylinder is thus by far the best-preserved literary manuscript from the ED IIIb period, Ni 12501 could also have contained over 200 lines in its original state.¹¹

On Ni 12501, OSP 1: 3 and 5, the Barton Cylinder, and OIP 14, 53, the cases are of fixed size, regardless of how many cuneiform signs they contain.¹² Evenly filled cases containing as little as two signs in reading order alternate with crammed cases in which the signs are not arranged in strictly linear fashion. The dimensions of the cases, however, differ: while they are similar in width, the cases

⁷ For publications, see Westenholz 1975a: nos. 194 and 219 and id. 1975b: 11–12; nos. 1, 3, 4, 5. OSP 1: 1, 3, 4, and 5 have been recopied in Westenholz (2023: 289–93) as nos. 338, 339, 341, and 342. I will continue to refer to them by their more familiar OSP numbers. For ED IIIb literary texts generally, see Bauer 1998: 516 with n. 106.

⁸ Other ED literary tablets from Nippur and nearby, though equally fragmentary, resemble Ni 12501 in their dimensions, particularly their thickness: notably, OSP 1, 1 (P010533), OSP 1, 3 (P010539), OSP 1, 4 (P221573), OSP 1, 5 (P216082), and ECTJ 219 (P345686).

⁹ For literary tablets from the ED IIIa period, it is not uncommon for the reverse to be only partly inscribed or left empty – though colophons are often placed on the lefthand side of the reverse; cf. Krebernik 1998: 273.











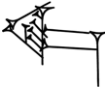
¹⁰ The cylinder fragments have a reconstructed diameter of ca. 10 cm. and an incomplete length of 11.6 cm. (Alster

and Westenholz 1994: 15 n. 1). They feature the goddess Naše but have not been edited yet. Note that the field copy drafted by Banks includes a lower fragment that did not arrive in Chicago and hence was not copied by Luckenbill in OIP 14. Banks' copy is reproduced by Westenholz (2014: 82); he speculates that the fragment may now be in Istanbul or altogether lost. For literature on OIP 14, 53, cf. Wilson 2012: page facing plate 18. Additionally: Krecher 1992: 287–88; Bauer 1998: 516 n. 106.

¹¹ The same could hold true for (some of) the above-mentioned fragments published in OSP 1.

¹² Conversely, on OSP 1: 1 and 4, as well as on the excerpt tablets MBI 2 (P222184) and NFT 180 (P315470), the size of the case depends on how many cuneiform signs are grouped together to form a unit.

TABLE 1: Comparison of NAM and KA in ED literary tablets from Adab (region) and Nippur

	<i>OIP 14, 53</i> (Adab)	<i>Barton Cyl.</i> (Adab/Keš?)	<i>OSP 1, 3</i> (Adab/Keš?) ¹³	<i>OSP 1, 1</i> (Nippur) ¹⁴	<i>ECTJ 194</i> (Nippur)	<i>Ni 12501</i> (Nippur)
NAM	iv 2 (also v 2): 	i 6 et passim: 	obv. ii' 3: 	i' 4' (also 5') 		ii 13' et passim: 
KA	ii 4: 	iii 8 et passim: 	rev. i' 2': 	ii' 3' (also iii' 2' and 3': 	obv. ii 8: 	iv 6': 

on Ni 12501 are only about half as high as those of OSP 1: 3 and 5, the Barton Cylinder, and OIP 14, 53, which often arrange signs in two ‘registers.’ The difference in case height excludes the possibility that OSP 1, 5 (P216082) – a small central surface fragment from the right-hand edge of what would have once been a big tablet – could belong to Ni 12501, even if the only column in which a few complete cases survive mentions the *kur* (ii' 2') and Enlil (ii' 6'). Too little is preserved to ascertain if it had any relation to Ni 12501.

As noted by Alster and Westenholz (1994: 17), the sign forms on the Barton Cylinder differ from those attested in contemporary texts from Nippur, wherefore they suggest that the cylinder may have been written by a scribe from Keš or Adab, ca. 25 miles southeast of Nippur. And indeed, the forms of certain diagnostic signs used in the Barton Cylinder and the Adab cylinder fragments, such as NAM and KA, differ from those used in Ni 12501, which Alster and Westenholz (1994: 37 ad xix 2) describe as being written in “pure Nippur script.”¹⁵ For NAM, the final vertical crossed by two parallel horizontals (similar to a PA) is characteristic of Nippur sources. In the case of Nippurite KA, the hatching occurs in the first part of the sign, as it does in later periods (see table 1).¹⁶

Ni 12501 features deities such as EšPEŠ, who was at home in the Adab region.¹⁷ Moreover, Iškur was one of the most important deities there.¹⁸ However, the presence of deities like EšPEŠ, who also features in the Barton Cylinder, does not strike me as sufficient grounds for assuming a provenience of Ni 12501 from Adab, as recently argued by Westenholz (2023: 291). Moreover, the records in Istanbul do not confirm his suspicion that E. Unger may have falsely inventoried the tablet.¹⁹ Rather, evidence from both Ni 12501 and the Barton Cylinder attests to strong links between the two local panthea. For the moment, this leaves evidence from sign forms as our best (though perhaps not always decisive) option for establishing provenience. A comprehensive study of sign forms in different regional centres of the second half of the 3rd millennium BCE remains a desideratum.

In terms of orthography, Ni 12501 contains at least one (common) phonetic spelling, namely, ge-ge for gegge in ii 7'. Similar spellings are also attested on the Barton Cylinder, where, for

¹³ Westenholz (1975b: 12) suggests the tablet is “[p]robably, but not certainly, from Nippur.” The sign forms of NAM and KA speak for an origin in the Adab region. CDLI (accessed 02/02/2024) dates it to the ED IIIa period. Recopied by Westenholz 2023: 290 n. 339 without changes to the sign forms in question.

¹⁴ This tablet may be older than the other tablets written in Nippur (cf. Westenholz 1975b: 11), which might explain the form of KA with central hatching. CDLI (accessed 02/02/2024) dates it to the ED IIIa period. Recopied by Westenholz 2023: 289 no. 338 without changes to the sign forms in question.

¹⁵ The figures in Biggs (1973a), where the Barton Cylinder after its copy by Barton (1918: pl. I–III) represents Nippur, hence require revision. Lisman (2016–17: 153; 163), to my mind, misrepresents the evidence, since he fails to realize that

Biggs (1973a) took all relevant Nippur examples from the Barton Cylinder, which likely was not written in Nippur.

¹⁶ Already noted by Alster and Westenholz 1994: 17 n. 11.

¹⁷ Alster and Westenholz 1994: 37 ad xix 2; Such-Gutiérrez 2005–06: 16; Westenholz 2023: 291.

¹⁸ Such-Gutiérrez 2005–06: 20–21; Schwemer 2016: 71. Note that some references in administrative documents from Adab refer to Iškur’s main sanctuary in nearby Karkara (Schwemer 2016: 71). For Iškur and EšPEŠ in Nippur, see Such-Gutiérrez 2003: 251–54 and 328, respectively.

¹⁹ Although Unger mixed up Old Babylonian tablets from Nippur and Sippar, nothing indicates that he misattributed Ni 12501. As far as records go, Müge Özcan Maşalı and Emine Cevher kindly informed me that Ni 12501 was registered by Veysel Donbaz; an excavation card that could have established its provenience does not survive.

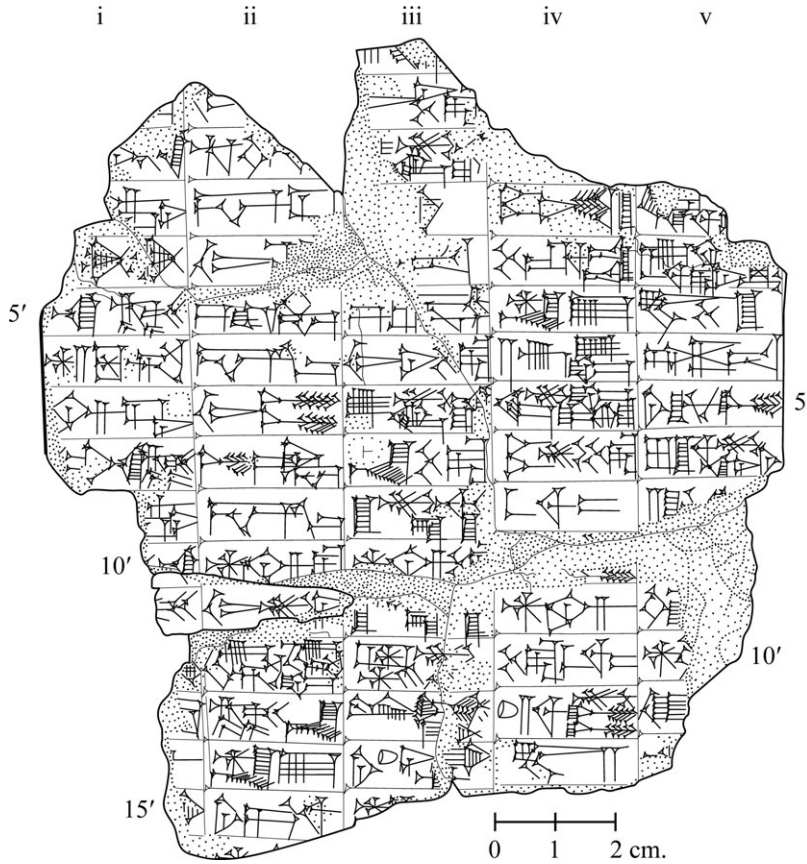


Fig. 2. Hand copy of Ni 12501. By Jana Matuszak

example, *nin* stands both for *nim* (i 8 // i 11) and *nin*, (ii 2 // ii 5). Moreover, the scribe of Ni 12501 uses DA_2 (ma_3) where one would expect *MA*, but the practice is not consistent: cf. dim_2 - DA_2 (ii 3') vs. dim_2 -*ma* in ii 6' and 9'.

The most salient feature of Ni 12501 are the frequent repetitions. They either take the form of 'hymnic' enumerations, as in the case of the three water creatures in i 3'–11' and the three differently coloured cows in ii 1'–9', or they repeat a statement by replacing an epithet with a proper name, such as in iii 9'–12' (*en* "lord" > *dīškur*) and iv 7'–12' (*dumu* "child" > *dīškur*). Both practices are characteristic of Sumerian and Babylonian narrative and hymnic texts of all periods and underscore the literary quality of Ni 12501.²⁰

3. Reading Ni 12501

The fragmentary state of preservation prevents a reconstruction of the plot, but close reading and comparison with similar narratives facilitates the understanding of the preserved episodes.²¹ For the convenience of the reader, the transliteration and translation of Ni 12501 are provided below, followed by an interpretive summary of the episodes' contents. The philological commentary is provided at the end of the paper in section 6.

²⁰ E.g., Wilcke 1976: 214; 219. For literary enumerations and their relationship with lexical lists, see Civil 1987; Michalowski 1998; Veldhuis 2004 and 2018; Boddy 2021.

²¹ The following attempt at reading and contextualizing Ni 12501 directly disobeys the warning of Schwemer (2001:

180): "Von einer Deutung dieses mythologischen Textes, von dem wir nur wenige Zeilen zu verstehen meinen, muß man Abstand nehmen." Yet I hope that the – admittedly tentative – results justify the endeavour.

Col. i

1'	[...] 'x ¹	[...]
2'	[x g]u ²² -na	[...]
3'	[abbar ² n]i ₂ [b]a ₄ -zal ²³	[The marshes ²] were glistening by themselves:
4'	[s]uḥur-'suḥur ¹	<i>suhur</i> -carps
5'	na-nam	verily existed.
6'	^d i ₇ -maḥ	The Great River/Canal
7'	ni ₂ ba ₄ -{eras.}-zal	was glistening by itself:
8'	'aštub ¹ na-nam	<i>aštub</i> -carps verily existed.
9'	[x n]i ₂ [b]a ₄ -zal	[...] was glistening by itself:
10'	[...] 'x ¹ -na	[...]
11'	[na-na]m	verily existed.
12'	[...] 'x ¹	[...]
13'	[...] -d]a ²	[...]
14'	[^d I]M ²⁴	[Išku]r ²
15'	[...] -g]a ²	[...]
	[...]	

Col. ii

1'	a[b ₂ /babbar/']	[White ²] co[ws] created
2'	mušen babbar-ge[n ₇]	like white birds,
3'	dim ₂ -DA ₂	
4'	ab ₂ 'su ₄ ¹	Brown cows created
5'	ṛeš ¹ da-'HI ¹ -gen ₇	like ...-wood,
6'	dim ₂ -ma	
7'	ab ₂ ge-ge	Black cows created
8'	ge šembi _x (TA×SIG ₇)-gen ₇	like kohl reed –
9'	dim ₂ -ma	
10'	^d iškur-ra	(these are) Iškur's
11'	ab ₂ mu-ne ₂	... cows.
12'	sul-sul maḥ-maḥ-ne	The great young men [...]
13'	nam-en	the lordship
14'	^d +en-E ₂	of Enlil,
15'	niṇ ₂ rib-'ba ¹	the mighty thing,
16'	'AN x ¹ [...]	[...]
	[...]	

