

# Myths and Legends: Ishtar, the first goddess of love and war

By Louise Pryke, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.16.17

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Ishtar (right) comes to Sargon, who would later become one of the great kings of Mesopotamia. Image: Edwin J. Prittie via Flickr

*Mythology began thousands of years ago. There was a need to explain why there were sunrises, floods, sickness and wars. Myths were stories about gods and goddesses who had super powers. They also had human feelings and looked human. These ideas were passed down in stories. This myth comes from ancient Mesopotamia.*

As singer Pat Benatar once said, love is a battlefield. After all, while love can be a beautiful thing, it also can hurt.



So it was with the world's first goddess of love and war, Ishtar, and her long-time love Tammuz.

Thousands of years ago, Ishtar was revered throughout ancient Mesopotamia. It covered a huge area that now includes Iraq, parts of Iran, Syria, Kuwait and Turkey.

For the Mesopotamians, love was a powerful force capable of upsetting earthly order.

## **In Love And War**

Ishtar was closely linked with romantic love, but she was also the goddess of war. Those two concepts might seem very different, but love and war have a few aspects in common. For one thing, both can change a person's place in the world. A king might lose his riches and his throne after losing a war, for example. Meanwhile, a commoner could suddenly gain a title and wealth by marrying a prince or princess.

The goddess Ishtar was described as beautiful and love poetry was often written about her. At the same time, she was terrifying on the battlefield, with her rage being compared to a destructive storm. Ishtar was quick to seek revenge, as her lover would find out.

## **Playing With Fate**

The earliest poems of Ishtar were written by Enheduanna around 2300 B.C. Enheduanna was the daughter of Sargon of Akkad, the legendary ruler who founded the Akkadian Empire and ruled over much of Mesopotamia.

Enheduanna's poems describe Ishtar as being able to bring about quick changes of fortune. Ishtar's ability to change fate ensured victory on the battlefield. It could also change romantic fortunes. In ancient love charms, Ishtar's help was called upon to capture the heart of the desired lover.

Ishtar is described as a beautiful, young woman with striking eyes. She and her long-time love, Tammuz, are the subjects of one of the world's first love stories. The two are described as deeply in love — but like many great love stories, their union ends tragically.

## **Ishtar's Descent To The Underworld**

The most famous telling of this myth is an account known as "Ishtar's Descent to the Underworld." It begins with Ishtar's decision to visit her sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld. The Underworld was the land of the dead, and something like our idea of hell.



Ishtar said she was visiting the Underworld to mourn the death of her brother-in-law, the Bull of Heaven, who is also in the "Epic of Gilgamesh." However, the other gods suspected her visit was part of a plan to seize control of the Underworld.

Ishtar's motives were made clear by her preparation for her journey. She carefully applied makeup and jewelry and wrapped herself in beautiful clothing. Ishtar was known for beautifying herself not only before meeting a new love but also before entering battle.

When Ereshkigal learned how Ishtar was dressed, she realized her sister did indeed intend to conquer the Underworld. So she came up with a plan to literally strip Ishtar of her power.

Once arriving at Ereshkigal's home, Ishtar descended through the seven gates of the Underworld. At each gate, she was instructed to remove an item of clothing or jewelry. When she arrived before her sister, Ishtar was naked and powerless, and Ereshkigal killed her at once.

## **Finding A Replacement**

Ishtar's death had terrible consequences. It led to couples on Earth no longer having an interest in love or having families. In response, Ea — the god of wisdom — arranged for Ishtar to be brought back to life and returned from the Underworld.

