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Title

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Permalink

Journal

ISSN

Author

Myerston, Jacobo

Publication Date

2022-07-01

DOI

Jacobo Myerston*

Variations on Violence in Greek and Akkadian Succession Myths

Abstract: In this article I explore a selection of texts from Greece and Mesopotamia that either recount or comment on the succession myth. I argue that representations of violence in those texts differ considerably within the same culture and time period. I explain these variations as social deixis, positing that ancient authors and interpreters of the succession myth used different representations of violence to present themselves as innovative figures. I argue that both mythmakers and myth-interpreters increased and decreased the intensity and number of violent features to mark a position in the competitive field of cosmological knowledge. Through the comparison of the sources, I show that there was as much competition and innovation in Greece as in Mesopotamia within the field of cosmology. The similarity of social contexts and practices may explain the cross-cultural transfer of knowledge between specialists of these two regions.

Keywords: Succession Myth, Greece, Mesopotamia, Violence, Cosmology, Deixis, Variation, Hermeneutics, Ancient Scholarship.

1 Introduction

The term *succession myth* refers to a series of stories of the Eastern Mediterranean that metaphorically conceptualize the formation of the cosmos as a usurpation process. More specifically, succession myths recount the history of the universe as a sequence of discrete events, the boundaries of which coincide with the rules of succeeding divine kings. This process often contains elements of violence, as the castration of Ouranos by Kronos and the killing and dismembering of Tiamtu at the hands of Marduk. However, contrary to what it is normally assumed, this divine succession is not always violent. The degree of violence, from its full presence to its entire absence, varies notably within the same culture. In this article, I explore how violence is represented in the succession myths of Greece and Mesopotamia and investigate the possible functions of such representations. I argue

*Corresponding author: Jacobo Myerston, University of California, San Diego, USA,
E-Mail: jmyerston@ucsd.edu

that forms of portraying violence were related to discursive strategies of myth-makers and cosmologists who sought to define a position in their field of cosmological knowledge.[1] Embracing or rejecting violence was a way of producing meaningful differences that could be used to distinguish one intellectual project from another and, at the same time, to increase symbolic capital. I tackle this issue making use of the concept of deixis that I explain in the next section.

Although I use the term myth, I do not limit my approach to the study of mythemes and motifs that were shared by a group of texts. Rather, I conceive the succession myth as a symbolic medium that includes both narrations and reactions that may or may not take the form of mythical discourse.[2] By symbolic medium, I mean a stable framework that offered not only narrative components to choose from – i.e. motifs, themes, tropes, and so on –, but also modalities of engaging with discourses produced within the myth. Among those modalities was the possibility to agree or disagree with myth variants as a whole or with some aspects of them. Disagreement and other forms of rejection allowed for the emergence of meta-discursive elements that could manifest as critiques of stories of divine succession. These critiques, which have often been studied as separate phenomena, are not to be taken as a form of disengagement but as a particular way of reproducing and transforming the succession myth.

For practical reasons, I limit myself to a selection of Greek and Akkadian sources, which were geographically and temporally close enough to suggest a direct or mediated relationship. The plan of this essay is as follows: First, I discuss extratextual components of the succession myth while aiming to show that its textualizations were embedded in a wide framework of social interaction. Second, I turn to the comparison of the Akkadian and Greek sources. In the final part of the paper, I propose that variations on the theme of violence are related to dynamics of differentiation between authors who wanted to stand out as innovators in relation to other individuals who operated within the same discursive tradition. Regarding the succession myth, my findings show that there was as much variation in the representation of violence in Greece as in Mesopotamia, which contradicts the view that holds that authors who wrote in cuneiform were less prone to innovation than their Greek counterparts.[3]

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1 I follow here López-Ruiz 2010 who has shown that the interest on cosmological questions was one important factor in the diffusion of knowledge in the ancient Mediterranean. For a cross-cultural study of the field of cosmological knowledge see Helms 1998.
2 I have inherited the notion of symbolic medium from Luhmann 1972; Luhmann 1987; Luhmann 1998.
3 See, for instance, Frahm 2018, 12 who writes "the highly conservative attitude cuneiform scholars displayed towards many areas of knowledge, are, in my view, to be found in the politi-

2 Social Deixis and the Representation of Violence

As I have just mentioned, the succession myth not only offered motifs to choose from but also made available various deictic strategies which allowed mythmakers to mark their positions in relation to others within the field of cosmology. As a function of language and, consequently, of any discourse, deixis is the signaling of the temporal, spatial, and social location of referents. Deixis has been much discussed in classics, but the debate has centered mainly around how literary texts refer to the contexts in which they were performed, i.e, rituals, festivals, and so on.[4] In this regard, grammatical deictics have received more attentions than other indexical expressions. For instance, classicists have focused on deictic pronouns and adjectives, spatial and temporal adverbs, locatives, and verbal tenses and aspects which express an internal point of view.[5] Thus, the study of deixis applied to ancient Greek texts has focused on the grammatical aspects of indexes. In other disciplines, however, like anthropology and sociolinguistics, the study of deixis includes more general symbolic strategies that indicate the position of the speaker in a web of social categories.[6]

My focus here is on this latter type of deixis, a way of signaling the social status of the narrators and texts. For this purpose, it is useful to briefly turn to the concepts of semantic and non-semantic indexes (deictics). About half a century ago, the sociolinguist Michael Silverstein distinguished between semantic (denotational) and non-semantic (non-denotational) indexes.[7] First and second person pronouns and deictic adjectives like 'this' have semantic properties insofar as they can denote actors and objects present or presupposed in the context of a message. Other indexes, however, have no semantic properties in the strict sense and are used only to situate the speaker or the message within social categories. Such indexes are, for example, honorific vocabularies employed to express

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cal landscape of first millennium Mesopotamia, dominated as it was by autocratic structures and powerful kings". Here Frahm sees a symmetric relation between political structure and ancient scholarship. For similar assumptions see, e. g., Lloyd 1989, 54. Finn 2017 and Robson 2019 have shown that the idea of Mesopotamian intellectuals being highly conservative and completely controlled by the king is no longer tenable.

4 See for instance, Bakker 1999; Felson 1999; Calame 2005; Athanassaki 2009; D'Alessio 2009.

5 Felson 1999, 4.

6 See, e. g., Eckert 2000. Viveiros de Castro 1998 writes about cosmological deixis in the Amazonian context, an idea worth applying to ancient cosmogonies but that for a matter of space I cannot develop in this paper.

7 Silverstein 1976.

respect towards an addressee, like the mother-in-law lexicon of some Australian aborigines, or replacement vocabularies, like the substitution in English of words like *eat* and *home* by *dine* and *residence* to indicate formality.[8] On the other hand, variation of intonation, pronunciation, and lexica can indicate social class, gender, and ethnicity.[9] This is the case of American English where 'valley girl', 'white', 'Chicano', and 'black' forms of speaking mark, through linguistic variation, gender, class, and ethnicity.[10] This use of variation is also known from the ancient world where we not only find ethnolects and literary dialects but also forms of speech that differentiate women from men and vice versa.[11] Moving beyond the purely linguistic domain, my aim is to show that indexical variation also occurs at the narrative level; put in a different way, variation on narrative features can indicate the social position of authors and texts.

Although narrative deictics could be numerous, I restrict myself here to investigate how variations on the theme of violence can signal the text's place within a larger context of myth textualizations. It is my purpose then to show that an apparently sheer semantic feature, namely the violent actions of the gods, was often employed pragmatically to indicate social and ideological positions of mythmakers in the social field in which they operated. In the next section, I will show how this deictic process worked.