Col. iii

1'	'x ¹ n[u ₂ ²⁵]	[...]
2'	[a]b ₂ -ne ₂ kur-r[a]	His cows are eating grass in the <i>kur</i>
3'	'u ₂ ¹ mu-'na ¹ -gu ₇ -e ¹	for his sake (or: on account of him?).
4'	[(x)] 'x ¹	[...]
5'	[...] 'DU ²	[...]
6'	'ṛeš LU ² x (x) MUŠ ₃ ¹	...
7'	ab ₂ -ne ₂ 'kur ¹ -ra	His cows are eating grass in the <i>kur</i>
8'	u ₂ mu-na-gu ₇ -e	for his sake (or: on account of him?).
9'	{eras.} en kur-ra	<i>Because</i> the lord
10'	še ₃ -mu-'til ₃ ¹ -la-še ₃	<i>has been 'living' in the kur,</i>
11'	^d iškur kur-r[a]	<i>Because</i> Iškur
12'	'še ₃ ¹ -m[u-til ₃]-la-še ₃	<i>has been 'living' in the kur,</i>

²² The reading was suggested by Reviewer 1.²³ For other readings and interpretations of IM(-)DA₂(-)zal, see the commentary.²⁴ Suggestion by Reviewer 1.²⁵ Suggestion by Reviewer 1.

13'	ama-ḡu ₁₀ ^d eš ₅ - ^r PEŠ ¹	my mother EŠPEŠ,
14'	lu ₂ sa ₆ - ^r ga ¹	the beautiful person,
15'	inda ₃ 1 lid ₂ -ga ^r AK ¹	(who used to) make bread (from) 240 litres (of flour),
16'	^{rd+1} e[n-E ₂]	E[nlil ...]
	[...]	
	Col. iv	
1'	[...]	[...]
2'	^r dumu i ₃ ¹ -TU-ŠE ₃	Children were born
3'	kur-re ₂ ba-DU.DU-ŠE ₃	(but) they were carried off by the <i>kur</i>
		(or: they went to ¹ the <i>kur</i> .)
4'	^{d+} en-E ₂	Enlil
5'	a-nun-ke ₄ -ne	addressed the Anuna gods:
6'	gu ₃ mu-ne-de ₂ -e	
7'	dumu-ḡu ₁₀ kur-ra	“My son
8'	bar ba-tab	is held captive in the <i>kur</i> .
9'	[dili/deš a-ba mu]- ^r ge ₄ -ge ₄ ¹	[A <i>single one</i> – who will] bring him back?
10'	^d iškur	Iškur
11'	kur-ra bar ba-tab	is held captive in the <i>kur</i> .
12'	dili/deš a-ba mu-ge ₄ -ge ₄	A <i>single one</i> – who will bring him back?”
13'	ka ₅ ^a	Fox [...]
	[...]	
	Col. v	
1'	^r x (x) ¹ ki ba N[I x]	...
2'	GIN ₂ ^r ša ₃ ^{?261} -[ga/ba [?]] ba-ra-ni-	... certainly did not let the axe/crown [?] be in [?] the
	^r ḡal ₂ ¹	...
3'	ka ₅ kur-še ₃	“Fox
4'	ḡe ₂ -DU	shall go to the netherworld!”
		(Or: Fox indeed went to the netherworld.)
5'	inda ₃ šu nu-ge ₄	He ²⁷ did not refuse [?] the bread
6'	lu-ub ₂ -ba mu-na-ni-ḡar	(but) put it in a bag (instead).
7'	a ^r šu nu ¹ -g[e ₄]	He did not refuse [?] the water
8'	[^(kuš) ummu ₃ -da mu-na-ni-de ₂ (?)]	[(but) poured it in a waterskin instead (?).]
9'	u ₄ ^r x ¹ [...]	Day ...
10'	^d ut[u]	the Sun god Ut[u ...]
11'	ḡe ₆ [...]	Night [?] [...]
12'	A[N ...]	the [...] g[od ...]
	[...]	

3.1 Prosperity in illo tempore (cols. i–ii)

The beginning of Ni 12051 is lost; hence it is unclear if it started with an account of creation. When Ni 12501 first becomes legible, the waters are already teeming with fish. Although only four out of 15 visible lines are fully preserved in col. i, it is possible to reconstruct several of the partially preserved lines due to a recurrent pattern. At least three different water bodies, among them the Great River/Canal, are said to be glistening (X_{1–3} ni₂ ba₄-zal; i 3', 7', 9') and, as a result of that, three different kinds of creatures are thriving within them (Y_{1–3} na-nam; 5', 8', 11'). The first few lines hence invoke an image of abundance and bliss.

Soon after, traces in i 14' likely introduce Iškur as one of the main protagonists, but the circumstances are lost in the break. Possibly it is his role as gu₂-gal “canal inspector” attested in later

²⁶ Suggestion by Reviewer 1.

²⁷ The sex/gender of Fox in Sumerian texts is unknown. However, whenever the orthography is explicit enough to render relevant grammatical information visible, morphemes

restricted to human referents indicate that Fox is anthropomorphised. Since in Babylonian texts Fox is treated as male, I will refer to him as male throughout.

periods, which explains his connection to rivers.²⁸ In any case, we can observe that prosperity still prevails at the beginning of col. ii, which contains a poetic description of Iškur's multicoloured cows (ii 1'–11').²⁹ However, the idyl of abundant livestock seems to face a sudden threat when a group of young men do something to the lordship of Enlil (ii 12'–15'+[...]), which is unfortunately lost in the break. Possibly, they challenge Enlil's sovereignty. When the text becomes legible again in col. iii, the order of the cosmos has been disturbed, and Iškur is confined in the *kur*.

Both the na-nam sequence at the beginning of col. i and the enumeration of differently coloured animals find parallels in the Barton Cylinder, indicating shared topoi among roughly contemporaneous texts. In the Barton Cylinder, the three-fold na-nam sequence serves to transport the audience back to primordial times:³⁰

u ₄ -ri ₂ -a u ₄ -ri ₂ -še ₃	In those distant days, those very distant days,
na-nam	it happened verily!
ne ₆ -ri ₂ -a ne ₆ -ri ₂ -še ₃	In those distant nights, those very distant nights,
na-nam	it happened verily!
mu-ri ₂ -a mu-ri ₂ -še ₃	In those distant years, those very distant years,
na-nam	it happened verily!

Barton Cylinder i 1–6

Then follows the account of the creation of the universe and the birth of the Anuna gods, and the plot unfolds. Significantly, both Ni 12501 (i 6') and the Barton Cylinder (ii 13) prominently mention the Great River/Canal (^di₇-maḥ) at the beginning of their accounts. This signals a common concern for freshwater supply – the most important guarantor of fertility and prosperity (cf. Lisman 2016–17: 146; 150 et passim). In the narrative of the Barton Cylinder, access to freshwater soon becomes scarce, resulting in a period of salinization and starvation. Once the water supply has been restored, several animals are said to multiply again, heralding the beginning of a new era of abundance that resembles the ideal primordial state described in Ni 12501 col. ii:

am gegge al-lu ₂	Black bulls multiplied,
am babbar al-lu ₂	White bulls multiplied,
am su ₄ al-lu ₂	Brown bulls multiplied,
am dara ₄ al-lu ₂	Dark-red bulls multiplied.

Barton Cylinder xiv 4–7

3.2 Iškur and his cows in the *kur* (col. iii)

Iškur's multicoloured cows – once invoked as an image of vitality – are now in the *kur* (iii 2'–3' // 7'–8'), where they seem to be feeding on grass. While the semantic spectrum of *kur* ranging from 'mountain' to

²⁸ Suggestion by Reviewer 1. For Iškur as gu₂-gal, cf. Schwemer 2001: 129–96 passim. Cf., however, the discussion in the commentary on i 3' // i 7' // 9'.

²⁹ Cows are usually associated with the Moon god, cf. IAS 253 (P010230) iv 3; OSP 1: 4 (P221573) iii 3–7; *Nanna A*, *Nanna B*, *Nanna D*, *Nanna F*, *Nanna I*, *Nanna K*, *A hymn to Nanna*, *A fragment of a hymn to Nanna*, *Sulgi F*, *A Cow of Šin*, etc.; see also PSD A/II 161f. s.v. ab₂ A 3.5. The earliest pictorial representations of Iškur on Sargonic seals show him accompanied by a lion griffin; only a single seal from Umm al-Hafrīyāt depicts him on a wagon pulled by bulls (Dietz 2023: 65–74 with cat. no. 24; reference courtesy Reviewer 2). The bull becomes the dominant symbolic animal of the storm god only during the Ur III period (Schwemer 2001: 125), forging a closer parallel with the Northwest-Semitic and Anatolian storm gods, who are equally associated with bulls. In this context, Ayali-Darshan (2024: 136 n. 335) links the mention of Iškur's cows in Ni 12501 to an episode in the Ugaritic Ba'al cycle where Ba'al mates with a cow before

descending to the netherworld. Besides the evidence from Ni 12501, the storm god is also associated with bovines in the roughly contemporaneous Lagas "riddles" (2H-T25 = BiMes 3, 26; P221796; cf. Biggs 1973b, Biggs 1976: no. 26, and Marchesi 1999: 3), where Iškur is described as "wild calf" (diḡir-be₂ ^diškur ama[r³] ¹banda₃^{1da}; rev. ix 7'). This epithet is commonly attributed to Nanna, but Schwemer (2001: 130 n. 895) connects it with a later *kudurru* inscription mentioning a "wild calf of Adad son of Anu" (*būru ekdu ša Adad mār Anim*). Pairs of bulls and bull calves are commonly associated with Iškur/Adad throughout the second and first millennia BCE (Schwemer 2001: 69). *Šin-iddinam* and *Iškur* (*Šin-iddinam E*) lines 75–78 describe the installation of two wild bulls (am) at Iškur's throne; for am as an epithet of Iškur himself, cf. Schwemer (2001: 699).

³⁰ For parallels to the opening lines of the Barton Cylinder, see Rubio 2013: 10–11 and Krebernink and Lisman 2024: 190 with previous lit. For the prologues of Old Babylonian Sumerian epics, see Streck 2002.

‘east’ to ‘netherworld’ to ‘foreign country’ is well-known (Katz 2003: 105–06) and its polysemy possibly exploited for storytelling purposes, it is doubtful that the cows are grazing on a lush pasture in the Zagros mountains. Rather, they seem to be trapped in the netherworld, together with their master (iii 9’–12’). In later sources, the *kur* is portrayed as a negative mirror of the terrestrial realm, where the potential for procreation and fecundity, or even basic subsistence, is eternally thwarted (Katz 2003: 236). In *Ninṣešzida’s Journey to the Netherworld* and a similar passage in a lament for Damu, for example, the *kur* is described as follows:³¹

i₇ kur-ra-ke₄ a nu-de₂ a-bi nu-mu-un-na-na₈-na₈
 a-ša₃ kur-ra-ke₄ še nu-de₂ zi₃ nu-mu-ar₃-re
 udu kur-ra-ke₄ siki nu-de₂ tu₉ nu-mu-un-ni-TUKU₅-TUKU₅

The river of the *kur* produces no water, no water is drunk from it.
 The fields of the *kur* produce no grain, no flour is ground from it.
 The sheep of the *kur* produce no wool, no cloth is woven from it.

Ninṣešzida’s Journey to the Netherworld 29–31

If this conception of the *kur* as barren was already prevalent in Early Dynastic times, then Iškur’s cows were feeding on grass that lacked nutrients, which would prevent them from sustaining their master. Moreover, if the storm god was trapped in the netherworld, rain would cease to fall in the world above, leading to drought and starvation. While the consequences of Iškur’s absence, with the possible exception of iv 2’–3’ (cf. section 3.3), are not described in the preserved parts of the text, the reference to EŠPEŠ as someone who *used to* bake enormous quantities of bread (iii 13’–15’) is perhaps to be understood in this context.

Little is known about EŠPEŠ, an ancient deity from Adab (cf. commentary), but her invocation as “my mother” (iii 13’) proves that she is female. The fact that she is here described as someone baking bread – traditionally a female chore – underscores her gender, which was unknown until now. She also plays an active role in the Barton Cylinder (xix 2–5): in xix 3 she is said to be understanding things very well (gal i₃-ga-mu-zu), whereupon she locks the doors (xix 5). After a line whose reading and interpretation are debated,³² Irḫan, the deified western branch of the Euphrates is mentioned (xix 7) just before the text breaks off.³³ EŠPEŠ (Ni 12501 iii 14’) and Irḫan (Barton Cylinder xii 8) share the epithet “beautiful person” (lu₂ sa₆-ga), but their relation otherwise remains obscure. The shared protagonists and epithets further underscore the various links between the two texts. EŠPEŠ is not mentioned again in the preserved parts of Ni 12501, but Enlil apparently resolves to take action (iii 16’+[...]).

3.3 Plans to rescue Iškur (cols. iv–v)

The first two preserved lines of col. iv seem to warn of the consequences of a prolonged absence of the storm god, who is responsible for bringing rain and ensuring fertility. If I understand them correctly, they indicate that, though children will be born, they will soon die for lack of sustenance. Enlil hence informs the Anuna gods that his son Iškur³⁴ has been taken captive in the netherworld and

³¹ The textual variants to these lines are extensive; cf. Jacobsen and Alster 2000: 320–22 and Zólyomi 2003. The idealised eclectic text presented above is a condensation of different manuscripts. The line count (though not necessarily the reading) follows ETCSL. For the quote, cf. Katz 2003: 219–20 with notes 65–67; for the Damu lament, see also Fritz 2003: 188 with lit. For *Ninṣešzida’s Journey to the Netherworld* in the context of OB literature and scribal culture, see Gabbay 2020.

³² Cf. Alster and Westenholz 1994: 31; Lisman 2016–17: 162.

³³ While Irḫan originally appears to have been conceived of as male, at least one (later) manifestation of Irḫan was female; cf. Wiggermann 2000: 571–72. According to Such-

Gutiérrez (2005–06: 20), s/he had a relatively important temple in Adab; in *An = Anum* I:263 and the *Divine Directory of Nippur* 14, 14–18, s/he is listed among six “constables” (udug) or “attendants” (AN-gub-ba) of the Ekur, respectively; cf. Lambert and Winters 2023: 86; 100. For Irḫan in literary contexts, see Peterson 2009.