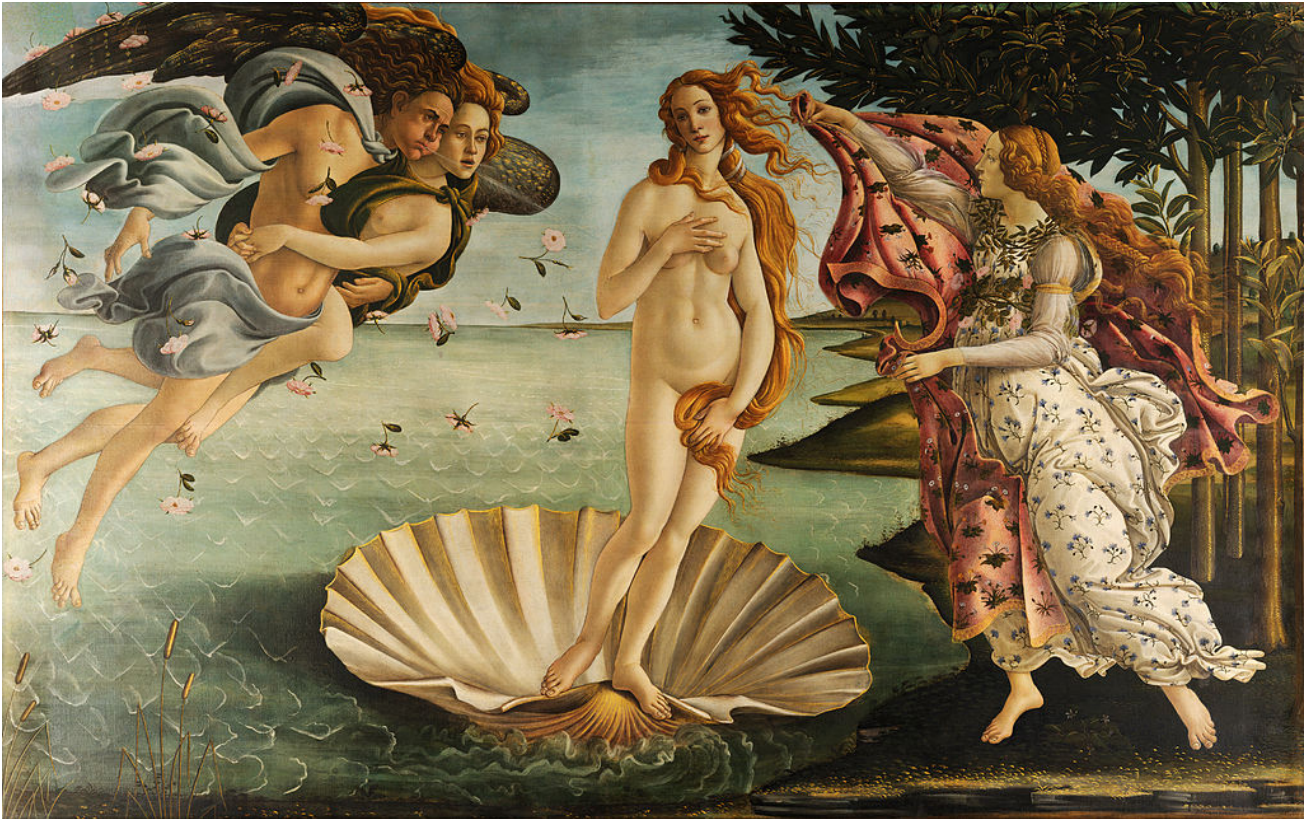
However, Ishtar's departure created an empty space in the Underworld, and that space could not be left empty. Ishtar was instructed to find her own replacement with the aid of a band of demons.

In the world above, Ishtar saw Tammuz relaxing on a throne, apparently not very saddened by her death. Enraged, she instructed the demons to take him away with them back to the Underworld.

Ishtar frequently sought revenge for one wrong or another, but her desire for revenge was not just mean-spirited. It was closely connected to the world's need for justice and order.

Love and war are both forces that can create chaos and confusion. The goddess Ishtar needed to be able to restore order as well as overturn it.

## Ishtar's Legacy



Today, Ishtar is largely forgotten. However, her myth helped to shape the image of the most famous love goddess of them all, the Greek goddess Aphrodite.

In turn, Aphrodite helped to shape the image of the comic book superhero Wonder Woman. This connection might partially explain the striking similarities between Ishtar and Wonder Woman. Both are warriors who enter the battlefield wearing bracelets and a tiara. Both demonstrate love, loyalty and a fierce commitment to justice.

In the modern day, love is said to conquer all, and in the ancient world, Ishtar did just that.

*Louise Pryke is a professor of languages and literature of ancient Israel at Macquarie University in Australia.*

**Quiz**

- 1 Read the selection from the section "In Love And War."

*Those two concepts might seem very different, but love and war have a few aspects in common. For one thing, both can change a person's place in the world. A king might lose his riches and his throne after losing a war, for example. Meanwhile, a commoner could suddenly gain a title and wealth by marrying a prince or princess.*

Why did the author include this selection?

- (A) to elaborate on Ishtar's power with examples of how quickly Ishtar could make bad and good things happen
  - (B) to introduce the risk of romantic love by explaining what happens when a person goes to battle for love
  - (C) to elaborate on the very different sides of Ishtar's power by explaining how going to war and being in love are different
  - (D) to introduce how Ishtar could be the goddess of both love and war by giving a detailed example of how they are similar
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST introduces the influential role that Ishtar had in the world?
- (A) Ishtar was closely linked with romantic love, but she was also the goddess of war.
  - (B) The goddess Ishtar was described as beautiful and love poetry was often written about her.
  - (C) The goddess Ishtar needed to be able to restore order as well as overturn it.
  - (D) In the modern day, love is said to conquer all, and in the ancient world, Ishtar did just that.

- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

*Thousands of years ago, Ishtar was revered throughout ancient Mesopotamia.*

Which of the following words, if it replaced the word "revered" in this sentence, would CHANGE the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) respected
  - (B) worshipped
  - (C) honored
  - (D) remembered
- 4 Read the selection from the section "Ishtar's Legacy."

*This connection might partially explain the striking similarities between Ishtar and Wonder Woman. Both are warriors who enter the battlefield wearing bracelets and a tiara. Both demonstrate love, loyalty and a fierce commitment to justice.*

The word "striking" in the first sentence tells you that \_\_\_\_\_.

- (A) the similarities between Ishtar and Wonder Woman were remarkable
- (B) Ishtar and Wonder Woman were both aggressive and intimidating
- (C) Ishtar and Wonder Woman were similar in their use of violence and force
- (D) the similarities between Ishtar and Wonder Woman were accidental