3 Origins and Transformations of the Succession Myth

As early as the second millennium BCE, the succession myth was already in use as a symbolic medium of communication, constituted as the result of human interactions through social networks of various kinds.[12] Besides trade and migration, one key factor in the formation of those networks were the competing states and empires of the Near East and the Aegean. The early states of the Eastern Mediterranean and their dynamics of power legitimization pushed for the exchange

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8 Regarding the Australian language, Dyirbal, Silverstein 1976, 32 writes "there is an 'everyday' set of lexical items, and a 'mother-in-law' set, which had to be used by a speaker only in the presence of his classificatory mother-in-law or equivalent affine". For replacement vocabularies in English, see Huang 2015, 166.
9 See Eckert 2000; Silverstein 2003; for the classical world, Clackson 2015.
10 Eckert 2008.
11 Clackson 2015, 123.
12 See Bachvarova 2016 with references.

of prestige goods and symbols, something that had a considerable impact on the mobility of specialized personnel and the ideas that they produced.[13] In relation to the political elites who sought to increase their symbolic and social capital via the consumption of wisdom, Mary Bachvarora writes that "foreign performers, healers, and craftsmen could be collected like esoteric objects to enhance the prestige of local courts, an impulse that can be seen from third-millennium Ebla, the early second-millennium court of Mari, the Neo-Assyrian courts, the court of Polycrates, tyrant of Samos (...), and the court of the Lydian king Croesus in Sardis, which (...) all the leading Greek sophists made a point to visit".[14]

Driven by the desire to increase prestige, elites of different times and regions within the Eastern Mediterranean traded, among other things, experts who told stories about the origin of the world.[15] But centralized exchange at the hand of kings and strong men was not the only factor that caused the emergence of the succession myth as a medium of transregional communication. In fact, independent wandering poets and people of wisdom are also well attested.[16] In any of those centers of power that Bachvarova describes, but also outside of them, experts interested in understanding the gods and the cosmos met and had the succession myth as a common template for the elaboration of their own theories about the origin of the universe and the place that gods and humans hold in it.

Men of power who made cosmologists move across distance were not the only ones who strived for prestige. Scribes, poets, and philosophers also sought the building of symbolic capital in their own terms. They could use the embracing or rejecting of violence in the context of the succession myth as a strategic choice to distinguish themselves from other thinkers (more in section 4). This occurred in highly competitive environments, which are acknowledged to have existed in Greece but that are generally denied for Mesopotamian scribal culture, a tradition that modern scholarship has associated with conservatism.[17]

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13 Zaccagnini 1983; Moyer 2006; Rollinger 2018 and Bachvarova 2016, especially chapter 9.
14 Bachvarova 2016, 208. For an important theoretical contribution on the relationship between social networks and interaction in ancient Greece and China, see Collins 1998 chapters 1–4.
15 Other themes, of course, were traded, such as the stories about legendary kings like Sargon and Gilgamesh. But those stories were part of a different conversation, *pace* Haubold 2002 who thinks that both Greek and Near Eastern heroic poetry belong to the cosmogonic genre.
16 For a treatment of the subject see the various contributions in the edited volume by Hunter/ Rutherford 2009. See also Herrero de Jáuregui 2008.
17 See note 3.

3.1 Social Networks and Transcultural Communication

The many layers of exchange and interaction that lie under the succession myth are not difficult to recognize, especially when we compare its different regional manifestations. Similarities between different textualizations have been used to trace chains of interactions between the agents that participated in the telling and retelling, composing, and recomposing of the succession myth. In the case of Hesiod, for instance, convergence of motifs and storylines has been used to show that the *Theogony* had its forerunners in Hittite, Hurrian, Levantine, Babylonian, and Egyptian narratives.[18] By now, we know that during the second millennium the Hurrians, who inhabited part of Anatolia, Syria, and Northern Mesopotamia, acted as a cultural bridge between the land of Akkad and the Hittites.[19] The Hittites, in turn, were partly responsible for the transmission of many Mesopotamian traditions – that they received from the Hurrians – to Western Anatolia. The flow of communication in the opposite direction, from Anatolia and Syria back to Mesopotamia, is also attested, especially in the motif of the struggle between the Storm God and the Sea. This theme seems to appear for the first time in Mesopotamia by the end of the second millennium but was previously attested in the Ugaritic epic *Cycle of Baal* and in the Hurro-Hittite *Song of the Hedammu* and the *Song of Ullikummi*.[20] Most of the routes and modes of exchange that we find in the second millennium continue during the first millennium, although new empires, ethnic identities, and professions emerge.

The Hurro-Hittite material speaks with particular clarity about the different layers of intercultural transmission, exhibiting a high degree of cultural hybridity.[21] In the *Song of Emergence,* for example, we find a mixture of Hurrian gods, like Kumarbi and Teššub, and Sumero-Akkadian divinities, like Alalu, Anu, Enlil, Enki, and Ishtar among others.[22] The different cultural layers embedded in these texts reflect the movement in space of the poets and scribes who engaged in exchanging and thinking about the world within the framework of the succession myth. For Alfonso Archi, the Hurrian version of the succession myth was "the

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[18] Haider 2005; Rutherford 2009; López-Ruiz 2010; van Dongen 2010; van Dongen 2011; Campbell 2013; Clay/Gilan 2014; Ayali-Darshan 2015; Bachvarova 2016; Bachvarova 2018.

[19] See Heubeck 1955, for an early articulation of this position and Gilan 2021 for the most recent treatment of the issue.

[20] Jacobsen 1968; Durand 1993; Archi 2004; Ayali-Darshan 2015.

[21] The term Hurro-Hittite refers to a group of mythological composition found in the Hattusa, the capital of the Hittite empire, see Bachvarova 2016, especially chapter 2 with references.

[22] I use here the critical edition of the *Song of Emergence* by Rieken *et al.* 2009.

fruit of a profound process of acculturation that had already begun at the end of the Akkadian period".[23]

3.2 The Meaning of the Myth

Although recent scholarship has clarified the processes of exchange and interaction that gave rise to the succession myth as a symbolic medium, grasping what was communicated through such a medium is more problematic. Today's tendency is to interpret the succession myth in political terms, that is, as a theological legitimization of authority. In the case of Ugarit, Carolina López-Ruiz interprets the *Baal Epic* as an attempt to legitimize political change through a theology based on divine succession.[24] In the case of the Hittites, Bachvarova has suggested a possible connection between the Storm-god, Teššub, and an ancestor cult.[25] In such a context, the supreme Storm-god would have acted as a symbol of royal power, a divine counterpart of the actual king, while the deposed gods like Anu and Kumarbi could have been linked with the spirits of previous dead kings who needed to be appeased and controlled by the living king. In Section 5, I will come back to discuss similar interpretations that have been proposed to make sense of *Enūma eliš*.

Although it is certain that the succession myth had a political layer that may have appealed to the elites that consumed such stories, we should not reduce this narrative to its political content. If we do so, we may well overlook the meaning that an important number of ancient poets and interpreters assigned to it. Simply, if we stay close to ancient interpretations of the succession myth, as they appear both in Mesopotamian and Greek commentaries, it seems that the content communicated through this mythical complex is what appears on the surface: models of the origin of the world and histories of the cosmos and its gods.[26]

Thus, there is nothing that forces us to assume that the meaning that poets, diviners, and philosophers conferred to the succession myths was necessarily the same as the one that kings could have attributed to them.[27] Jennifer Finn has clearly shown that even in the Neo-Assyrian empire, in which intellectual activ-

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23 Archi 2009, 212.

24 López-Ruiz 2010, 171–182. See Tugendhaft 2018 for an alternative interpretation.

25 Bachvarova 2016, 152.

26 For the interpretation of the Babylonian *Epic of Creation* as a cosmology particularly interested in the role of language in the universe, see Myerston 2013 and van de Mieroop 2015, 2018.

27 Cf. the important distinction between subjective and objective meaning that Schütz 1932 developed early in the 20th century.

ity was closely supervised by the palace, royal and scribal ideologies operated independently as two autonomous systems: while the royal discourse aimed at legitimizing power, the inner discourse of the scribes worked towards producing knowledge about the world.[28] The latter occurred despite the fact that the kings were greatly invested in controlling the discursive production of the scribal class. What applied to the fierce Assyrians must not have been much different from other political formations of the region. Thus, despite the political implications of the myth, there was a meaning that the ancients attributed to it, and this was cosmological.

Cosmology then was part of the horizon of expectations attached to the myth. This horizon determined not only which themes and topics could be selected and combined but also how mythmakers and exegetes could enter and leave the conversation around divine succession. Within those boundaries, violence in its different degrees was one of the levers that could be manipulated to create variations of the overall structure and meaning of the myth. I see these variations, however, not as mere transformations of mythemes, as it has been suggested in past publications of structuralist orientation, but as the consequence of strategies to claim symbolic capital.[29] These took place within frameworks for action and communication, which were present throughout a vast geographical area and extended period of time.[30] In the next section I will explore how indexical gestures were used within the succession myth to claim a privilege position among stories and storytellers.

4 The Succession Myth in Greece and Mesopotamia

In this section I compare a series of texts that either tell or provide commentary on stories of divine succession. I begin with the Greeks because they have left us important evidence of how the succession myth could be discussed from antagonistic perspectives on the central role of violence. The dialogue in which Plato describes how Euthyphro, a diviner, and Socrates, a philosopher, disagree about the meaning of the succession myth can serve as a model for understanding a long tradition of mythmaking and interpretation. Equally useful are the intertex-

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28 Finn 2017.