³⁴ Schwemer (2001: 166–68; 2016: 71) notes two different traditions concerning Iškur’s ancestry: according to the later dominant transmission, the sky god An was his father, but particularly in mythological accounts featuring Iškur as a youthful hero similar to Enlil’s son Ninurta, he is known as the son of Enlil. Ni 12501 suggests that this was the local tradition in Enlil’s city Nippur in Early Dynastic times.

asks who can bring him back (iv 4'–12'). The search for someone who can achieve the (nearly) impossible is a common motif in hero narratives (cf. section 4.3). But unlike in *Ninurta's Exploits* or *Anzû*, for example, where the warrior god Ninurta volunteers to defeat the chaos monster and thus restores order, in our story Fox enters the scene (iv 13') – just before the text breaks off again. Perhaps Fox offered his services, sincere or not, as he did in *Enki and Ninhursanja* 223–24. Whatever exactly happened in the lacuna, it seems to have triggered a discussion among the Anuna gods. In the remnants of the last preserved column, col. v, someone (perhaps Enlil) finally resolves: “Fox shall go to the netherworld!” (v 3'–4'). And, apparently, he did, since the narrator next reports next that Fox did not refuse⁷ the bread and water he was offered upon arrival in the *kur* but put it in containers instead, concealing the fact that he did not consume the food and drink (v 5'–8'). After this intriguing glimpse into Fox's cunning nature, the rest of the story is lost.

3.4 Reasons for expecting a happy end

It is uncertain if it was indeed Fox who succeeded in bringing Iškur back from the *kur*. However, one can reasonably assume that the storm god was not trapped in the netherworld forever and re-emerged eventually, guaranteeing a renewed period of abundance and growth. Ni 12501 hence differs from Mesopotamian creation stories that contrast a primordial state of non- (or rather, not-yet-) existence with subsequent bounty³⁵ in that it recounts how a state of initial prosperity later became imperilled by disaster. Presumably, the text ended with the definitive solution of the problem, the benefits of which extend from mythical into historical time and characterize the world we live in. In this respect, Ni 12501 resembles the Barton Cylinder, where creation is equally followed by crisis, only to be resolved once and for all.

4. Contextualizing the motifs

Several motifs encountered in Ni 12501 are attested in other texts ranging in date from the ED IIIa to the Neo Babylonian periods, though some are associated with different protagonists. This may partly be related to the fact that Ni 12501 is the only extant mythological narrative from ancient Iraq that features the storm god as protagonist.³⁶ In the following, I will trace the more salient motifs through cuneiform literature in order to demonstrate the embeddedness of Ni 12501 in enduring Mesopotamian models of mythological explanation and literary composition without necessarily positing any direct dependencies between the texts.³⁷ This survey is inevitably limited by the fragmentary nature of the corpus, and I do not aspire to completeness. At the same time, the continuous growth of the corpus renders all observations preliminary. Notably, the relative inaccessibility of the literary corpus from the ED IIIa period (particularly the UD.GAL.NUN texts, see Zand 2009) and the general scarcity of literary texts from the centuries that follow present a major obstacle for the contextualization of the narrative within its mid to late 3rd millennium BCE horizon.

4.1 Iškur as provider of fertility

Dietz Otto Edzard's (1965: 136) characterization of Iškur as a storm god who, unlike his Akkadian counterpart Adad, was only associated with destructive storms but not with fertile rains was already

³⁵ Cf. Michalowski 1991: 134; Rubio 2013: 8; Krebernik and Lisman 2024: 190 with n. 48.

³⁶ Schwemer 2001: 175; 179. For IAS 377, an ED IIIa period fragment that probably mentions Iškur, see (Krebernik 1998: 321). It is too badly preserved to assess its contents and possible relation to Ni 12501.

³⁷ A comparative lens that looks beyond cuneiform sources is consciously avoided here; mainly for reasons of scope, but also because parallels from farther afield do not aid much in understanding Ni 12501 in its Mesopotamian context, which is my primary concern. In structuralist terms one can,

however, identify common storytelling elements as charted 1928 by Propp (here cited after the second edition of the English translation published in 1973), such as the emergence of a threat or lack (Iškur's captivity), the emergence of a hero (Fox), and the hero's journey (here: to the netherworld) – unless, of course, future evidence reveals Fox to be a deceitful villain, which presently does not seem particularly likely. One might also note more specific motifs such as “an interdiction addressed to the hero” (implicitly, the avoidance of consuming bread and water in the *kur*).

corrected by Schwemer (2001: 176–83). Ni 12501 adds further evidence to Iškur’s role as bringer of rain that ensures the growth of vegetation, which serves as sustenance for animals and people alike. Indirectly, this is evidenced by the rivers being full prior to his absence, and the fact that Iškur’s captivity forces his cows to eat presumably non-nutritious grass in the barren *kur* (iii 2’–8’),³⁸ while children seem to be dying prematurely of starvation (iv 2’–3’).

Iškur as provider of agricultural abundance is already attested in *zame-Hymn* 24: karkara še gu til₃ | ^diškur za₃-me “(At) Karkara, where barley and flax make (everything and everyone) live, Iškur (said) praise.”³⁹ A more detailed account is offered by the temple hymn addressed to Iškur’s sanctuary in Karkara, which also emphasizes Iškur’s connection to bovines:

e₂ ^diškur-ra igi-zu-še₃ he₂-ḡal₂ a-ga-zu-še₃ giri₁₇-zal
TE.IG-zu inda si pirig
x ku₃ ubur an-na šeḡ_x(IM.A.A) še-gu-nu

O House of Iškur, at your front is abundance, at your rear is bounty.
Your ... is a horned bull, a lion.
Pure ..., teat of heaven (bringing) rain for crops.⁴⁰

Temple Hymn 23, 330–32

The Old Babylonian Eršemma *Gud maḥ pa e₃-a*,⁴¹ which invokes Iškur as the eponymous “great bull” (*gud maḥ*), combines the notion of the storm god as provider of rain that enables the growth of flax and barley (l. 3; the motif of agricultural abundance is continued in ll. 4–6) with a possible allusion to his ‘death’ (ll. 9–10) and subsequent return (ll. 11–12). The latter seems to cause the invigoration of cattle and sheep, which gives rise to celebrations. This short section likely emphasizes the seasonal nature of rainfall in southern Iraq. While it is not unthinkable that the cyclical absence and return of the storm god was interpreted as Iškur’s ‘death’ (imagined as his captivity in the netherworld) and his subsequent liberation, caution is in order. In Ni 12501, the conditions for Iškur’s presumed release from the *kur* are unknown (cf. section 4.4). With the end of the story lost, it is unclear if Ni 12501 offered the aetiology for alternating periods of aridity and abundance in Sumer or told a unique episode, as is the case in the Barton Cylinder or *Enki and Ninḫursaḡa*, for example. Be that as it may, a concern for water supply is clearly present in Ni 12051. Since agriculture in southern Iraq relies on irrigation rather than rainfall, the focus on grazing animals is noteworthy, as they depend more directly on Iškur as provider of rain.⁴² In this context, it is interesting to note that precipitation rates in the 3rd millennium BCE seem to have been considerably higher and more evenly spread throughout the autumn and winter months (Rost 2015: 162–64). This, Rost argues, is also suggested by administrative documents from Ur III Umma, which indicate fewer irrigation periods, primarily in spring, but not during the sowing and germination period in October/November.⁴³ The slightly lesser dependence on irrigation before the onset of a long dry period around 2150 BCE⁴⁴ might perhaps explain the more prominent role of Iškur in early texts such as Ni 12501.

4.2 Gods trapped in the netherworld and other disappearing deities

Outside of Ni 12501, we have no evidence for the Sumerian storm god being held captive in the netherworld. Only the Old Babylonian Iškur-Eršemma mentioned in section 4.1 may allude to the

³⁸ For subsistence and ecological conditions in the Mesopotamian netherworld, see Katz 2003: 197–233. *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* is a noteworthy exception from the prevailing description of the *kur* as a barren place (e.g., Katz 2003: 213–15 et passim).

³⁹ Adapted from Krebernik and Lisman 2020: 38.

⁴⁰ On še-gu-nu, see Attinger 2023: 1269.

⁴¹ Cf. Schwemer 2001: 180–84 and the edition on <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/obel/P345451> (accessed 07/04/2024).

⁴² Cf. the nuanced discussion by Schwemer 2001: 176–83; 195–96. On the literary topos of animal fertility signalling abundance, see Ferrara 1995.

⁴³ Schrakamp (2018: 120–23) notes that complex irrigation systems appear in the archaeological and textual record in the mid to late Early Dynastic period, although earlier irrigation practices are likely. On hydraulics in 3rd millennium BCE southern Iraq, particularly in Lagas-Ūrsu, see also Zanetti 2023 (reference courtesy Reviewer 2).

⁴⁴ Cf. the summary in Rost 2015: 31–32.

disappearance and return of the Sumerian storm god, but the *kur* itself is nowhere mentioned. However, the motif of dying and reappearing gods, who are kept hostage in the netherworld until they are ultimately released, is attested throughout cuneiform literature.⁴⁵ The earliest attestation is found in SF 31 (P010611), a literary fragment from the ED IIIa period which seems to record the monthly abduction and return of Ama'ušumgal or Innana from the netherworld (Zand 2020). As argued by Matuszak and Attinger (2024), the Sargonic school tablet CUSAS 23, 205 (P323472) invokes Ama'ušumgal's death and return. Moreover, two lexical fragments – IM 205093, probably from Sargonic Umma, and 6N-T 1012 from Ur III Nippur – contain allusions to “slave work” performed by Innana and Deštinana, respectively, which possibly refers to their sojourns in the netherworld (Matuszak and Alessawe 2024: 42). In general, the motif of captivity in the netherworld is mainly found in texts featuring Innana, Dumuzi, and his sister Deštinana. Famously, Innana's attempt to take over the netherworld results in her death and confinement in the “land of no return.” Upon her rescue, she must provide a substitute, and the text ends with Dumuzi and Deštinana sharing the sentence for half a year each in perpetuity (*Innana's Descent to the Netherworld* 407; cf. also section 4.4).

In Ni 12501, the disastrous consequences that the storm god's prolonged captivity in the netherworld would have on human life seem to be indicated in iv 2'–3', whose immediate context remains unclear: while reproduction apparently would not cease altogether, new-born children would stand no chance of surviving. If that interpretation proves to be correct, it would be unique for early accounts of gods trapped in the netherworld: neither the 3rd millennium BCE tablets mentioned above nor the Old Babylonian Sumerian version of *Innana's Descent to the Netherworld* describe what happens when certain gods can no longer fulfil their functions.⁴⁶ Only the later Standard Babylonian version reports how, after Ištar had descended to the netherworld,

ana burti alpu ul išahhiṭ imēru atāna ul ušarra
ardata ina sūqi ul ušarra eṭlu
itīl eṭlu ina kum[m]iṣu
itīl ardatu ina aḫi[it]ša

The bull would not mount the cow, the ass would not impregnate the jenny,
 The young man would not impregnate the young girl in the thoroughfare.
 The young man slept in his bedroom,
 The young girl slept by herself.

Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld 77–80 // 87–90

Excursus: In this context, it deserves to be mentioned that ancient Anatolia had its own myths about the disappearance and return of the Storm God of the Sky (CTH 325) and that of his son Telipinu (CTH 324), an originally Hattian deity associated with crops who shared some aspects with storm deities.⁴⁷ In both myths (the Telipinu myth being attested in four different versions),

⁴⁵ Ayali-Darshan (2024) argues that Mesopotamia mainly knew of dying, not rising, gods, and that the tradition of *Innana's Descent to the Netherworld* is marginal. However, the evidence from the 3rd millennium BCE presented in this article and other publications that appeared after her study, suggests that the last word on the topic has not been spoken.

⁴⁶ Likewise in *Enki and Ninhursaga*, the consequences of the curse-induced illness of Enki, the god of the subterranean freshwater pool, are not directly mentioned in the preserved passages, but the Anuna gods' mourning and distress is illustrated by their sitting down in the dust (^ana-nun-na-ke₄-ne saḫar-ta im-mi-in-durun_x(KU.KU)-ne-eš; l. 220). Note, however, that Krebernik (2020: 134) interprets a fragmentary section in HS 2940 as contrasting Innana's absence resulting in Dumuzi struggling to feed his sheep with goats and sheep producing abundant offspring in her presence. There is, however, no mention of the *kur*. For Dumuzi's and

Damu's absence resulting in lack of abundance, see Delnero 2020: 59–75.

⁴⁷ See Hoffner 1998: 14–22, Pecchioli Daddi and Polvani 1990: 71–104, and the editions and translations on hethiter.net by Rieken et al. 2009 (accessed 14/03/2024). Certain motifs are also shared with other Anatolian myths about vanishing storm gods, such as CTH 328 and 330, and, as correctly observed by Reviewer 2, myths about vanishing gods generally (CTH 322 and 323). The context and occasion for the texts about vanishing storm gods is unclear, and there is no indication that the disappearance and return was cyclical. Note that none of the Hittite texts mention the netherworld. This is different in the fragmentary mythological section of the Hurro-Hittite *Song of Release* (KBo 32.13+; CTH 789), but it lacks other parallels with the vanishing god stories; see most recently Ayali-Darshan 2024: 137–44 with lit. Ayali-Darshan (2024) also treats the *Myth of Elkunirša, Ašertu, and the Storm God* (CTH 342) as well as

the storm god disappears in anger, which results in drought, hunger, and the cessation of all procreation.⁴⁸ The sun god invites all gods to a banquet, but they cannot still their hunger and thirst. In most versions, it is then specifically the father of the vanished god who notices and announces the catastrophic absence of his son, and all the gods start searching for him.⁴⁹ Their search yielding no results, an eagle is dispatched, which likewise fails to find him. Ultimately, and much to the surprise of the gods, a tiny bee achieves the impossible,⁵⁰ and, at least in CTH 325 § 18'', the eventual return of the storm god is celebrated with a banquet. The Anatolian myths thus share certain motifs with the narrative as it is partially preserved on Ni 12501 – a god as provider of rain (cf. section 4.1); disappearance and ultimate return of the god with their associated negative and positive consequences; father announcing the disappearance of his son; helpless gods; quest achieved by an animal (cf. sections 4.3 and 4.4). However, details differ, and it is altogether uncertain if the myths are in any way related, not least because their manuscripts are separated by roughly a millennium and non-negligible geographical distances.⁵¹

4.3 Helpless gods and dauntless heroes

Iškur's captivity in the *kur* results in a cosmic crisis requiring the immediate attention of the gods. However, bringing someone back from the netherworld is a quest that cannot easily be achieved by just anyone. Hence Ni 12501 appears to feature a condensed version of what one might call the Mesopotamian 'helpless gods and dauntless heroes' motif, which serves to heighten the accomplishments of a singular champion against the backdrop of the normally all-powerful but temporarily dumbstruck gods. In different variations, it can contain the following elements: the great gods being speechless and/or sitting around motionless, sometimes in mourning, the convention of the divine assembly, the search for a champion, and finally a hero coming forward who will accomplish the almost-impossible.⁵² In Ni 12501, Enlil's address to the Anuna gods presupposes the convention of the divine assembly, and the fact that none of the gods volunteers to bring Iškur back opens the path for Fox to make his appearance. An abbreviated version is also attested in *Enki and Ninḫursāṇa* 220, where the Anuna gods sit down in the dust after Ninḫursāṇa's curse incapacitates Enki, prompting Fox to offer his services to Enlil in the following line. The motif is most fully developed in Babylonian epics such as *Anzû* and, borrowing from that, *Enūma eliš*. In the former, the chaos monster Anzu's theft of the tablet of destinies results in deafening silence, even among the highest divine authorities: "Their father and counsellor, Enlil, was speechless."⁵³ The gods convene to devise a plan, and Anu asks who among the gods can slay Anzu (OB II 9 // SB I+86). Three gods (Adad, Girra, and Šara) are summoned but express the impossibility of the venture, before valiant Ninurta finally accomplishes the task. The motif is consciously adapted in *Enūma eliš*,⁵⁴ where Ea "fell silent in his chamber and sat stock still"⁵⁵ upon hearing that monstrous Tiamat is ready for battle. He resolves to confront her but "stopped (lit.: sat down), speechless, and turned back;" the same happens when Anu tries himself.⁵⁶ This leads to the familiar image of the divine assembly sitting in silence:

Levantine texts including the Ugaritic *Ba'al Cycle*. Although storm god Ba'al is slain by death god Mot but ultimately returns, the details differ so considerably from the story preserved on Ni 12501 that a discussion in this context seems unwarranted.

⁴⁸ CTH 324.1 § 4'–§ 6' l. 41; CTH 324.2 §§ 1'–2'; CTH 325 §§ 6'–8'"; all after Rieken et al. (2009).

⁴⁹ CTH 324.1 § 7'; CTH 324.2 § 3'; CTH 325 § 9'' 1.60–§ 10'' 1.65; all after Rieken et al. (2009).

⁵⁰ CTH 324.1 § 9' l. 74–§10' l. 81 + ff.; CTH 324.2 §§ 5'–7' + ff.; CTH 324.3 §§ 2'–3'; CTH 325 § 13'' ll. 115–19; all after Rieken et al. (2009).

⁵¹ The origin of Anatolian myths about disappearing storm gods is debated: Haas and Wilhelm (1974: 8–33) were the first to argue for a Luwian (i.e., southeast Anatolian) rather than a Hattian (i.e., central Anatolian) origin. Due to parallels with an Old Hittite Palaic festival ritual, Görke (2023: 15), who cites the pertinent literature published in the meantime, now suggests an old central Anatolian mythical

core. Note that Popko (1995: 87) has drawn attention to the seven doors of the netherworld mentioned in CTH 324.1 § 37'' and CTH 325 § 32'', which is a motif otherwise known from Mesopotamian mythology, such as *Immana's Descent to the Netherworld*.

⁵² Katz (2008: 334 with n. 61) collected attestations of the related but not identical motif of frightened Anuna gods in Sumerian literature.

⁵³ OB *Anzû* II 2 // SB *Anzû* I b+81: *abu(m) malikšunu šuharrur ellil*, quoted after Heinrich 2022a and b, respectively. The motif of gods falling silent in *Anzû* and *Enūma eliš* was already noted by Machinist (2005: 40).

⁵⁴ On intertextuality between *Anzû* and *Enūma eliš*, see Wisnom 2019.

⁵⁵ *Enūma eliš* II 6: *kummiš ušharrir(-ma) šaqummiš ušba*, quoted from Heinrich 2021.

⁵⁶ *Enūma eliš* II 82/106: *ušib ušharrir-ma itūra arkiš*, quoted after Heinrich 2021.

pahrū-ma igīgū kalīšunu anukkū
šaptāšunu kuttumā-ma qāliš uš[bū]

The Igigi and Anuna gods were all assembled,
 Their lips closed tight, they sat in silence.

Enūma eliš II 121–122

As is well known, Marduk then rises to the occasion and establishes himself as creator and king of the gods. Since all champions get rewarded in one way or another, it seems likely that Fox also demanded compensation for his efforts in a lost section of Ni 12501 (cf. also section 4.4).

4.4 Rescuing captives of the *kur* and related motifs

The Mesopotamian netherworld is famously conceived of as the “land of no return.”⁵⁷ Bringing anyone back to the world of the living hence requires special arrangements, if not outright trickery. The following survey is intended to contextualize the behaviour of Fox in col. v.

In *Innana’s Descent to the Netherworld*,⁵⁸ Innana’s faithful messenger Ninsubura, after failing to secure the support of Enlil and Nanna, finally succeeds in soliciting the help of the clever god Enki in rescuing Innana from the *kur*.⁵⁹ Enki creates two liminal figures, the Kurjara and the Galatura, who can cross the boundaries between earth and netherworld in a way others cannot: gliding, flying, and pivoting (ll. 227–29). He equips them with the food and water of life (ll. 224–25) and warns them not to accept the welcoming gift of food and drink: “They will offer you a river full of water – don’t accept it! They will offer you a field full of barley – don’t accept it!” (246–47). The Kurjara and Galatura heed Enki’s advice (273–74) and successfully trick Ereškigala, queen of the *kur*, into surrendering Innana’s lifeless body. They succeed in reviving her and bring her back to earth – in clear violation of the rule that those who enter the *kur* may never leave it again (cf. ll. 285–89). To keep balances even, Innana is required to find a substitute for herself. For the story on Ni 12501 this begs the question if a similar kind of ransom had to be paid for Iškur, or if his release was achieved by different means.

Conversely, *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* tells the story of a failed attempt to enter and exit the *kur* unharmed. When Enkidu offers his master Gilgameš to retrieve his ball and stick that had fallen through a hole into the netherworld, Gilgameš gives him precise instructions for how to behave in the *kur* so as to avoid drawing attention to himself, which – we presume – would enable him to come back up to the world of the living (ll. 182–99). It is Enkidu’s systematic disregard for Gilgameš’s advice that seals his fate and traps him in the *kur* eternally.⁶⁰

In the case of the sage Adapa, on the other hand, it is precisely the faithful observance of instructions that proves fatal.⁶¹ When Adapa is summoned by sky god An/Anu because he broke the South Wind’s wing, Enki/Ea instructs him how to behave upon entering the heavens.⁶² However, comparison with *Innana’s Descent* suggests that a crucial piece of Enki/Ea’s advice would in fact have been appropriate for entering the netherworld: one should never accept bread and water there, because they will cause one’s death. It appears that the consumption of bread and water in the heavens, by analogy, will grant eternal life. In refusing the welcoming meal, Adapa hence forfeits his unique chance at immortality – much to the delight of An/Anu, who erupts in laughter upon realizing what Enki/Ea had done.⁶³

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Katz 2003: 41–43 and 243. Note, however, that the Sumerian phrase *kur nu-ge*, is only found once in the extant sources (*Innana’s Descent to the Netherworld* 83).

⁵⁸ Elements of the plot structure are preserved in the much-abridged Standard Babylonian version of *Ištar’s Descent*, though many details differ, rendering it less relevant for understanding Ni 12501.

⁵⁹ Note the twice-unsuccessful search for a champion.

⁶⁰ Gadotti’s (2014: 83–91) hypothesis that Enkidu re-emerged unharmed has been addressed, for example, by Attinger (2015: 236–38).

⁶¹ The sincerity of Enki/Ea’s advice has been discussed controversially; cf. Izre’el 2001: 121–25; Edzard 2002; and Liverani 2004: 3–23, each with further lit.

⁶² Sumerian *Adapa* 136–51 (after Cavigneaux 2014); Standard Babylonian *Adapa* c+10–e+3 (after Mitto 2022).

⁶³ Sumerian *Adapa* 171–72; Standard Babylonian *Adapa* e+4–6.

These partial parallels suggest for Ni 12501 that, when commissioned to go to the *kur*, Fox either knew or had been informed about which protocols to follow in order to avoid being trapped there indefinitely. While the instructions themselves are skipped, v 5'–7' relay how Fox implemented them.⁶⁴ Considering that Fox hid the bread and water in appropriate receptacles, he must have first received and accepted them. His actions (whether inspired by instructions or not) hence differ from those of other travellers to different cosmic domains, who refuse the welcoming meal. Tricking the authorities of the *kur* into believing that he consumed the offered bread and water underscores Fox's cunning nature. The ruse that probably secured his survival, while in line with Mesopotamian rules of conduct in the *kur*, may also loosely be based on observation of foxes, as they are known to bury their food and come back for it (cf., e.g., Macdonald 1976; Henry 1996: 95–117). The ease with which Fox transcends boundaries may likewise have been inspired by observations of vulpine behaviour: they have a habit of digging holes and building underground dens, making them ideal go-betweens for missions to the netherworld and back up again to the world of the living.⁶⁵

Fox as a liminal creature and trickster is also attested in several texts and proverbs from later periods.⁶⁶ Given his sly and sometimes treacherous nature documented elsewhere, this begs the questions: Was Fox's offer sincere? Did his mission succeed?

Since Ni 12501 itself cannot provide the answer, let us look at other texts for inspiration. Indeed, animals offering help to gods is a motif attested in another Early Dynastic mythological narrative. In *Ezinan and her Seven Children*, a composition exclusively known from ED IIIa manuscripts from Tell Abū Šalābiḥ, it is Wolf who offers his services to Enki who, according to the interpretation by Krebernig and Lisman (2024: 174), seeks to end a food shortage.⁶⁷ Since Wolf is never mentioned again in the preserved parts of the text, it is unclear what came of it, but it is worth noting that Fox and Wolf are sometimes rivals, sometimes partners in crime in the later *Series of the Fox* (Jiménez 2017: 48–50), and generally share a rather dubious reputation.

Sumerian narratives known from Old Babylonian and later sources also contain instances of successful animal intervention in the resolution of crises (cf. Verderame 2021). Already Kramer (1956: 280) had connected Fox's offer to a similar episode in *Enki and Ninḫursāga*, which is known from (only) three Old Babylonian manuscripts. After the goddess Ninḫursāga had cursed Enki for his incestuous rapes, Enki falls gravely ill and Ninḫursāga herself seems to go into hiding. At this point, Fox appears. He asks Enlil: "If I bring Ninḫursāga to you, what will be my reward?" (l. 222), to which Enlil answers: "If you bring Ninḫursāga to me, I will erect two birch trees in my city for you and your name will be renowned" (ll. 224–25).⁶⁸ Fox prepares for the journey⁶⁹ but then the text breaks off. It appears, however, that the mission was successful, as Ninḫursāga ultimately agrees to cure Enki of the effects of her curse (ll. 250–68). Although not explicitly mentioned in the text, I agree with Dina Katz' (2007: 588; 2008: 340) observation that Enki's revival would have ensured the renewed freshwater supply. This concern for access to freshwater and the temporary absence of gods associated with it – Enki as the god of the subterranean freshwater ocean that feeds rivers and Iškur as the bringer of rain – connects Ni 12501 and *Enki and Ninḫursāga* even beyond Fox's offer to perform the rescue mission.⁷⁰ In that regard, the plot of *Enki and Ninḫursāga*, in which Fox's intervention seems to bring about a happy end, might be counted as potentially good news for Iškur in the story preserved on Ni 12501.

⁶⁴ The conflation of instructions and their implementation is not uncommon in Mesopotamian literature and can be observed, for example, in *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld* 93–101.

⁶⁵ Cf. the comparison of a fox's tail to a harrow which cuts into the soil in SP 2.61a (and parallels): ka₅^a-a kuḫ₂-bi al-dugud | ^{ne}gana₂-ur₃ la₂-am₃-me-e-še "The fox's tail is heavy – it drags a harrow, as they say." References to Sumerian and bilingual proverbs and literary texts featuring the fox dragging its tail on the ground as a symbol of loss and destructions are collected by Attinger (2023: 768–69 n. 2626) with lit.; further attestations can be found in CAD Š/II 268 s.v. *šelebu* 1a.

⁶⁶ On Fox in proverbs and literature, see Alster 1976: 125 n. 52; Vanstiphout 1988; Kienast 2003; Jiménez 2017: 39–56, 377–95; Sövegjártó 2019; Sövegjártó 2021; Jiménez 2020; Verderame 2021; Vilela 2021: 496–500.