29 See Littleton 1969 for the classic structuralist approach, but also more recently Ayali-Darshan 2015.

30 See López-Ruiz 2010 with references.

tual relationships between Orphic theogonies and Hesiod's *Theogony* given that they differ in how they represent violence.

In Greece the most violent forms of the succession myth were attributed to Orpheus and his followers.[31] But, paradoxically, within the same Orphic circles there were some who removed all traits of violence from the myth through allegorical readings.[32] This expunging resulted from the transposition of the Orphic theogony into a natural cosmogony that contained many features of pre-Socratic physics. Similar to this allegorizing trend within the Orphic circles, is what we observe in Plato's critique of the succession myth and the countermyths he produced as a response. Let us start with *Euthyphro* because it is an unparalleled source for the study of the structures of expectations that concerns us in this study.

4.1 Euthyphro

Although it has been largely neglected in the study of myth, Plato's *Euthyphro* illustrates particularly well how the theme of divine succession could be deployed within a communicational interplay between experts.[33] Through the dialogue of its characters, *Euthyphro* shows with clarity how accepting and rejecting violence positions the speakers in their field of cosmological knowledge. In this fictional but historically plausible dialogue, Socrates meets Euthyphro, an Athenian diviner about whom we know very little. He appears in the dialogue that carries his name and is mentioned in the *Cratylus* several times, but there are no other references to him outside Plato's work.

The dialogue begins by outlining the social settings of an interaction between experts in which not only the concept of piety is discussed but also the validity of the succession myth is put into question. Socrates and Euthyphro meet near the office of the *archōn basileus*, an Athenian magistrate who oversaw the proper practice of the polis' religion.[34] With this reference to the location of the encounter and the religious authority associated with it, Plato is unambiguously highlighting the topic of the dialogue: divine order and its relation to humans. The

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31 See Edmonds III 2018; Edmonds III 2020.

32 For the allegorical interpretation of the Orphic theogony, see Laks 1997; Most 1997; Piano 2016; Kotwick 2017; Bernabé 2018a; Kotwick 2019.

33 As Werner 2012, 42 has pointed out, "one of the main elements underlying the philosophical and dramatic structure of the dialogue [*Euthyphro*] is myth".

34 Another function of this 'king', who was appointed every year by the city council, was to arbitrate legal disputes with a religious component.

reference to the office of the *archōn* is followed by a description of the ideological position of the speakers: Socrates is there to face an accusation of impiety for introducing new gods.[35] Thus he is presented as a religious innovator and, consequently, as somebody who is operating at the margins of traditional religion. Euthyphro, on the other hand, is the paradigm of religious orthodoxy. Indeed, he is about to charge with murder his own father who had brutally, but also unintentionally, killed a servant and therefore polluted his household.[36] Euthyphro's lawsuit can be seen as an attempt to avert this pollution at the expense of his family's cohesion, an act that emphasizes his social standing as a devout religious believer. Plato's sketch of the settings in which the *mantis* and the philosopher meet is important because it marks the boundaries within which the succession myth will be discussed.

With the description of the place, legal circumstances, and social types, a horizon of expectations is invoked. To a large extent, this horizon is informed by the selection of the topic of discussion, which on the surface appears to be the question about the nature of piety. But this question, as important as it may be, hovers over a deeper and more general background: the relation between myth and reality. Euthyphro summons this background in the form of the succession myth when he claims that Zeus' overthrowing and subsequently incarceration of his unjust father, Kronos, should be taken as a model of human behavior (Pl. *Euthyph*. 5e–6a):

> People believe that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, and they acknowledge that he put his father in bonds because he unjustly devoured his children, and that this god, in turn, castrated his father for similar reasons; but they are angry with me because I proceed against my father for his wrong doing. So, they contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and about me.

Right after the diviner's intervention, Socrates expresses his skepticism about the validity of the succession myth as traditionally narrated. He wonders if Euthyphro really believes that the gods are able to commit violent and hostile acts

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35 3b: ΣΟ. φησὶ γάρ με ποιητὴν εἶναι θεῶν, καὶ ὡς καινοὺς ποιοῦντα θεοὺς τοὺς δ' ἀρχαίους οὐ νομίζοντα. (...) Ευθ. μανθάνω, ὦ Σώκρατες· ὅτι δὴ σὺ τὸ δαιμόνιον φῂς σαυτῷ ἑκάστοτε γίγνεσθαι. ὡς οὖν καινοτομοῦντός σου περὶ τὰ θεῖα γέγραπται ταύτην τὴν γραφήν.

36 The charge against Socrates is often seen as slander, and this may be well true to some extent. But, although Plato absolved Socrates from this accusation in his early dialogues, Socrates designs in the *Republic* a whole new religion. This is done through the identification of the Sun with the Good as the highest divine principle as well as the reimagination of the afterlife as it appears in the myth of Er.

against each other.[37] This point is developed in full in Book II of the *Republic* where Socrates argues that the succession myth, as told by Hesiod, must be false because the gods can only be cause of good and not of evil things like violence and aggression.[38] Socrates' argument here is not about using the gods as a model for action nor about the metaphor of royal succession; on the contrary, Socrates' argument is against the element of violence, specifically the transgressive behavior of father and son.

At this point, one needs to consider that disagreement in this context does not mean disengagement from the conversation that the succession myth made possible. That critique did not imply abandoning the subject becomes clearer when we consider that Plato produced his own version of the succession myth in the *Timaeus*. In this work, he provides a story of creation deprived of violence but that still has a succession narrative as its main structuring subtext. In the Platonic response to the traditional succession myth, a perfectly good and knowing demiurge creates, at the beginnings, a world endowed with a soul. This world is perfect as the original craftsman cannot create anything contrary to his own nature; because he is perfectly good it follows that violence must be excluded from his creation. To introduce imperfection into the cosmos, the demiurge must generate the gods who are no more than inferior copies of their creator. It is, then, the imperfect gods that bring forth still lower beings capable of dying and acting in a non-good way. In this model of succession, the cosmos evolves from perfection into imperfection, following the opposite direction of other creation myths in which the beginning is presented as chaotic and violent.[39] Plato's cosmology, then, is a deliberate reversal of the succession myth as we find it in earlier Greek and Mesopotamian texts – one that attributes flaws to lower gods and mortals, and not primeval forces such as Chaos in the *Theogony* and Tiamtu in *Enūma eliš*.

Before we leave the *Timaeus* and *Euthyphro,* I would like to remind the reader that these dialogues build on a communicational framework that had a long history previous to the philosophical encounters of Socrates in the 5th century BCE. In the second millennium, as we saw above, the succession myth had already formed as a symbolic medium which extended across the Eastern Mediterranean.

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37 6b: καὶ πόλεμον ἄρα ἡγῇ σὺ εἶναι τῷ ὄντι ἐν τοῖς θεοῖς πρὸς ἀλλήλους, καὶ ἔχθρας γε δεινὰς καὶ μάχας καὶ ἄλλα τοιαῦτα πολλά.

38 Pl. *Resp*. 2.377e–379c.

39 For a collection of essays that deal with Plato's response to Hesiod see the edited volume by Boys-Stones/Haubold 2009. For a comparison of the *Timaeus* and *Enūma eliš* see Brennan 1970. The trend of interpreting or recreating the succession myth with an absolute absence of violence was maintained in later Platonist and Aristotelian circles; see Kotwick 2014.

In the following sections, I will explore other contents that were produced within this medium and show that the representation and interpretation of violence was one of the major axes around which differences were constructed. Unfortunately, the sources that I will examine next differ from the *Euthyphro* in one important aspect: they rarely reveal anything about the interactions and discussions that lead to the narratives they contain. They show us only the results of complex processes of communication that extended through social networks that cannot be fully reconstructed.