⁶⁷ For a full quote of Wolf's speech, see the commentary on Ni 12501 iv 13'.

⁶⁸ For an idea for why this reward may have been attractive to Fox, see Sövegjártó 2019: 288 with previous lit.

⁶⁹ See Sövegjártó 2019: 290 for details.

⁷⁰ Incidentally, the water theme also connects Ni 12501 to the Early Dynastic myth preserved on the Barton Cylinder, where the problem of salinization resulting in brackish water needs to be resolved in order to assure prosperity for the land (Lisman 2016–17).

However, given the cunning nature of Fox, later Sumerian and Akkadian proverbs document ambivalent feelings towards relying on a fox for help: while the Neo-Assyrian letter ABL 555 (SAA 13, 45) rev. 3–6 quotes a popular proverb suggesting that clinging to a fox’s tail may result in salvation, it appears that grasping a fox’s ear rather than a bull’s horn achieves the opposite (A.10107; cf. Alster 1976: 125 n. 52 and Cohen 2013: 219–20 with lit.). To complicate matters, the relationship between Enlil and Fox is not without friction, as I will survey in the next section.

4.5 Enlil and Fox

The origin and nature of Enlil’s relationship with Fox remains elusive, but evidence for a close connection between the two surfaces at irregular intervals across the cuneiform corpus. Ni 12501 provides the earliest available evidence for their interaction so far – and simultaneously the earliest attestation of Fox as a trickster figure.⁷¹

Outside of *Enki and Ninhursaga*, where Fox also offers his services as special operations envoy to the king of the gods, Enlil and Fox interact in several Sumerian proverbs and so-called fables attested on manuscripts from the Old Babylonian period. SP 2+6.58, though broken, can likely be reconstructed on the basis of SP 2+6.71,⁷² in which case it would read: ka_5^a -a d en-lil₂ lul ba-e-[si₃[?]-ke[?] (vel sim.)] “Fox li[es] to)” Enlil.”⁷³ The exact implications of this proverb, which inaugurates a sequence of fox proverbs, are difficult to assess. Certainly, the deceitful nature of Fox is well-known from other sources: the Sumerian words for “fox” (ka_5) and “lie” (lul) are written with the same cuneiform sign representing the head of a fox, and this graphic and semantic association is exploited throughout the Sumerian proverb collections, particularly those from the Old Babylonian period.⁷⁴ However, the specific mention of Enlil in SP 2+6.58 raises questions: does Fox’s attempt to deceive even the king of the gods (if that is indeed the proverb’s meaning) merely underscore his duplicitous character, or does the proverb allude to a specific episode narrated elsewhere? While this cannot be answered, the relationship between Enlil and Fox is worth surveying.

A short narrative included in SP 8 Sec. B 20, a collection that likewise contains several proverbs and prose miniatures featuring vulpine content, illustrates Fox’s hunger for power – as well as his innate inability to comport himself with the authority he desires. The narrative can be paraphrased as follows: Once upon a time Fox demanded from Enlil the horns of a bull, the Mesopotamian symbol of divinity. Enlil grants his wish, but as it starts to rain, the newly gained horns prevent Fox from entering the safety and comfort of his den. Thereupon he is forced to conclude that the divine privileges had better be returned to the rightful king, Enlil. While the context for Fox’s hybriatic demand remains unclear, the transmitted version contains no evidence of trickery or deception on the part of Fox. However, as argued by Sövegjártó (2021: 99), it is possible to infer that Enlil predicted Fox’s failure to live up to his newly conferred divine status, in which case Enlil would have outsmarted the animal and kept the upper hand in this latent power struggle throughout.

Another Sumerian story, *The Fox and Enlil as Merchant*, is fragmentarily preserved on exceedingly few, mainly disconnected manuscripts.⁷⁵ While the plot cannot currently be

⁷¹ This was already noted by Alster 1976: 125 n. 52. For further studies on Fox in proverbs and literature, cf. n. 66. Most of the evidence discussed in the following features in one way or another in the aforementioned publications. Here I focus on the relationship between Enlil and Fox. Some aspects of this are discussed by Vilela 2021: 496–500 (reference courtesy M. Weeden), who, however, does not mention Ni 12501.

⁷² SP 2+6.71: lul du₁₁-ga-ab zi du₁₁-ga-ab lul ba-e-si₃-ke “Tell a lie, tell the truth – (people) will then lie to you” (for a different interpretation, see Lämmerhirt 2010: 527 ex. A 545). Note that this proverb ends the fox-sequence started in SP 2+6.58 quoted above.

⁷³ The lack of a case marker after d en-lil₂ in SP 2+6.58 remains problematic; perhaps it indicates a vocative: “Fox – o Enlil – li[es] even to you!”

⁷⁴ Note that there is no unequivocal mention of foxes in the *Early Dynastic Proverb Collection 1* (Alster 1991/92;

Klein 2003), as the LUL sign could represent the words lul “lie etc.,” nar “singer; musician” or ka_5 “fox.” The lack of disambiguating spellings and context often makes it impossible to decide which word was originally intended – or if there was an element of intentional ambiguity involved. For Sumerian proverbs about foxes surviving into the bilingual tradition of the 1st millennium BCE, see most recently Jiménez 2020: 332–38.

⁷⁵ See Alster 2005: 346–51 for the main fragment (CBS 438; P257886), possibly from Sippar (cf. Jiménez 2017: 54 n. 152), a partial duplicate from Uruk (W 20248,3; cf. Cavigneaux 1982: 22–27; id. 2003: 57–58), and related tablets. The story was still known in Middle Babylonian Ugarit (RS 86.2210; see Arnaud 2001, id. 2007, Viano 2016: 332–34, and Jiménez 2017: 55) and appears to feature similar animal protagonists – Fox, Dog, and Hyena – as the Babylonian *Series of the Fox* known from later manuscripts,

reconstructed in its entirety,⁷⁶ it is noteworthy that it apparently also involves trickery on Enlil's part, who disguises himself as a merchant.⁷⁷ This illustrates or plays on an epithet of Enlil, which is attested in Old Babylonian lamentations⁷⁸ and found its way into the god list *An–Anum* I 175, where the divine merchant is equated with Enlil: ^ddam-gar₃ = ^den-lil₂. This is significant insofar as merchants had a reputation for dishonesty. SP 3.64 and parallels, for example, give the following warning: ^{neš}-rin₂ sa AK dul₂ ni₂ ⁿⁱri₃-a-kam | dam-gar₃ gu₅-li-ni-ir lu₂ na-an-du₁₂-du₁₂ “Scales made with a net are a pitfall for the feet. A man should not take a merchant for his friend.” The story may hence be another example of Enlil outfoxing Fox.

In Babylonian sources from the first millennium BCE, Enlil and Fox appear in conjunction in a variety of genres, ranging from the popular yet fragmentarily preserved *Series of the Fox* to learned omens and *Taboos of the Gods*. Since the popular genres have recently been treated by Jiménez,⁷⁹ I will not repeat the evidence in extenso. Suffice it to say that in the *Series of the Fox*, Fox – who elsewhere in the text is portrayed as slanderous and false – directly addresses Enlil several times. At the very beginning of the text when Enlil, angered by something he discovered during an inspection of the land, stops the rains from falling, Fox urges him to preserve his own creation, since he has made peace with (most of) his enemies – the others Enlil is welcome to finish off.⁸⁰ The text breaks off immediately afterwards, but despite its poor preservation it seems unlikely that Fox's role in ensuring rainfall had any direct links with the story preserved on Ni 12501. Rather, as suggested by Kienast (2003: 22), it is probably Fox's first attempt at denying responsibility for a misdeed he has committed. Other instances of interactions between Fox and Enlil, such as when Fox, after an unsuccessful foray, asks Enlil for wealth instead of health,⁸¹ are less indicative of their relationship, since Fox also pleads with other gods, such as Šamaš.⁸² He does, however, refer to Enlil as his lord and to himself as *ša Enlil* “he of Enlil,”⁸³ and proves his devotion – sincere or not – by praying and offering to him.⁸⁴

In the case of an omen recorded in *Šumma izbu* V 114, a sheep giving birth to a fox is associated with the bountiful ‘reign of Enlil,’ which manifests itself in an abundance of sheep (or subjects?) and a royal reign as long and successful as that of Sargon of Akkade.⁸⁵ BE U₈ KA₅.A U₃.TU BAL ^dEN¹.LIL₂ MU.MEŠ LUGAL.GI.NA *ina* KUR u₂-šab-ša₂ TUR₃.BI DAGAL KIMIN LUGAL *ina* šal-ma-at BAL-šu₂ u₂-šam¹-[qat] “If a sheep gives birth to a fox: rule of Enlil. He creates the year of Sargon in the country; its sheepfold will grow. Same (protasis): he (Enlil) makes the king fall in the abundance of his reign.”⁸⁶

Finally, the fifth entry in the enigmatic Neo-Babylonian *Taboos of the Gods*⁸⁷ provides an enticing yet obscure explanation for the special relationship between Enlil and Fox. It informs us that “The fox (is the taboo of) Enlil because Dagān (the West Semitic equivalent of Enlil) ‘went away’⁷¹. Erra *sank* and went down to the water. He received the instructions of Ea(?). Their words

though Jiménez (2017: 56) does not consider the Sumerian narrative(s) as a direct forerunner. On the Nippurite origin of the *Series of the Fox* and its likely composition in the Old Babylonian period, see Jiménez 2017: 46–47.

⁷⁶ For a recent summary, see Sövegjártó 2021: 99–100.

⁷⁷ For another instance of Enlil's shapeshifting, see *Enlil and Namzitara*, where Enlil appears as a raven.

⁷⁸ Specifically in the OB Eršemma BM 13963 (CT 15, 10; P345447); cf. Civil 1976a and Löhner 2009: 203–05.

⁷⁹ Jiménez 2017: 39–57, 377–99 and Jiménez 2020, respectively.

⁸⁰ Cf. Lambert 1960: 190–91 and Kienast 2003: 36–37.

⁸¹ Cf. Jiménez 2017: 377–80; 2020: 328–32. Another prayer by Fox to Enlil is recorded in § c rev 5' (Jiménez 2020: 381).

⁸² Cf. Kienast 2003: 22–23.

⁸³ Cf. *a-na* ^d50 *be-li-ia*₂ (n+34) and *ša*₂ ^d+en-[il]₂ in j+8. Line count according to the forthcoming eBL edition, a draft of which Enrique Jiménez kindly shared with me. n+34

corresponds to E 61 and j+8 to F 75 in the reconstruction of Kienast 2003.

⁸⁴ n+34–38, corresponding to E 61–65 in Kienast 2003.

⁸⁵ Cf. Foster 2016: 245–86 with previous lit.

⁸⁶ Quoted after Sövegjártó 2021: 96.

⁸⁷ Quoted after CBS 16 (CTL 2, 401; P257581) obv. 5, BM 76230 (CTL 2, 402) obv. 5', and BM 37675+37868 (CTL 2, 403) obv. 6': KA₅.A (NIG₂.GIG) ^d50 MU ^dda-¹gan DU⁷¹ ^der₃-ra i-te-bu-ma ana A [E₁₁] te-me-et ^dBAD 'x¹ [ŠU.T]I-e-šu INIM-su-nu DUG₄.GA-šu₂ E₁₁-šu₂ ^d50-ta ul BAD KIN [x]. Logograms are clarified by the Late Babylonian commentary BM 35401+ (CTL 2, 407; P461132) obv. 10–12: [... ana] 'A' E₁₁ ana me-e ur-du DI.ME.ET te₃-e-mu-e-tum ^dBAD x¹ [ŠU.T]I-e-šu₂ il-q[e₂-e-š]i | [K]A-su-nu a-mat-su-nu DUG₄.GA-šu₂ iq-bi-iš 'E₁₁-[šu₂ u₂-še]-la-aš₂-[šu₂] | rd50-ta ^den-lil₂-tu ul ^dEN B[AD ...]. Reconstructions largely follow Lambert Folio 001043. I would have missed this reference had Andrew George not proposed to read the *Taboos* in the London Cuneiform.

he (Ea?) told him (Erra?). He (Ea?) made him (Erra?) rise. The sovereignty of Enlil ...”⁸⁸ This is not the place to try and disentangle this difficult entry. However, one might notice that the fox is never mentioned again; instead the explanation features an episode in which Erra sinks and rises again, which has (positive?) consequences for Enlil’s sovereignty. The link between Erra and Fox is provided by *Mul Apin* I i 17, where the Fox Star (^{mul}KA₅.A) – one of the 33 stars of Enlil – is explained as ^der₃-ra gaš-ri DINGIR^{meš} “Erra, powerful one among the gods.” Future research will elucidate the role played by Erra (a.k.a. Fox?) in this taboo.

As this survey shows, Enlil and Fox interact in a variety of Sumerian and Akkadian texts attested on manuscripts that span more than two millennia. The nature of their relationship appears to change according to circumstances but often involves trickery, also on Enlil’s part. However – and this is significant for Ni 12501 – there is no evidence of Fox successfully fooling Enlil, which may further support the assumption that Fox’s mission to rescue Iškur probably succeeded. Lastly, it is worth noting that several pertinent texts – Ni 12501 itself, the proverb collections, *The Fox and Enlil as a Merchant*, *Enki and Ninḫursāga*, and *The Series of the Fox* – have either been found in Nippur, the seat of Enlil’s main temple, or were probably composed there and later made their way to other centres of literary and scholarly productivity. These stories may hence reflect local traditions, of which Ni 12501 would be the earliest surviving example.⁸⁹

5. Conclusion: common motifs, unique story

The story preserved on Ni 12501 is so far unique, and there is no evidence that detailed knowledge of it survived into later periods. For the time being this assessment, I believe, is valid even when acknowledging that Ni 12501 contained only one version of a myth that could have been told in various ways.⁹⁰ Despite its singularity, several motifs can be traced throughout cuneiform literature. The association of some motifs with other protagonists may partly be due to the fact that Ni 12501 presents the only currently known Mesopotamian narrative about the storm god. The tablet hence adds significantly to our knowledge of Mesopotamian mythology, while also offering glimpses into the use of motifs in telling stories about the mythological past. Here as elsewhere, motifs were freely adaptable to different contexts, where they bear the potential of weaving a web of associative links that could reinforce both similarities and differences between their individual manifestations in context. However, to what extent ancient audiences would have drawn connections between narratives based on recurring motifs is difficult to assess, at least for the early periods of Mesopotamian history, where manuscripts of literary texts are generally rare and the circulation of stories – whether orally or in written form – is almost impossible to trace.⁹¹ While Ni 12501 and the Barton Cylinder, for example, were both available in ED IIIb Nippur (albeit seemingly on a single manuscript each), the absence of later copies prohibits conclusions about whether the rescue mission of Fox in *Enki and Ninḫursāga*, for example, was loosely modelled on the story told in Ni 12501, or (as seems likelier) taken from a pool of narrative material whose contents fluctuated over time and

⁸⁸ The translation is tentative and will undoubtedly be improved once the *Taboos of the Gods* have been comprehensively edited, translated, and analysed. Provisionally, I read the first part as *aššum Dagān illiku*, because photo and copy of CBS 16 suggest ‘DU’ rather than the conjunction ‘u₃’, which could have made Dagān and Erra the joint subject of *iḫebbū*, and because several taboos start with MU ^dDN DU “because DN went away.” Moreover, I have interpreted ^dBAD as a reference to Ea (i.e., ^dIDIM) since Enlil’s name is spelled ^d50 and he is commonly associated with (underground) water, but the spelling is ambiguous and elsewhere ^dBAD can stand for Enlil. Generally, the referents of verbs and enclitic pronouns are not always clear to me. *i-te-bu-ma* is durative (“he will sink”) but this contrasts with *ur-du* as a gloss for E₁₁; hence I have tentatively translated it as preterite. The sign sequence *ul BAD KIN* [x] poses difficulties. Interpreting BAD as TIL =

qaṭū and KIN as *pāru* would yield something like “the sovereignty of Enlil is not over but found” but a reading *ul-ziz* “he set up (the Enlil-ship)” is also possible. However, both options are challenged by the insertion of ^dEN (usually a spelling for ^dbēl referring to Marduk) between *ul* and *BAD* in the commentary (CTL 2, 407 obv. 12).

⁸⁹ On Nippur as a centre for education and scholarship, see, e.g., Paulus 2023 and Jiménez 2022: 8–12.

⁹⁰ Cf. narratological distinctions between *histoire*, *récit*, and *narration* (Genette 1972; 1983), *story*, *text*, and *narration* (Rimmon-Kenan 1983), or *fabula*, *story*, and *text* (Bal 1985), etc., as well as research on *hylemes* by the DFG research group 2064 STRATA around A. and C. Zgoll (Göttingen). For an introduction to hylistics, see Zgoll et al. 2023.

⁹¹ This is different in the first millennium, for example, where Wisnom (2019) demonstrates intertextuality as a means of establishing a “self-conscious tradition.”

probably differed across regions. Hence the survey in section 4 may not illustrate anything other than the general longevity of certain motifs, some of which can be traced across millennia.

Considering the exceedingly small number of literary texts from the 3rd millennium BCE that survive into the Old Babylonian period and sometimes beyond, the case of Ni 12501 is far from unique. Apart from famous examples such as *The Instructions of Šuruppak*, whose development can be traced from the ED IIIa to the Old Babylonian period and, via Akkadian and Hurrian versions, into the second half of the 2nd millennium BCE (Alster 2005), the presence of common motifs in an otherwise unattested narrative context also characterises texts like *Eznan and her Seven Children* or the Barton Cylinder. This alerts us to the richness of early Mesopotamian mythological literature, much of which yet awaits discovery. While more work needs to be done, we may hope that one day we will write an anthology of Sumerian literature that features Early Dynastic sources such as Ni 12501 not only on its dust jacket but also in translation.

6. Philological commentary

i 2'–11': Despite the parallelism of the three sentences, they are unevenly arranged across cases: once IM(-)DA₂(-)-zal occupies a case all by itself (i 7'), twice it shares a case with the corresponding subject (i 3'; i 9'); similarly na-nam stands on its own in i 5' and 11' but shares a case with its subject in i 8'. This indicates that ideally a case would have contained a unit consisting of subject and predicate (as in i 3', i 8', and i 9'), but in i 4', 6', and 10' the respective subjects left no space for the predicate.

i 2': [g]u-na may be an unorthographical spelling for gun₃ “multicoloured,” qualifying something lost in the break, or part of a name. The goddess ^dše-gu-na, who is attested in the Tell Abū Šalābīh God List (Q000036) 365 (cf. Mander 1986: 31), might just about fit into the gap (particularly if written without the divine determinative). However, her mention in this context would be surprising, since her name suggests that she was associated with crops. In either case, the syntactic function of [x g]u-na is unclear, since the position of IM in i 3' indicates that the subject of [b]a₄-zal – likely the marshes (abbar) – was written at the beginning of the line; cf. the commentary on i 3'–5'.

i 3' // i 7' // 9': As evidenced by the variants dim₂-DA₂ (ii 3') vs. dim₂-ma (ii 6'; ii 9'), the scribe used DA₂ (ma₃) and MA quasi-interchangeably. Accordingly, several options for understanding IM(-)DA₂(-)-zal present themselves:

- 1) im-DA₂ (for im-ma) is a noun⁹² and zal a participle. Cf. for this option AO 4153 (NFT 180; P315470), the ED IIIb cosmogonic excerpt from Dirsu that evokes the beginning of time, iii 1–4: u₄-¹da¹ im-ma | ul-[la] im-¹ma¹ | u₄ nu-zal-[(zal)] | i₃-ti nu-e₃-e₃ (the rest of the tablet is uninscribed). Rubio (2013: 4–5) translated these lines as follows: “At that time, in earlier times | At that distant time, in earlier times | Daylight did not shine | Moonlight did not come forth;” perhaps in light of a similar account on 6N-T650 (NBC 11108; P301718) obv. 7, dating to the Ur III period, which unambiguously associates “time before time” with darkness: ¹u₄ nu-zalag ¹ne₆ am₃-mu-la₂ “Daylight did not yet shine. Night spread.” Since AO 4153 uses zal rather than zalag, however, the ED IIIb account is less clear: one could equally translate iii 3–4 as “Days did not pass/Months did not come forth.” Both translations account for the fact that time starts, and is measured by, the rotation of night and day. In that regard it is noteworthy that zal is mostly used in connection to the day, while the darkness of the night is mainly said to spread or envelop: zal hence simultaneously expresses the passing of the sun across the horizon and its luminosity. This makes im-DA₂ (for im-ma) “earlier years” an unlikely subject; moreover, this interpretation of the sign sequence causes syntactical problems: if im-DA₂ is the ‘subject’ of zal, then how does the preceding entity fit in?

⁹² On (mu) im-ma “last year”, see Attinger 2023: 740 with lit.; ePSD s.v. im [YEAR] and imma [LAST YEAR].

- 2) As a solution to this problem, one could consider interpreting im-DA₂ as a noun (im “rain”) in the locative: “waterbody X was glistening in the rain;” i.e., implicitly, thanks to Iškur’s providence. However, I know of no similar statements in Sumerian literature.
- 3) IM could be short for ni₂-be₂/ba “by itself;” ba₄-zal the finite verbal form (suggestion by Reviewer 1). For primordial entities operating by themselves, cf., e.g., *Tree and Reed* 1: ki-ur₃ gal-e ni₂ pa bi₂-ib-e₃ “The vast ground appeared by itself” (quoted after Rubio 2013: 9). This, in contrast to option 2, would deny Iškur’s active involvement in providing prosperity.
- 4) im-DA₂-zal as a whole constitutes the verbal form (cf. the later prefix im-ma-).⁹³ However, this spelling is so far unattested vis-à-vis common e/ĭ₃-ma- and rare im-ma-.⁹⁴

While options 2–4 are all, to a certain degree, possible, option 3 (ni₂ ba₄-zal) presents the least problems. The description of this tranquil and peaceful scene of abundance, seemingly devoid of any agents, may be in line with the fact that Iškur was probably only introduced in i 14’. Perhaps the explicit reference to waterbodies operating without external stimulation – if this is indeed the correct reading and interpretation – foreshadows Iškur’s incapacitation or somehow explains or contrasts with his (later) role as provider of rain and regulator of the waterflow of rivers and canals.

What exactly it is that the waterbodies are doing is slightly ambiguous due to the semantic spectrum of zal alluded to above: while zal in the meaning “to pass” could refer to the flowing of the river (although the flowing of watercourses is usually expressed with ġen/du), zal as “to shine” could express the glittering of the ever-moving surface of the water. Since zal combines notions of movement and luminosity and since setting things in motion is how creation starts,⁹⁵ the flowing or glittering of the river and the two broken entities may be the reason for the abundance of fish expressed in 4’–5’, 8’ and probably 10’–11’. My preference for “to glisten” attempts to capture both meanings of zal and reflects the fact that in i 3’–5’ it likely describes the marshes, which do not quite qualify as “running water” the same way as rivers and canals.

i 3’–5’: In literary texts from the 3rd and early 2nd millennium BCE, *suĥur*-carps are associated with marshes (abbar): e.g., abbar suĥur-suĥur du₁₀ “(its, i.e., SAĤAR’s) marshes (are) good (for) *suĥur*-carps” (*Zame Hymn* 36; l. 124); abbar-be₂ ku₆ĤI.SUĤUR ku₆suĥur u₃-de₆ “After he had provided its marshes with ĤI.SUĤUR-fish and *suĥur*-carps” (Gudea Cylinder B xii 1); abbar-ra ĤI.SUĤUR ku₆ suĥur ku₆ ġal₂-la-da “to make ĤI.SUĤUR-fish and *suĥur*-carps exist (in abundance) in the marshes” (ibid. xiv 26); [abbar-re gu₃ ba]-an-de₂ SUĤUR.ĤI^{ku₆} suĥur^{ku₆} ba-an-šum₂ “He called on the marshes, and bestowed on them SUĤUR.ĤI-fish and *suĥur*-carps” (*Enki and the World Order* 274); cf., moreover, *Nanna-Suen’s Journey to Nibru* 334 // 343; *Nanna B* 40; *Nanna K* Segm. B 5; *Ninurta F* 26. Two pairs of parallel lines in *Nanna-Suen’s Journey to Nibru* locate *aštub*-carps in rivers and *suĥur*-carps in marshes, respectively:

332 i₇-da a-aštub šum₂-ma-da-ab (...)

334 abbar-ra ku₆-da suĥur^{ku₆} šum₂-ma-da-ab (...)

In the river, give me the carp-flood!

In the marshes, give me the *kuda*-fish and the *suĥur*-carp!

341 i₇-da a-aštub mu-na-an-šum₂ (...)

343 abbar-a ku₆-da suĥur^{ku₆} mu-na-an-šum₂ (...)

In the river, he (Enlil) gave to him (Nanna-Suen) the carp-flood.

In the marshes, he gave to him the *kuda*-fish and the *suĥur*-carp.

⁹³ im-ma- + zal is attested in OB literary texts, but usually with u₄ “day” as direct object; cf., e.g., [a]-^rNIR¹ a₂-sag₃ du-lum ge₁₇-ga ‘u₄’ im-ma-ni-in-‘zal’ “He spends the days in lament, *asag*-demon-induced illness, and bitter hardship” (*A Man and His God* 11); kur-ra u₄-ta im-ma-ra-[zal] “The day was passing in the mountains” (*Ninurta’s Exploits* 300).

⁹⁴ The prefix chain im-ma- is still rare in the ED IIIb period, cf., e.g., CUSAS 35: 014 (P252840) obv. iii 5: im-ma-ta-e₃ and rev. i 1: im-ma-e₃; LB 0929 (P389385) obv. 10: enim-ba im-ma-ge. Barton Cylinder xix 6, for example, writes i₃-ma-šū₂-šū₂ in line with earlier and contemporary practice.

⁹⁵ Rubio 2013: 7–8; George 2016: 13–15, 19–20.

This suggests that the lost sign at the beginning of i 3' may have been *abbar*.