4.2 *Enūma eliš*

Enūma eliš, composed by the end of the second millennium in Babylonia, is the most studied succession myth of Mesopotamia, although it is by no means the earliest attestation of a story of divine succession in Akkadian. To a large extent, it draws on and responds to the *Epic of Anzu*, the roots of which go back to the third millennium BCE.[40] In *Enūma eliš,* patrilineal violence is not an issue: violence has been removed from within the royal family to be directed against a distant female relative. The first tablets of this poem describe the initial state of the universe: a messy and unnamed turmoil that preceded the creation of the world. It is not just that boundaries and hierarchies are not well defined, but also that aggression and killing among competing cosmic powers has not been overcome. It is only with the resolution of this struggle that the right social order of both gods and humans will come to be.[41]

According to this poem that celebrates the accession of Marduk as king of the gods, at the beginnings there were two beings, Sea (Tiamtu) and Fresh Water

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40 The two most recent critical editions of *Enūma eliš* are Lambert 2012; Kämmerer/Metzler 2012. *Enūma eliš* is frequently dated towards the end of the second millennium, but the earliest copies of this composition are first attested in Neo-Assyrian ductus; they are not earlier than 911 BCE, see Frahm 2010, 5; Lambert 2012, 4. It should be also considered that there are no copies of *Enūma eliš* in the Hittite libraries, which are characterized for having a good representation of Akkadian and Sumerian literary texts. This means that *Enūma eliš* may well be later than the Hurro-Hitttite Kumarbi Cycle and, therefore, it is possible that this Babylonian text responds to older and more violent North Syrian (including Hurrian) versions of the succession myth. On the intertextual relationship between *Enūma eliš* and the *Epic of Anzu,* see Lambert 1986; Seri 2014; Wisnom 2019. In addition to the *Epic of Anzu*, the Old Babylonian poem *Atra-hasīs* develops a critical view of violence; see Gabriel 2018.
41 For an early comparison of *Enūma eliš* and the *Theogony* see Walcot 1966. For more recent comparisons, see Haubold 2017 and Scully 2016; Scully 2017.

(Apsû), and from them everything emerged.[42] Within the mixing of those cosmic waters, which evoke the image of a great womb, the gods were born. Despite the liquid messiness of this beginning, there was some social hierarchy in place: the female principle, the Sea, held the greatest authority. Although Fresh Water was subordinated to her, he decides to eliminate his progeny in an act of anger without Sea's consent. When the new gods are informed about the plan of their progenitor, they organize a revolt in which Ea, the son of Anu, kills Apsû; immediately thereafter Ea turns the body of the deceased into an inert cosmic region. Although Tiamtu had initially opposed the killing of her offspring, she becomes enraged because of her husband's assassination. Turning to revenge, she decides to execute the new gods but she is defeated by Marduk, her great grandson in sixth degree.

Enūma eliš deals with succession in a way that is quite different from what we see in Hesiod, in the Hurro-Hittite *Kumarbi Cycle* of North Syria and Anatolia, and in other theogonies from Mesopotamia. There is no violent succession from king to king, as in the Hesiodic sequence Ouranos–Kronos–Zeus or the Hurrian Anu–Kumarbi–Teššub. Instead, there is a confrontation between two original forces, the cosmic waters, and a family of gods that descends from them but that is radically different.[43]

To be sure, there is no violence in the transition of power from Anšar to Anu, from Anu to Ea, and from Ea to Marduk.[44] All aggression is directed towards Apsû and Tiamtu, and their monstrous helpers. In Greek terms, this would be the equivalent of Ouranos pacifically conceding his rule to Kronos, and Kronos giving kingship to Zeus without resisting. In this way, the transmission of kingship in the Babylonian cosmogonic poem is not attached to aggression towards the father, but rather it is associated with the passing of a trial. This test consists

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42 As Borger 2008 has shown, Tiamtu and not Tiamat is the right transliteration of the name of the mother of the gods.

43 In cuneiform divine names are in most cases marked with the divine determinative DINGIR. Neither Tiamtu nor Apsu are preceded by this determinative, what may well indicate that they are not gods.

44 Usually, when succession myths are compared, the Greek line of succession Ouranos → Kronos → Zeus is often equated with the Babylonian sequence Anu → Ea → Marduk. However, the genealogy of male gods in *Enūma eliš* is much longer than the Greek one: it is Lahmu → Anšar → Anu → Ea → Marduk. Additionally, the gods compared do not always correspond in character: Ea, for instance, is put into relation with Kronos, although Ea has little in common with Zeus's father. In terms of functions, the Greek god closest to Ea is Hermes, who mediates between gods and humans. For a detailed analysis contrasting forms of succession in *Enūma eliš* and Hesiod's *Theogony*, see Haubold 2017; Kelly 2021.

of the killing of the Ur-mother, Sea, and the transformation of her body into the world that gods, humans, and animals will inhabit.

In *Enuma eliš*, then, each phase in the succession process is determined by the degree of success that the brotherhood of the new gods achieves in their attempt to overpower Tiamtu. This is explained programmatically in the first two tablets, where we are told how Anšar, father of the gods, sends Ea to defeat Tiamtu without success. Given the negative outcome of the first attempt, Anšar sends Anu against the Ur-mother, but this also fails. At this point, the gods fall into despair until Marduk offers to battle Tiamtu under the condition that he will become king of the gods in case he succeeds. This means that Marduk will displace Anšar as a leader if he wins the struggle in which his grandfather and father failed. The gods have no option: if they turn down Marduk's offer, Tiamtu would destroy them. In the third attempt, Marduk kills Tiamtu and dismembers her in a foundational sacrifice. With her body, he creates the world; he separates the earth and the firmament; he puts the planets in their respective courses; and he sets the cosmic axes in place. Succession in this case is not a matter of patrilineal violence, but a progression in strength within a royal family.

4.3 Hesiod's *Theogony*

In stark contrast to *Enūma eliš*, Hesiod's *Theogony* sets the focus of violence on the conflict between father and son and not between children and mother.[45] This, nevertheless, occurs with a peculiar limitation: since the Greek gods are immortal, they can neither be killed nor sacrificed as in Akkadian literature. However, the bodies of the overthrown gods can be mutilated and from the mutilated parts new gods can arise, as in the case of Ouranos' genitals from which Aphrodite is born. Overall, despite the violent severing of various extremities, the gods themselves cannot be sacrificed and turned into cosmic regions as in Mesopotamian myth. Thus, violence that leads to divine succession in Hesiod takes the form of castration, relocation, expulsion, and imprisonment but never of killing. The immortality of the gods represents one of the constraints within which archaic Greek mythmakers had to operate.[46]

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45 Haubold 2017. See Kelly 2021 for the contrasting treatment of gendered violence in *Enūma eliš* and the *Theogony*.
46 One of the few exceptions to the rule of immortality is the myth that recounts the dismembering of Dionysus/Zagreus at the hand of the Titans. Dionysus is, in fact, one of the few Greek gods that dies and resurrects, but accounts of this kind are later than Hesiod and tend to occur within Orphic texts. See Bernabé 2002b for a discussion of the Greek sources and the critical response

In the *Theogony,* father and son do not compete by showing their strength in a fight against a common enemy as in *Enuma eliš*. It is not a contest of force in which a younger member of the family replaces an older king, who is not strong enough to defeat the enemy. The Greek family of gods that descend from Sky is neither united nor builds a common front against a female threat. Gaia, who is Tiamtu's counterpart, is not the target of aggression despite the fact that she actively promotes upheaval.[47]

Ian Rutherford has suggested that Hesiod's poem is more closely related to the Hurro-Hittite succession myth than to any other Near Eastern version.[48] In fact, many aspects of the *Theogony* give the impression that it was conceived with the Anatolian variant in mind – possibly a later offshoot of the Hurro-Hittite stories about Teššub and Kumarbi that survived the collapse of the Hittite empire by the end of the second millennium.[49] Yet the Hesiodic succession myth differs from the Hurro-Hittite textualizations found at Hattusa in significant ways. Among several differences that Rutherford and others have isolated, there is one that concerns us particularly here: the way sexual aggression is handled in the *Theogony* and the Hurro-Hittite *Song of Emergence*.[50] If Hesiod was reworking an Anatolian version, he then reduced a conspicuous element of sexual violence, namely the mutilation that Kumarbi inflicted on Anu by biting off his genitals.

In comparing these two texts, we see Hesiod's less transgressive approach to the theme of castration. In the *Song of Emergence*, Kumarbi, the equivalent to Kronos in the line of succession, swallowed the Sky's reproductive parts after

to Bernabé by Edmonds III 2008a. More recently, see Meisner 2018 with references. On the other hand, *Iliad V* thematizes the remote possibility of the gods being killed by mortals, but Homer unambiguously excludes such a possibility from a world ruled by Zeus.

47 Scully 2016, 56 thinks that there is a strong correlation between the *Theogony* and *Enuma eliš* in the way these poems handle the roles of Gaia and Tiamtu. Scully, however, does not consider the issue of aggression between the gods and the Ur-mother.