- i 5' // i 8' // i 11': On *na-nam* sequences at the beginning of Sumerian narratives, see Streck (2002: 202–09) and Rubio (2013: 10–11).
- i 6'–8': The Great River/Canal is also mentioned in the Barton Cylinder (ii 13) just before a broken passage; hence its role remains unclear. The Great River/Canal (without divine determinative) occurs as theophoric element in personal names of the 3rd millennium BCE: *nin-i₇-maḥ* is attested a few times in the Sargonic period (e.g., BIN 8, 157 [P212703] obv. 6; BIN 8, 167 [P212711] obv. 4; both of unknown provenience), the personal name *lugal-i₇-maḥ* in ED IIIb *Ḫirsu* (Nik 1, 3 [P221710] obv. iv 1). According to 3rd millennium BCE documents, a Great River/Canal was located in the Lagas-*Ḫirsu* province (*Rulers of Lagas* 145; Edzard et al. 1977: 221–2). Zanetti (2023: 107; 205; 248; 309–11) argues that the canal known as *i₇-maḥ* in ED IIIb sources corresponds to the *i₇ bi₂-za-ge-le-le* attested in the Ur III period. In *Šū-ilīšu* 2 iii 11'–12' (E4.1.2.2), the Great River/Canal without divine determinative is also associated with *aštub*-carps: *i₇-maḥ a-^{ku}aštub DU-a-na | saḥar ḥa-an-^lda-si^l-[si]* “May he (Enki) silt up his Great River/Canal that used to bring the carp flood;” cf. also the OB *Kultlied über Damu* B 13: *i-lu-bi i₇ maḥ-e na-nam a-aštub na-u₃-TU* “this lament verily concerns the Great River/Canal; it used to bear the carp-flood” (CT 15, 26–27 [P345459]; Römer 2001: 195). For other sources locating *aštub*-carps in rivers, see the commentary on i 3'–5'. On stock strophes involving fish in rivers and marshes, cf. also Ferrara (1995: 95–100); reference courtesy Reviewer 2.
- i 9'–11': Based on the parallel occurrence of “X (waterbodies such as *i₇-maḥ*) *ni₂ ba₄-zal/Y* (fish such as *suḥur*; *aštub*) *na-nam*,” one would expect another type of fish or aquatic animal. The only fish in ED Fish (Q000014) ending in -NA is the *alerina_x* (MUŠ&MUŠ)^{na.ku₆}, which is, however, hardly compatible with the preserved trace (the upper part of a centrally placed *Winkelhaken*). Moreover, the *alerina*-fish – unlike *suḥur*- and *aštub*-carps – does not seem to be attested anywhere outside of ED Fish, while *suḥur*- and *aštub*-carps are often mentioned in parallel (e.g., *Enki's Journey to Nibru* 78–79, *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nibru* 176. 178 // 284. 286; 207 // 218 // 229 // 240 // 251; *Heron and Turtle* Segm. A 27–28; 75–76), without another animal present, making it harder to identify the third entity.⁹⁶ The uncertainty of the noun preceding *na-nam* also prevents a suggested reconstruction for the noun preceding *ni₂ ba₄-zal*.
- i 14': Comparison with iv 10' suggests that *Iškur*'s name filled the line.
- ii 1'–9': The syntax of col. ii remains uncertain, mainly because of the ambiguity of ii 10'–11'. Compare the sequence of differently coloured bulls in the Barton Cylinder col. xiv, 4–7 quoted in section 3.1. The closest conceptual parallel, however, is found in the Ur III period hymn 6N-T637 (P274973) col. iv, where different kinds of sheep are described according to the same pattern as in Ni 12501: X Y-gen₇ dim₂-ma (Rubio 1999: 167). Extensive comparisons involving animals, including cow (iii' 3') and calf (iii' 5'), are also attested in OSP 1, 4 (P221573), which may be related to 6N-T637 (Rubio 1999: 162–91).
- ii 1'–2': Based on ii 4'–9', one would expect ii 1' to contain a white cow, which is compared to a similarly-coloured entity in ii'. White cows are attested in *zame-Hymn* 47 (l. 162) as well as in ED lexical lists and administrative documents,⁹⁷ but */babbar/* is only used in reference to specific birds, such as *uz* “duck”, *uga* “raven”, or the *ḡiri₃-babbar^{mušen}* and the *giri₁₇-babbar^{mušen}* in OB Ura 04 and associated manuscripts.⁹⁸ The duck is the only animal specifically designated as white in ED Birds (Q000018) 17.

⁹⁶ Units of three are common in Ni 12501 and other Early Dynastic literary texts; cf., e.g., the three differently coloured (groups of) cows in ii 1'–9' and the *u₄-ri₂-a | ḡe₆-ri₂-a | mu-ri₂-a* sequence in the Barton Cylinder i 1–6 and parallel occurrences; also the tercet ending in *ge₁₇-ŠE₃ mu-ḡar-ḡar* in Barton Cylinder iv 4–9.

⁹⁷ ED Animals A (Q000012) 3; CUSAS 35, 195 (P252841) obv. i 2 (ED IIIb Adab; right after *am babbar₂* in obv. i 1); PSD A/II 157 s.v. *ab₂ A 1.3* and 163 s.v. *ab₂ A 3.6*. White cows are also frequently attested in Ur III economic

documents and more often mentioned in OB Sumerian literature than cows of other colours: *Sulgi* refers to himself as the calf of a white cow (*amar ab₂ babbar₂-ra*; *Sulgi C* 6); in *Sulgi F* 12 and *Sulgi X* 129 white cows are singled out in sections about animal fertility and abundance; in *Nanna F* 23 *babbar₂* is the only specification referring to their coat.

⁹⁸ *uz babbar^{mušen}*: OB Nippur Ura 04 (Q000041) 442; BM 92611 (CT 6, pl. 11–14; P247863) d i 41; UET 7, 92 (P247851) iii 25'; CUNES 52-10-163 (P411684) i' 4'. *uga babbar^{mušen}*: BM 92611 (CT 6, pl. 11–14; P247863) d ii 36;

- ii 4'–5': Brown cows are attested in ED Animals A (Q000012) 11, but the entity to which it is likened is unclear to me. Based on the determinative, it should be a red-brown type of wood. Note that OSP 1, 4 iv' 2' compares something to ^{ges}dašgari tu[n₃] bar-gen₇ “like a tamarisk cut by an axe” (cf. Rubio 1999: 164–65).
- ii 7'–8': Given the other colour terms, ge-ge is interpreted as an unorthographical spelling for gegge; cf. ab₂ gegge in ED Animals A (Q000012) 4. The black cows are compared to kohl reed; for TA×SIG₇ as a spelling for šembi_x, see N 290 (P275528) obv. 3 (ED IIIb Nippur). I am not aware of another attestation of kohl reed; my best guess is that it might have been used to apply the eye makeup.
- ii 10'–11': Schwemer (2001: 179 with n. 1258), who thought the loose fragment did not belong in ii 11', interpreted ^diškur-ra as dative and part of a speech introduction formula, with ii 12'–13' as direct speech. The correct placement of the fragment being established, I understand these lines as containing an anticipatory genitive construction (“of Iškur his ... cows”). The MU, however, is troubling. In administrative texts, cows are sometimes designated by their age (ab₂ mu n “n year(s) old cow”), but here a numeral is missing – and unexpected. An interpretation of mu as “name” likewise fails to convince: although the practice of naming cows is attested (Alivernini and Bramanti 2023), no names are mentioned in our text – unless we are to understand their description (“created like X”) as names? This seems improbable in light of 6N-T637 col. iv, cf. commentary on ii 1'–9' above. An interpretation of mu-zal as a verbal form is excluded in context, as it would be transitive. The uncertain meaning of MU notwithstanding, these lines seem to sum up the list of cows. Since ii 12' probably starts a new sentence, I translated i 11' as if it were a copular clause.
- ii 12'–16': “All the great young men” are in the ergative, probably doing something to the *en*-ship of Enlil. However, no predicate is preserved, and the last partially legible line seems to contain another divine name. The traces are compatible with ^diškur¹, but this reconstruction is not certain. If so, it would have significant ramifications for the plot, as the next intelligible passage places Iškur and his cows in the *kur*.
- ii 13': The office of nam-en, here tentatively translated as lordship, is commonly associated with rule over the city of Uruk. On several stone vessels excavated in Nippur, ED IIIb ruler Lugal-kiĝeneš-dudu credits Enlil with making him both *en* and king (lugal): u₄ ^den-lil₂ | gu₃ zi e-na-de₂-a | nam-en | nam-lugal-da | e-na-da-tab-ba-a | unu^{ki}-ga | nam-en | mu-AK-ke₄ | uri₂^{ki}-ma | nam-lugal | mu-AK-ke₄ “When Enlil had truly called on him (to select him for office), he combined the title/office of *en* and the title/office of king for Lugal-kiĝeneš-dudu. He (then) ruled as *en* in Uruk and as king in Ur (ll. 4–14).”⁹⁹ However, a connection to Uruk is unlikely in the present context. In the *Figure aux Plumes* nam-en AK simply seems to mean “to reign.”¹⁰⁰ In later sources, nam-en and nam-lugal are often mentioned side-by-side, indicating that they are understood as different terms for rulership.¹⁰¹ The specific term for the sovereignty of Enlil, nam-^den-lil₂ (Akkadian *ellilātu*), is only attested from the Old Babylonian period onwards. While the syntax of ii 13'–14' suggests a genitive construction (nam-en Enlil=ak), the context is overall too destroyed to allow for a confident hypothesis that nam-en ^den-lil₂ could correspond to later nam-^den-lil₂. It is hence unclear if the event recounted in ii 12'–16' bore any similarity with Anzu stealing the *ellilātu* in OB Anzû II 1–2 ~ SB Anzû I b+147 (cf. Heinrich 2022a and 2022b).
- iii 1': If the reading ^rx¹-n[u₂] proposed by Reviewer 1 is correct, one would expect the first sign to be a verbal prefix. However, the tails of three parallel vertical wedges do not easily match any.
- iii 4'–6': The contents of these cases are, unfortunately, unclear to me. Since they are nestled between two sentences (iii 2'–3' and iii 7'–8'), one would expect them to contain at least one finite verb. If

IM 051144 (CM 22, pl. 36–37; P247864) rev. iv 32. ģiri₃-babbar^{mušen}. OB Nippur Ura 04 (Q000041) 477. giri₁₇-babbar^{mušen}. OB Nippur Ura 04 (Q000041) 478.

⁹⁹ A similar text is found on two other stone vessels excavated in Nippur, but there the one who combined the titles for Lugal-kiĝeneš-dudu is Innana, goddess of Uruk (RIME 1.14.14.02 = Q001370).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. the interpretation attempts by Wilcke (1995: 673) and Lecompte (2020: 421) on i 2, ii 2, iii 1, iii 3, and iv 1.

¹⁰¹ E.g., *Nintur A* (Q000719) 39 and 43; *Iddin-Dagan A* (Q000447) 24; *Ur-Ninurta E* (Q000494) 40; CT 58, 44 (P274239) obv. 5'; *Lament for Sumer and Ur* (Q000380) 53 and 452, *Ninurta's Exploits* (Q000351) 709.

the preserved sign in ii 5' is DU, then this line likely contained a predicate, with the poorly preserved sign in iii 4' representing the agent/subject. The first two signs in iii 6' could be read ^{ueš}deb “wooden board,” but whether this fits the context is doubtful (note that what might be mistaken for a second vertical as in DA₂ is a tiny crack that continues into the next line and runs through ab₂, excluding ba₄ as a verbal prefix). MUŠ₃ is in the position where one would expect the verbal base, but the available options (suh₁₀ “to be chosen;” “to tear out”; se₂₇-d “to be cool;” “to soothe”) are unconvincing and the sign(s) above epigraphically uncertain. The second sign is not the clear KU₆ copied by Westenholz (2023: 291).

- iii 9'–12': In iii 9', a faint erasure atop the first part of EN (read DIŠ by Schwemer 2001: 179) suggests that the scribe had first written ^{d+}EN as in ^{d+}en-E₂.¹⁰² Schwemer (ibid.) read twice še-mu-ti-la-e and translated “der Herr, der sich in der Unterwelt aufhält” without commenting on the curious -e. Collation confirms it is not E but ŠE₃. Since the verbal forms in iii 10' and 12' are nominalized, the terminative may represent an abbreviated form of {mu ...=ak=še} and supply a reason for what follows. The form itself is perfective, but since Iškur has yet to be rescued, my translation assumes that he has been – and still is – staying in the *kur*. However, given the fragmentary context, it cannot be excluded that this refers to a previous sojourn of the storm god in the *kur*.

The form še₃-mu-til₃-la-še₃ is attested in the small fragment IAS 340 (P010274) ii 1', 3', and 5'. While, as remarked by Reviewer 1 when elaborating on my observation, the text seems to share with Ni 12501 the motif of someone going away and bovines eating grass that does not fill them, to my eyes the details and rest of the preserved narrative differ.¹⁰³ Significantly, še₃-mu-til₃-la-še₃ is associated with a workshop, possibly that of the divine smith,¹⁰⁴ and the *kur* is nowhere mentioned. However, certainty can only be reached once additional fragments are identified.

- iii 13'–15': The 1st person singular possessive pronoun suggests that the entire section preserved in col. iii is direct speech. While the epithet ama “mother” suggests that EŠPEŠ is female, we know too little about her to be able to determine her child – and hence the speaker of these lines. She is attested in god lists from Fāra and Tell Abū Šalābīḥ (cf. Mander 1986), offering lists, a few personal names such as ur-^{deš}(₅)-PEŠ and gan-^{deš}(₅)-PEŠ, and in the name of a canal (i₇-^{deš}(₅)-PEŠ-DU); she also had a temple with priests.¹⁰⁵ Reviewer 1 suggest that ^{deš}(₅)-PEŠ and ^{deš}(₅)-GI may be different spellings of the same theonym, because in the Tell Abū Šalābīḥ god list (Q000036) 179–80 ^{deš}(₅)-PEŠ directly follows ^{deš}(₅)-gi and both deities have a connection with Iškur: in the Tell Abū Šalābīḥ god list 35–36 ^{deš}(₅)-gi follows Iškur and in the Fāra god list (SF 001; P010566) ^{deš}(₅)-PEŠ is mentioned in rev. ii 9, three lines after Iškur in rev. ii 6. This would then speak for the reading ^{deš}(₅)-gir rather than ^{deš}(₅)-peš.

The lidga measure, equalling 240 litres, is a core unit in the ED III period and continues to be used until the late 3rd millennium BCE, especially in Nippur (Powell 1990: 494–97).