48 Rutherford 2009.

49 It is quite possible that Hesiod knew about textualizations or oral traditions similar to the *Song of Emergence,* which survived the collapse of the Hittite empire in 1180 BCE. It has been proposed that such oral traditions continued in Anatolia and in the New Hittite kingdoms of Syria, see Clay/Gilan 2014; Gilan 2015; Bachvarova 2016; Gilan 2021. In my opinion, there is no strong evidence suggesting that the Greeks knew about *Enūma eliš* before the classical period. Burkert 2004, 30 and now Lardinois 2018 have suggested that the there is an indirect reference in *Iliad* 14 to *Enūma eliš,* but this has been disputed (see Kelly 2008 for a skeptical view on this issue). After all, the earliest direct reference to the Babylonian cosmogony is found in a fragment attributed to Eudemus of Rhodes (Fr. 150 ed. Wehrli), in this regard see Talon 2001; Betegh 2002; Burkert 2004, 116.

50 I mean here 'violent and transgressive forms of intercourse' and not 'violence between the sexes' as in Kelly 2021.

having chased and grabbed him by his feet.[51] This scene illustrates the capture and rape of the defeated. The imagery, which includes contact of the aggressor's mouth with the sexual organs of the victim, suggests a perverted form of fellatio in which affection has been replaced by violence. The sexual tone of the description is unmistakable because Kumarbi becomes pregnant as a result of the physical contact with Anu. This unwanted pregnancy turns Kumarbi into the mother of the Storm-god Teššub, the one who will depose him. But in Hesiod the castration of Ouranos neither implies violence during oral sex nor the insemination of the aggressor. Kronos, in fact, uses a sickle as instructed by his mother Gaia, and treats the emasculated father with some compassion. Moreover, the mutilation is justified through the bad behavior of Ouranos, his unsatiable desire to copulate with Gaia, an act that does not allow the mother to give birth. To some extent, Hesiod excuses Kronos' response to the father, reducing the amount of violence in the Anatolian version that he may have known.

4.4 The Derveni Theogony

On the Greek side, we know of alternative accounts of divine royal succession that showed more marked representations of violence and transgressive sex than the Hesiodic version.[52] This is the case of the Orphic theogony that an anonymous commentator selectively quoted and explained in the Derveni papyrus, a text that was possibly composed towards the end of the fifth century BCE.[53] All what remains from this theogony are quotations of hexameters and isolated lemmata that were, in most cases, part of the same text.[54] From these pieces, various scholars have tried to reconstruct the entire Orphic poem.

According to one line of interpretation, which Walter Burkert initiated, at the beginning there was Night who gave birth to Ouranos, the first born and first to rule. As in the Hesiodic version Kronos emasculated his father Ouranos, depriving him of power.[55] But closer to the Hurrian myth than Hesiod, the Derveni version also reports that Zeus swallowed the genitals of Ouranos, after deposing his father, Kronos. As various scholars have argued, it is possible that this theogony reported that Kronos castrated Ouranos with his teeth and not with a

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51 Rieken *et al.* 2009 ll.32–35.
52 See Edmonds III 2018; Edmonds III 2020.
53 The edition princeps is Kouremenos/Parássoglou/Tsantsanoglou 2006. The most recent edition and commentary is that of Kotwick 2017.
54 A few quotations may come not from a theogony but from a collection of hymns.
55 Burkert 1986; for a comprehensive overview of this issue, see Bernabé 2002a; Bernabé 2018b.

sickle (as in Hesiod) in the same way that Kumarbi emasculates Anu.[56] Like in the Hurro-Hittite *Song of Emergence,* the ingestion of the sexual organs causes Zeus to become pregnant and, consequently, to give birth to the rest of the gods. This feminization of Zeus and his becoming a divine mother parallels the pregnancy of Kumarbi.[57]

Martin L. West also established a way of reconstructing the Derveni theogony which has found its adherents. In contrast to Burkert, West's approach minimizes elements of violence and sexual aggression that were present in the Orphic text.[58] For this purpose, West detaches the Derveni theogony from the Hurro-Hittite myth. It seems that one of West's motivations for detaching this text from the Near Eastern sources was his interest in creating a stemma that could account for the evolution of all Orphic theogonies, and only Greek texts were useful for such an enterprise.[59] Orphic theogonies, however, are too variegated to have a single origin. As Dwayne Meisner has shown regarding West's project, using techniques of textual criticism to model complex intertextual dialogues is inadequate because a "genealogical methodology (...) disallows the level of originality and variety" of many texts that, after all, are independent.[60] But, in my view, the greatest weakness of West's approach is that it fails to notice a central feature of Orphic literature, namely the use of exacerbated violence and sexual aggression as an index that differentiates it from Homeric and Hesiodic discourses.[61]

The rhetorician Isocrates, probably a contemporary of the Derveni author, is clear in this respect. He writes that Orpheus surpassed all other poets when it came to portraying the gods committing adultery, eating their children, castrating their fathers, and performing other acts that the Greeks perceived as transgressive.[62] In the classical period, when Isocrates and the Derveni author lived, a theogony deprived of violence and unusual forms of sexual aggression would not

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56 Fowler 2016 thinks that it is Kronos who swallows Ouranos' penis. In later Orphic theogonies, the castration episode is reduplicated: this means, Ouranos is castrated by Kronos, and Kronos by Zeus. Edmonds III 2018 points out that such reduplications of violence are markers (indexes) of the Orphic discourse.

57 Notice that Kumarbi is "explicitly named the 'mother (Hurrian *nera*) of Teššub' in a Hurrian prayer to Teššub of Aleppo" (Clay/Gilan 2014).

58 Seen on this point, Bierl 2014.

59 West 1983, 69.

60 Meisner 2018, 13

61 The Derveni author qualifies the Orphic as strange and foreign 'ξένη' (col. VIII 4–5). See Edmonds III 2008b; Edmonds III 2011; Edmonds III 2013; Edmonds III 2020 who has shown that Orphic texts were distinguished from other forms of literary discourse by their use of strange features.

62 Isoc. 11.38–39.

have possessed the deictic force that would grant it the label 'Orphic'. To further explore this issue it is worth turning to Diogenes Laertius, who was also aware of texts attributed to Orpheus which were perceived as transgressive and aberrant. In his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers,* Diogenes makes a condemnatory remark about Orpheus when he indicates that the Thracian poet attributed obscene oral practices to the gods.[63] With this comment, Diogenes seems to have in mind a special kind of fellatio. Francesc Casadesús has argued that Diogenes is referring here to a lost Orphic tale in which Hera and Zeus presumably appeared having oral sex. But the evidence that Casadesús provides does not relate to Orpheus but to the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus.[64]

As Burkert and others have suggested, Diogenes is more likely pointing to an Orphic theogony in which Kronos bit off Ouranos' phallus.[65] In his book, Diogenes refers to a grotesque act that people *rarely (σπαίως)* practice; this act may well not be the kind of oral sex that humans, and many other animals, regularly perform. Since he finds Orpheus' depiction of the gods reproachable, Diogenes avoids specifying what this grotesque oral act may be. Despite the silence, nevertheless, we can postulate at least two mythemes that may help understand what Diogenes had in mind. The first candidate is the swallowing of Ouranos' penis. This event is expressed in a hexameter quoted and commented on by the Derveni author that reads: αἰδοῖον κατέπινεν, ὃς αἰθέρα ἔκθορε πρῶτος 'He swallowed the phallus (of Ouranos), who first ejaculated Ether'.[66] The second candidate, which is not present in the papyrus, is the possible oral emasculation of Ouranos by

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63 Diog. Laert. 1.5: Οἱ δὲ τὴν εὕρεσιν διδόντες ἐκείνοις παράγουσι καὶ Ὀρφέα τὸν Θρᾷκα, λέγοντες φιλόσοφον γεγονέναι καὶ εἶναι ἀρχαιότατον. ἐγὼ δέ, εἰ τὸν περὶ θεῶν ἐξαγορεύσαντα τοιαῦτα χρὴ φιλόσοφον καλεῖν οὐκ οἶδα, <οὐδὲ> τίνα δεῖ προσαγορεύειν τὸν πᾶν τὸ ἀνθρώπειον πάθος ἀφειδοῦντα τοῖς θεοῖς προστρῖψαι, καὶ τὰ σπανίως ὑπό τινων ἀνθρώπων αἰσχρουργούμενα τῷ τῆς φωνῆς ὀργάνῳ. "Those who attribute the invention [of philosophy] to [non-Greeks] bring in also Orpheus, the Thracian, saying that he was the earliest and first philosopher. But I do not know if it is fitting to call philosopher somebody who has said such things about the gods. Why should somebody be called so who has carelessly attributed absolutely human behaviors to the gods, even the obscenities (αἰσχρουργούμενα) that some rarely do with the organ used to talk (τῷ τῆς φωνῆς ὀργάνῳ)".
64 Diog. Laert. 7.7.187–188. See West 1983, 241–242 for a critique of those who before Casadesús 2008, postulated such interpretations.
65 See Burkert 1980. For a history of this line of interpretation and its critics see Santamaría Álvarez 2016.
66 Scholars tend to translate OF 8 (col. XIII) mainly in two ways: 1) '(Zeus) swallowed the venerable one (Protogonos), who was the first to leap forth into the ether'; 2) '(Zeus) swallowed the phallus (of Ouranos), who first begat Ether'. These two interpretations go back to positions taken by Burkert 1986 and West 1983, 68–115 that I have discussed here; see Kotwick 2017, 207–212 for an overview of the competing interpretations.

Kronos. This is a viable option given that such a mytheme existed in the Hurro-Hittite *Song of Emergence* that continued to be retold in Syria during the first millennium.[67] In any case, if Diogenes was in fact referring to Kronos' oral castration of Ouranos, the strangeness and rarity of the practice is double. On the one side, it is done from son to father, a form of homoerotic incest. On the other, it is an extremely violent sexual aggression. But leaving aside the problem of how Ouranos was castrated, one can still assert that in terms of violence and sexuality the Derveni theogony was more transgressive than Hesiod.[68] Concrete examples of this are: a) Zeus swallows a phallus which had first ejaculated Ether; b) Zeus ejaculates Aphrodite (she is not born from sea foam as in Hesiod); c) Zeus rapes his mother, Rhea; d) the commentor himself finds that the Derveni theogony is strange (ξένη), which means, different from what a regular Greek audience would expect.[69]

The transgressiveness of the Derveni theogony gave the narrative an esoteric aura. Relying on the index of increased violence and other strategies, the Orphic poem presents itself as a text directed to the initiated, meaning those who claimed extraordinary access to the divine.[70] The opening line of the theogony states this explicitly: 'I will speak to those entitled, close your doors, you uninitiated!'[71] As I will discuss in the next section, in Mesopotamia some sexually charged and violent versions of the succession myth seem also to be confined to esoteric circles.

4.5 Cultic Commentary CT 15, 43–44

On the Mesopotamian side, there is a group of cultic commentaries that shows a much more violent version of the succession myth than the one presented in *Enūma eliš*. These commentaries, which are preserved in Neo-Assyrian copies, often use a succession myth for the exegesis of rituals performed by the king: they match ritual segments to mythic episodes as a form of interpretation. As in the case of the Derveni theogony, some of those commentaries indicate that they belong to the world of those with privileged knowledge; they were meant to be

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67 Gilan 2015; Gilan 2021.

68 For deviant practices in Orphic texts see Edmonds III 2018; Edmonds III 2020.

69 a) col. XIII 4; b) col. XXI 1–8; c) col. XXVI 10; d) col. VIII 4–5.

70 See Bernabé 1996; West 1997a; Bremmer 2011.

71 As reconstructed from lemmata in col. VII (OF 3) = Kotwick 2017 § 19. For the history of this line which was found in other Orphic texts, see Bernabé 1996.

used only by scribes with a high level of understanding of religious matters. In this sense, it is right to call them 'esoteric'.[72]

In the commentary CT 15, 43–44 that explains a royal ritual, the king is equated with the god Marduk while the rites in which he is involved are associated with the violent episodes of a story similar but not identical to *Enūma eliš*.[73] Although the story in question has not come down to us in its entirety, we can still get a relatively good picture of it from the commentary. In line 9, for instance, the anonymous author of the text explains that 'the sheep which (the priests) throw on the brazier and which the fire burns is Qingu, when he burns in the fire'. In *Enūma eliš*, Qingu is Tiamtu's son and second husband, whom she married after Ea killed her first consort Apsû. From the same text, we know that Marduk kills and sacrifices Qingu to fashion the first humans. Since in *Enūma eliš* there is no burning of Qingu, we must assume that the commentary is quoting from a divergent version that, as we will see, is more violent.

From these glosses to the ritual, we know likewise that Marduk not only kills but also rapes Tiamtu (l.18):

> LUGAL *ša ḫa-ri-ú ina li-is-ni i-*BAD*-tu-u* dAMAR.UTU *šá ina ú-ša-ri-šú* MÍ.*ti-amat* ⌜*ik*⌝-[*mu-ú*]
> The king, who opens the vat in the race, is Marduk, who [defeat]ed Tiamtu with his penis.

Such a detail is completely absent from *Enūma eliš*.[74] But as striking as Tiamtu's rape is the fact that Marduk also kills his grandfather Anu, his uncle Enlil, and his own father Ea, sending them to the Underworld, the reign of Nergal (l. 24–28). Although this version of the myth seems less inhibited than *Enūma eliš* in regard to conceiving the gods as capable of killing members of their own family, the author employs euphemistic expressions to refer to the assassination of the gods. For instance, the verb 'to bind (*kamû*) is used in place of the more straightforward 'to kill' (*nêru*). We know, however, that the author of CT 15, 43–44 did not only mean 'binding' in the physical or magical sense because he clearly states that Marduk pulled out Ea's heart with his own hands (l.23).

The succession myth embedded in this cultic commentary can be reconstructed in an abbreviated manner in the form of a list of actions performed by Marduk:

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72 On esoteric and protected knowledge in Mesopotamia, see Lambert 1968; Livingstone 1986; Lenzi 2008; Beaulieu 2009; Stevens 2013.

73 For an edition of CT 15, 43–44, see Livingstone 1989, 92 = SAA 3.37.

74 In the orphic cosmogony reported in the Derveni papyrus, Zeus also seems to have raped his mother, Rhea, see KTP, col. xxvi, l. 9–10 [Kotwick 2017 § 93]. This element is not present in Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Marduk binds and breaks Anu.
Marduk casts a spell against Enlil.
Marduk sends Enlil to the Annunnaki (Underworld).
Nergal takes Enlil in the Underworld.
Marduk binds his Fathers.
Marduk binds his Brothers.
Marduk binds the monster Anzu.
Marduk binds the demon Assaku.
Marduk burns the sons of Enlil.
Marduk burns the sons of Ea.
Marduk pulls out the heart of Ea.
Marduk casts Ea down into the Underworld.
Marduk defeats Tiamtu with his penis (he rapes her).
Marduk sets Qingu on fire.

As we have seen, this version of the story, which circulated only among experts, is much more violent than *Enūma eliš*. In the latter variant of the succession myth, there is no aggression within the royal line, which begins with the father of the gods, Anšar, and ends with Marduk. The sexual component, i.e, the rape by which Marduk overpowers Tiamtu is also missing in *Enūma eliš*.

4.6 The Theogony of Dunnu

An even more violent Akkadian version of the succession myth is found in the *Theogony of Dunnu,* which is preserved in a manuscript either from the Neo-Babylonian or Achaemenid period. According to its colophon, the tablet was the copy of an older Babylonian and Assyrian exemplar, which implies that the text could date to the beginnings of the first millennium or even earlier.[75] In this unique text, there are at least seven successions both in the paternal and maternal lines: it is not only that sons kill fathers, but also that mothers kill husbands, and daughters kill mothers.[76] Euphemisms for killing, like the ones in the cultic commentary CT 15, 43–44, are absent, while aggression and transgression is clearly stated.

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75 For the date, see Jacobsen 1984, 5; Lambert 2012, 387. As Lambert has pointed out, the extant text could be a copy either from an earlier Babylonian or Assyrian exemplar. It is quite possible that the Babylonian copy came first. In concrete terms, the colophon indicates that the composition already existed in Neo-Assyrian times, that is, it must predate the fall of Assur in 614 BCE. However, the *Theogony of Dunnu* may be much older.

76 Because of the lacunae, the exact number of successions cannot be determined with exactitude. It is possible that the text included, at the very end, the transfer of power to Enlil and thereafter to his son Ninurta.