- iv 2'–3': In both lines, ŠE₃ is tentatively interpreted as the 3rd person plural suffix consistent with the reduplicated form of DU in iv 3', although the marking of the plural for a collective of unnamed

¹⁰² Reviewer 1 suggests that Iškur's title en “lord” recalls the title *bā'l* of the Northwest-Semitic storm god. As argued in section 2, I consider it more likely to be a common poetic feature by which an epithet is replaced by a proper name in a verbatim repetition.

¹⁰³ The lower end of obv. i contains the following text (largely after Reviewer 1, who supplied a transliteration and translation of i 1'–6'): [...] 'x¹ | 'e¹-ḡen-na | dug mu-da-haš-haš | gud u₂ še¹ (copy suggests GI) i₃-gu₂ | gud ša₃ nu-mi-si | 'mu šu²-na² 'e-ḡen-na¹ “[Because? X had gone, (s)he broke the pots. The oxen/bulls ate grass and grain¹ (or reed²), (but) the oxen/bulls were not satiated. Because (s)he had gone into² his/her hands², [...]].” Note that Biggs (1974: 92) states “it is doubtful that the fragment copied as the last line of column i (i.e., i 6') belongs to this tablet.” Clearly this section describes a situation where something is wrong, but this occurs already at the beginning of the narrative, where in Ni 12501 earth is still in a state of bliss. Moreover, the scene features oxen/bulls rather than cows (cf. also amar “calves” in ii 4').

¹⁰⁴ ii 2' mentions the lord of the workshop (en e₂-umum – or is umum to be read simug?) and ii 4' likely the house of the divine smith (e₂ ^dsimug).

¹⁰⁵ Cf. the evidence collected by Such-Gutiérrez 2005–06: 16. Add, e.g., the following attestations: EŠPEŠ is a recipient of offerings alongside other deities including Iškur in CUSAS 35, 095 (P252710; ED IIIB Adab), CUSAS 11, 216 (P328963; Sargonic Adab), CUSAS 13, 141 (P323064; Sargonic Adab), CL 058 (P472373; Sargonic Adab), CUSAS 35, 340 (P500514) rev. 6 (Sargonic Adab; the divine name in rev. 5 is probably ^diš[kur]), and CUSAS 19, 079 (P322672) rev. 4' (Sargonic Adab; here Iškur is not mentioned in the preserved parts). Moreover, she is a solitary recipient of offerings in TCBI 1, 057 (P382309) i 3 and her temple (e₂) is mentioned in CUSAS 20, 291 (P328988) rev. 3. A temple administrator (saṅṅa) of EŠPEŠ is mentioned in CUSAS 11, 331 (P323960) obv. i 2 (Sargonic Adab) and CUSAS 20, 364 (P324955) rev. i 3' (Sargonic Adab).

children in the absolutive is surprising. I had discounted the possibility of ŠE₃ marking the quotative suffix {eše}, brought up again by Reviewer 1, mainly because 1) it is unclear if iv 2'–3' are part of the narrative or direct speech and 2) I know of no ED attestations, neither in narratives nor in proverbs, although {eše} is particularly common in OB proverb collections. I am also unaware of examples where the quotative is attached to two consecutive statements uttered by the same speaker; usually it is only added to the last sentence. More research on ED literary and proverbial material is needed; if there is corroborating early evidence for the quotative used in this way, then this could be an early example.

It is also uncertain if the forms are perfective or imperfective. In later periods, the *hamtu* base of (u₃)-du₂-ud / (u₃)-tu “to be born” clearly has a d-Auslaut but in the ED period it is never written in word-final position,¹⁰⁶ as is generally the case with closed syllables. ba-DU.DU-ŠE₃, on the other hand, is not only ambiguous regarding the aspect but also with respect to the underlying lexeme; options are *nen*/du “to go” and *de*₆ or *tum*₂ “to carry (off) / lead away,” each with their respective plural bases. According to Katz (2003: 33), *nen*/du is “the most common verb used to describe the movement to the netherworld” across periods and genres, though the directive rather than the terminative (as in v 3') is unexpected. *kur-re*₂ may hence more likely denote the ergative, in which case both forms would be perfective. For a similarly ambiguous form, cf. AO 13349 (DP 141; P220791) rev. iii 2, an administrative tablet from the reign of IriKAgina, which records lu₂ ^dba-U₂ *kur-re*₂ la₅-ha-me “they are people of BaU who were deported by (or: went to) the *kur*.”¹⁰⁷ For the *kur* actively snatching victims, cf. *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* 226 and parallel lines: *kur-re im-ma-an-dab*₅ “the *kur* has seized him (Enkidu).”

iv 8'//11': On bar tab “to banish”, see Matuszak and Alessawe (2024: 46) with lit.

iv 9'//12': My translation of the initial D-shaped sign, which was read U by Falkenstein (1965: 133 n. 70) and – perhaps judiciously? – ignored by PSD B 130 s.v. bar – tab and Schwemer (2001: 179), is admittedly conjectural and dependent on the idea that, as in other hero narratives, Enlil is hoping for a single champion to come forward. Sövegjártó (2019: 289) read the sign dili and translated “Who will bring the unique one back?” The fact that the direct object stands before a-ba speaks in favour of her solution, but dili as a reference to Iškur somehow seems unlikely to me (I might be wrong). To my knowledge, the interrogative pronoun a-ba is never paired with a numeral that would allow for the translation “(is there) one who ...?” or “who is the one that ...?” This is in later periods partially achieved by adding the enclitic copula -am₃. I am also unaware of the D-shaped sign being used as a marker of questions (which, given the interrogative pronoun, seems superfluous).

iv 13': Note the use of the phonetic indicator ka₅^a, which is missing in v 3' – either by mistake or because disambiguation was no longer necessary. Assuming that Fox offers help just as Wolf does in *Ezinan and her Seven Children* 95–103, compare the wording there (adapted from Krebern timer and Lisman 2024: 184–85):

	[u]r ² -r ¹ bar ² ₁	Wolf ⁹
	a-ne igi ba ₄ -gub	stepped up towards him (Enki).
95	ur-bar	Wolf
	igi ba ₄ -lib	was wide awake.
	a-ne ba ₄ -gub	He stepped up towards him.
	DA ₂ [A]B × AŠ ₂ .IGI su du ₁₀	“I, as someone who pleases the ‘Old Man,’
	[i]gi-za ga-tuš	I want to sit in front of you.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. the attestations collected by Farber (2014: 161); all forms are in the 3rd person singular and hence without suffixes. Add to this i₃-TU in MBI 2 (P222184) iii 8(?) and iv 1, though the d-Auslaut seems to be preserved in iii 3: NI(-) d[u₂]²-da (cf. (...)du₂-da in IAS 281 [P226023] obv. ii' 4(?)), and *Ezinan and her Seven Children* 29: ziz₂ dumu 7 mu-TU “Wheat gave birth to seven children.”

¹⁰⁷ This has been interpreted as a euphemism for death (Bauer 1998: 486–87; “to go”) or as a reference to the deportation of prisoners of war (Steinkeller 1979: 57; Selz 1995: 79 [kur-re₂ as directive]; Selz 1999/2000: 44 n. 176 [Mesanepada construction with kur-re₂ as ergative]; “to carry off”).

100	[...] ...	
	[...] ...	
	ʽsaman ₄ ʽ-[la ₂ ʽ] ga-me	I want to be (your) aid (lit., trader), ¹⁰⁸
	igi-za ga-tuš	I want to sit in front of you.”

v 1'–2': These two cases likely formed a pair, since they both contain locatives. In v 1', the first sign may be 'KUG' followed by a sign whose identification is uncertain – unless the traces in the upper 'register' of the case all belong to a single sign.¹⁰⁹ In v 2', the sign GIN₂ could either represent some kind of axe (aga₃ or giḡ₄) or a crown (aga₃); after ša₃-g “interior” one expects a locative corresponding to -ni-.

v 4': The modal prefix ḫe₂- is – perhaps deliberately – ambiguous, as is the verbal base DU “to go”: one could read it either ḡen (perfective) or du (imperfective).¹¹⁰ The orthographic ambiguity allowing for both epistemic and deontic interpretations (cf. Civil 2000 [2005]) works perfectly in the context of instruction and implementation: the two cuneiform signs, depending on their reading, could simultaneously convey a speaker's wish that Fox go to the netherworld and record the fact that Fox indeed carried out the task.

v 5'–8': The reconstruction of v 8' had already been proposed by Civil (1976b: 91) in his commentary on *The Song of the Plowing Oxen* 16–17 (inda₃ kuš₁lu-ub₂ ḫa-ma-ni-in-ḡar-ra-am₃ | a kuš₁ummu₃-da ḫa-ma-ni-in-de₂-am₃ “May she put bread into the leather bag for me; may she pour water into the waterskin for me!”). It is supported by ED Practical Vocabulary A (Q000293) 268–69, where lu-ub₂ “(leather) bag” is followed by kuš₁ummu₃-d(A.EDIN) “waterskin,” and, indirectly, by a fragmentary episode in the Barton Cylinder (xv 9–10 // 14–15), in which flour in a sack (kuš₁ḡa₂-la₂) and water in a waterskin (kuš₁ummu₃-d, spelled EDIN.LAL.A) play an (unclear) role.

The meaning of šu ge₄, a phrasal verb composed of šu “hand” and ge₄ “to return,” is unclear in the present context of Fox's operations in the *kur*.¹¹¹ In approaching its semantics, I will partly rely on my interpretation of the terse account in col. v as well as later parallels (cf. section 4.4) – admittedly a complex set of assumptions. I understand the switch from narrative (perfective indicatives) in 1'–2' to the wish¹¹² in v 3'–4' back to narrative (perfective indicatives) in 5'–7' as a condensed account conflating (omitted) instructions and their implementation. Considering that Fox hid the bread and water, he must have first accepted it. His actions hence differ from those of other travellers to different cosmic domains such as Adapa, who refuse the welcoming gifts (expressed with a negated form of šu gid₂; cf. *Adapa* 137–41 + parallels and, similarly phrased, the demons failing to bribe Deštinana in *Dumuzi's Dream* 131–32). There are, to my mind, two options for translating šu ge₄, depending on which noun is in the absolutive and which in the directive. I tentatively propose to understand šu ge₄ here as meaning “(to return something (abs.) into (someone's) hand (dir.) >) to refuse,” which illustrates the contrast with other episodes employing šu gid₂ “to accept.”¹¹³ Alternatively, one could understand šu ge₄ as “to retract the hand (abs.) with respect to something (dir.)” (cf. Attinger 2023: 519–20), yielding a similar result. In both cases, the switch from negated to positive statement in v 5'–6' (what Fox ostentatiously did not do versus what he surreptitiously did) would highlight his deceitful nature.

¹⁰⁸ The use of saman₄-la₂ “trader; agent; merchant's assistant” rather than a more conventional word for “helper” is noteworthy in this context. It is uncertain but not inconceivable that the word choice implies a certain amount of double-dealing in the accomplishment of the task at hand. Cf. also the discussion in section 4.4.

¹⁰⁹ The reading KIB suggested by Reviewer 1 is epigraphically impossible. The sign is also not KU₆ as copied by Westenholz (2023: 291).

¹¹⁰ Transitive readings of DU, such as de₆ “to carry” or tum₂ “to lead,” appear less likely in context, though given the axe/crown in the preceding line cannot be excluded either.

¹¹¹ The choice of šu nu-ge₄ may play on kur nu-ge₄ “the land of no return,” i.e., the netherworld (suggestion by Mark Weeden).

¹¹² Cf. the commentary on v 4' above.

¹¹³ For šu (dir.?) ge₄ “to return *with* the hand,” see Attinger 2023: 519–20. Note, however, that “to return something into someone's hand” normally requires {šu (...) (term.) ge₄} or {šu + possessive suffix (loc.) ge₄} (*ibid.*).

v 9'–12': The last lines are badly preserved, but the sequence u₄ “day” and MI (= ȳe₆ “night”?) in 9' and 11', respectively, probably indicated the passing of time while Fox was on mission in the *kur*. The sequence u₄ – ȳe₆ also marks the passage of time in the Barton Cylinder xviii 4–5.

v 10' and 12' both featured deities. Whether Utu was also mentioned in 12', perhaps reflecting his daily journeys across the sky and then through the netherworld at night, remains pure speculation. His appearance on scene could also be related to the fact that he knows all cosmic realms, including the netherworld, and is implored to mediate and help those embarking on dangerous journeys: In *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* 239–42, Utu opens a hole to the netherworld so Enkidu's ghost can rise to inform Gilgameš how people fare there. In *Gilgameš and Huwawa* (A 9–34 // B 23–33), Gilgameš prays to Utu for support in his journey to Huwawa's realm (*kur*). In *Dumuzi's Dream* (164–239) and *Innana's Descent* (369–79), Dumuzi implores Utu to transform him into swiftly fleeing animals so he can escape the demons who want to abduct him to the netherworld.

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عن آلهة العواصف الأسيرة والثعالب الماكرة: رؤى جديدة في الأساطير السومرية المبكرة، مع طبعة ني 12501
بقلم: يانا ماتوزاك

تنشر هذه الورقة نسخة من الطبعة الأولى من لوح من طبعة ED IIIb من نيبور، والذي يحتوي على رواية سومرية فريدة من نوعها ولكنها مجزأة عن أسر إله العاصفة إيشكور في العالم السفلي، والذي يبدو أنه تم إنقاذه منه على يد ثعلب. وفي حين أن عدم اكتمال حالة الحفظ يحول دون سرد القصة بشكل صحيح، ولكن يمكن تتبع الزخارف الفردية عبر مجموعة النصوص المسمارية بأكملها، مما يسمح بإجراء دراسة حال أولية للاستمرارية والتغيير على مدى أكثر من ألفي عام من الأدب الأسطوري في بلاد ما بين النهرين.