After the initial bloodshed that lasted seven generations, a series of peaceful transitions occur. As Thorkild Jacobsen has rightly argued, this movement from intrafamilial violence and incest to a nonviolent order indicates the transformation of a cosmos, initially marked by transgression, to a new world guided by different models of behavior. This transition is characterized by the substitution of primeval cosmic principles such as Earth, Sea, and River, by more civilized deities who had a concrete presence in the religious life of the Babylonians, such as Enlil and his son Ninurta. These two gods could definitively be attached to representations of a social order desirable to humans.

According to the damaged and only surviving copy of the *Theogony of Dunnu*, the succession begins with the accession to power of an unidentified male god who marries Earth. The break at the beginning of the tablet, where the name of the first father should have appeared, has been reconstructed either as *Ha*-[*'in*] or *Ha*-[*rab*].[77] Ha'in is an unknown divinity while Harab is the Plough. If one accepts the latter reading, then one could interpret the Plough as a cosmological principle. I follow here Jacobsen's reconstruction because I believe that this allows a more coherent reading of the text. This seems to be the case especially when one considers that there are other personified cosmological elements with which Plough interacts.

The image of Plough breaking Earth is strongly sexual and conveys the idea of a primeval coitus.[78] From the opened furrows in Earth, probably a symbol of the vagina, emerges the Sea (Tiamtu) and Šakkan, the divine shepherd.[79] Right in the early phases of the creation of the world, incest sets in when Earth marries her own son Šakkan, who eventually kills his father Plough and buries him in the city of Dunnu. While ascending to power, Lahar, the Ewe, kills his father Šakkan and marries his mother, Sea, in the same way as his predecessor had done. The murder of the Shepherd God by the Ewe clearly shows the reversed social order that dominates the earliest times of cosmic history.

On the female side, intrafamilial killing partially correlates with the violence that occurs between male gods. In the first part of the theogony, Sea murders her mother, Earth, but the killing of mothers by daughters comes to an end in the third generation. In the fourth generation, incest with the mother also concludes, but it continues among siblings: for instance, the son of Lahar marries his sister. In the seventh-generation parricide comes to an end, if Jacobsen's reconstruction of line 40 is right, in which we read that Harhanum's son, Hayyashum '[did not]

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77 *Ha*-['*in*] Lambert/Walcot 1965; Lambert 2012, 392; Ha-[rab] Jacobsen 1984, 6.
78 Cf. Soph. *Ant*. 569: ἀρώσιμοι γὰρ χἀτέρων εἰσὶν γύαι.
79 More especially, Šakkan is the god of the livestock, see Lambert 2012, 513–523.

kill his father'. This represents a breakthrough and the termination of a chain of violent successions. With this nonviolent transition, we see the rise of an internally cohesive royal family in which the transmission of power occurs as peacefully as within Anšar's line of descendants in *Enūma eliš*.

Given the uncertain dating of both the *Theogony of Dunnu* and *Enūma eliš*, it is not possible to know whether there is an intertextual relationship between them. Although these two cosmogonies could have been composed by the end of the second millennium, without awareness of each other, it is still worth asking whether one of those compositions was reacting to the other. If so, this means that one of its authors was taking a particular position in the field of ancient cosmogony by either increasing or reducing the amount of violence among the family members involved in the plot.

4.7 The *Epic of Erra*

An unusual take on the succession myth is the *Epic of Erra*, written by a certain Kabti-ilani-Marduk some centuries after the composition of *Enūma eliš*, probably during the 8th century BCE.[80] The text, according to the poet, was directly revealed to him in a dream sent by Erra, the god of war and plagues. Although this poem does not conform in a strict sense with the structural features that are often associated with narratives of divine succession, it has been suggested that the *Epic of Erra* is a critical response to the theological model behind *Enūma eliš*.[81]

Marduk, Išum and Erra are the central characters in this work. The action is set some time after the beginnings of the universe, when Marduk had already brought the cosmos to a final stable stage. The *Epic of Erra* then presupposes the events described in *Enūma eliš*, namely the birth of the gods, the defeat of Tiamtu and the creation of the world by Marduk. Besides the difference in time spans, the two poems also differ in their ideological programs. While *Enūma eliš* proposes an unchangeable world order that has arisen from the peaceful cooperation and alliance of kings against a primeval female being, the *Epic of Erra* advances the idea that there is a cyclical alternation of two principles, peace and destruction. These two opposites are represented by the gods Marduk and Erra. In between these two poles the author places the god Išum who is responsible for the alternation of the destruction and peace: he can awaken Erra when the world has

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80 See George 2013, 47 with references. The authoritative edition of *Erra* is still Cagni 1969.
81 See Frahm 2010; Seri 2014; Wisnom 2019.

experienced enough order and bring him back to rest after destruction has taken place.[82]

The poet constructs this alternative model with a complicated and novel plot: Erra has been sleeping for a long period of time but the Sibitti, the god's weapons, set out to wake him up. They ask Išum, Erra's assistant, to arouse the master. The Sibitti argue that the world has already become excessively prosperous: there are too many people and the reigning peace has brought the soldiers of the army into indulgence and weakness. Convinced by this argument, Išum wakes Erra but, for disorder to come back, Marduk has to be removed from the temple from which he oversees the well-functioning of the cosmos. To achieve this, Erra develops the following stratagem: he points out to Marduk that his statue is in bad shape and suggests that he leave the temple for the image to be repaired. Marduk, an omniscient god, knows Erra's true intention but nevertheless consents; this acquiescence seems to imply that Marduk acknowledges that order and disorder, peace and destruction have to alternate as part of a necessary cosmic cycle. When Marduk withdraws from his position of command, Erra takes over and devastation reigns until Išum soothes and convinces Erra to go back to rest. Frahm summarizes the ideological program expressed through this plot in the following way:

> The Erra epic is based on the idea, foregrounded in *Enūma eliš*, that Marduk should be the champion of peace and stability, but presents the god as unable, or unwilling, to preserve them. The epic claims, in complete contrast to everything that is said in *Enūma eliš*, that it was Marduk who had brought about the deluge, the archetypal catastrophe that had befallen mankind in an earlier age. Now, by yielding to Erra, Marduk allows the forces of chaos to return yet again. Cosmological order, represented by the harmonious configuration of the heavenly bodies, falls apart, and the political order hitherto guaranteed by a strong Babylonian king is shattered.[83]

5 Indexicality and Systemic Interdependency

As I have shown, different representations of violence surface in the succession myths from Greece and Mesopotamia. These different representations occur within the same cultural area and, in some cases, within a relatively short time span. For instance, the Derveni papyrus and the *Timaeus* are both from the fourth century, and the Akkadian commentary CT 15, 43–44 and the *Epic of Erra* may be from the eighth century. Although these texts may not be far apart chrono-

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82 Machinist/Sasson 1983.
83 Frahm 2010, 7.

logically, they significantly differ in the way they portray violence. One can explain these variations within the same culture in different ways, but the most common approach is to postulate historical conditions that required mythmakers to comment on specific problems of their respective societies that were changing over time.[84] I will give an example of such explanations for the sake of clarity. Frances Reynolds has recently reformulated a hypothesis, first advanced by Lambert in 1964, which explains the origin and purpose of the *Epic of Creation* in the following way:

> *Enūma eliš* was probably composed in the milieu of Esagil [temple] under the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar I (1125 – 1104 BCE). As Babylon's fortunes rose from a provincial backwater to the capital of an extensive territorial state, notably under Ḫammu-rāpi in the early second millennium BCE, the fortunes of Marduk as Babylon's city god also rose and in the course of that millennium in which he replaced Enlil as supreme god, becoming Babylonia's national god. In the invasion of Babylonia by the Elamite king Kutir-Naḫḫunte in c. 1155 BCE, Marduk' s principal cult statue was looted from Esagil, Babylonia's most important cult centre, and taken to Elam as booty. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar I campaigned in Elam in c. 1105 BCE, retrieved Marduk's statue, and reinstalled it in Esagil amid great cultic celebration (...). The counterpoint of Nebuchadnezzar's victory over Elam and the restoration of Marduk and his Esagil cult probably triggered the composition of *Enūma eliš* as a celebration of Marduk's supremacy, including his victory over Ti'amat and foundation of this cult. Celebrating Marduk's supremacy inherently celebrated the supremacy of Babylonia and its king, Marduk's human counterpart. Ti'amat in *Enūma eliš* may have been analogous to Elam.[85]

Thus, according to Lambert and now also Reynolds, political events and changes in the balance of power led the anonymous poet of *Enūma eliš* to produce a text that legitimized a newly established political order. The most salient feature of this new order is Babylon's regaining of its supremacy in the region. But as Lambert acknowledges, this hypothesis is based on circumstantial evidence: there are no documents of the time proving that the king, or other members of the elite, had commissioned such a composition. In fact, based on another historical context Tzvi Abusch has developed an interpretation that goes in the opposite direction. Abusch writes that instead of "viewing *Enūma Eliš* as a work composed during a period of Babylonian political ascendancy and as a reflection of the city's attainment of increasing power", this poem was "composed at a time when it was necessary to preserve the memory of Babylon's ascendancy and to assert its claim to

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84 We can find such explanations for most of the texts I have discussed in this article. For *Enūma eliš*, see Lambert 1964; for *Erra*, Frahm 2010 for Hesiod, Scully 2017, for the Derveni papyrus Most 1997.

85 Reynolds 2021, 61.

be a world capital on the grounds that it had been so since the beginning of time". In this view, then, *Enūma eliš* was composed "in a period of weakness of the city Babylon and served to bolster the city's claim to cultural prestige and privilege at a time when it was coping with the loss of political power and centrality".[86]

Seen from perspectives like this, mythic narratives respond to political contingencies, seeking ultimately the legitimization of social order. But, as we know, this is not the only way literature relates to the world. As Bruce Lincoln once put it, "modes of discourse – myth, ritual, and classification – can be, and have been, employed as effective instruments not only for the replication of established social forms (...), but more broadly for the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of society itself".[87]

Thus, there is a complex relationship between mythic narratives and social structure. Therefore, variations in the textualization of myth cannot be explained only as a way of sanctioning social and political settings. Different individual positions towards social structure, including critical points of view, may account in large part for the diverse forms that stories take, including the ones I have discussed so far.[88] But focusing on individual choices without rethinking what social structure is has also its limitations. Reducing social structure to political formations – like city-states and empires – is problematic. In the case of Greece, Esther Eidinow has questioned this narrow definition of social structure by showing that communities of diviners, magicians, and female worshippers of Dionysus cannot be properly understood if we take the Greek *polis* as the only social structure within which those groups operated. Diviners, magicians, and *Thyiads* formed social networks that traversed the boundaries of many Greek *poleis*; the same applies to the producers of cosmogonies. As Carolina López-Ruiz and others have shown, there were social networks of people interested in cosmogony and cosmology which spread not only across the Greek city-states but also throughout the Eastern Mediterranean.[89]

We should then consider that the texts I have discussed in this paper do not only respond to the political context in which they were embedded but also to the social networks within which they were produced. Consequently, I would like to propose here that the variations on the theme of violence found in the textualizations of the succession myths are the reflection of indexical strategies that occurred within the translocal social networks of ancient cosmologists. We can understand those social networks as communities which were built around a

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86 Abusch 1999.

87 Lincoln 2014, 3.

88 For a masterful reading of the *Epic of Baal* as critique of power see Tugendhaft 2018.

89 Bachvarova 2009; López-Ruiz 2010; López-Ruiz 2016.

symbolic medium.[90] As sociological research has shown, social networks cannot exist without symbolic media composed of narrative themes and indexes.[91] A social network not only relies on the existence of relations among people but also on a series of semantic constructs that keep the network's cohesion and coherence over time.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *field* and *symbolic capital* can help us better understand how a symbolic medium, such as the succession myth, could have contributed to the formation of networks of ancient cosmologists. According to Bourdieu, "literary production has to be approached in relational terms, by [re]constructing the literary field, i.e., the space of literary *prises de position* that are possible in a given period in a given society. *Prises de position* arise from the encounter between particular agents' dispositions (their *habitus* shaped by their social trajectory) and their position in a field of positions which is defined by the distribution of a specific form of capital". In the case that concerns us here, the *prises de position* are expressed by the different takes on various issues including the treatment of violence. Increasing, decreasing, or eliminating the violent acts committed by the gods marks a position in the field in relation to other positions. This also applies, of course, to other constituents of the succession myth that I have not analyzed in this paper for reasons of space.[92]

Within the field, or network, of cosmological thinkers the *prises de position* are accompanied by claims of symbolic capital. In this context symbolic capital is the value or prestige attributed to either the author or the text in relation to other authors or texts. *Prises de position* and their accompanying claims of prestige are primarily indexical gestures. The author's positioning in the field is a deictic action, a call for attention or a "here I am" that results from contrasting with other agents in the field.[93] Representations of violence within the succession myth are a manifestation of the deictic function described by sociologists. In the Greek evidence I have surveyed, this kind of deixis becomes visible in the way that the Derveni theogony marks its esoteric status in relation to the

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90 Cf. Feldman 2002; Feldman 2014.

91 Mitschele/Godart/White 2008; White/Fontdevila 2010; Godart/White 2010; Fontdevila/Opazo/White 2011.

92 There is also much variation on the first elements from which the world is constituted. Primordial gap, Water, Night, Cosmic Egg, Sky and Earth, Time are some of the elements that were chosen for distinguishing one cosmogonic account from another. For the large combination number of primordial elements in Mesopotamia, see the very interesting contribution by Westenholz 2010. Greek variations on this subject are better known and expand exponentially when one includes the cosmogonies of the philosophers.

93 For the application of sociological field and network theory to ancient Greek philosophers, Collins 1998.

Hesiodic version. Similarly, Plato positions himself in the field through his critiques of the succession myth. By having Socrates take distance from mainstream treatments of violence, Plato creates a contrast between postures which embrace violence and postures that favor non-violence. As expected, the founder of the Academy identifies with the latter position, claiming without embarrassment a certain cognitive superiority over his Greek peers who accepted the Hesiodic model as valid.

On the Mesopotamian side, similar deictic gestures also come to light. We can observe them in the way the *Epic of Erra* and commentary CT 15,43–44 relate to *Enūma eliš*. The former dismantles the worldview advanced in *Enuma eliš* by weakening Marduk and increasing worldly violence and disorder. By presenting Marduk as a god with limited powers over violence, Kabti-ilani-Markuk corrects the *Epic of Creation*. Like Plato, the poet of *Erra* also claims a privileged position in the field since his model, as he implies, offers a more accurate description of reality. On the other hand, the cultic commentary CT 15,43–44 claims its particular position in the field by offering a more violent version of the myth, which is characterized as the privileged knowledge of a selected group of experts. Interestingly, both the Assyrian commentary and the Derveni theogony augment violence to index esoterism.

Recognizing indexicality within the field of cosmogonic knowledge and its articulation within translocal social networks, or fields, has implications for investigating the relationship between Greece and the Near East. This problem has often been approached through the concept of *cultural influence,* while the main research task framed by this concept has been to determine whether Greece was influenced or not by the Near East.[94] But the concept of cultural influence is certainly a vague notion that has evaded a clear definition so far. Moreover, no scholar has specified what are the general implications of determining that a culture was influenced or not by another.

In my view, the importance of the study of Greece in relation to the Near East resides in a different area. It is important because it shows that the Greeks were embedded, from early times, in a larger world system which exhibits common semiotic layers that interpenetrated various cultures. Today one of the challenges that remains is to determine, from the perspective of literary and cultural studies, what are the characteristics of the world system in which the cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean developed. As I have shown with my analysis of variation in the succession myth, the study of indexicality can play a significant

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94 West 1971; Burkert 1992; Penglase 1994; West 1997b; Burkert 2004; López-Ruiz 2010; Metcalf 2015; Stevens 2019.

role when describing the systemic entanglements of ancient cosmogonists and cosmologists. For this purpose, it is imperative to move away from reducing social structure to states, nations, and empires, and seeing the Eastern Mediterranean and adjacent areas as the sum of various human networks that operated with independency. Such a step can allow us to see with more clarity smaller structural formations, like social networks of cosmologists, and their corresponding symbolic media. In the ancient world, as today, social networks pervaded various regions and created stable forms of communication across different populations.

A consideration of deixis in the context of the succession myth tell us that we are not dealing with issues of one culture influencing another. We are rather facing individual agents engaging in the production of networks and their corresponding semantic frameworks that spread across a large geographical area. Variations on motifs and tropes as well as variations achieved through indexical gestures like the manipulation of the variable *violence*, do not attest for an independent development of Greek and Mesopotamian cosmology but for a systematic interdependency. This interdependency is expressed in an overall coherence in the ways themes are manipulated for indexical purposes. Instead of seeing similarities and differences as signs of connection and disconnection, we can consider diverse uses of motifs and indexes as the product of the same social field, a field that provided a logic for taking positions in it.

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