

Water History
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1 The sea in Sumerian literature

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5 Abstract

6 Surveying the references to the sea in Sumerian literature, this paper discusses the general
7 idea that the sea is underrepresented in Mesopotamian cultures of the third millennium
8 BCE. The common idea on Mesopotamian civilizations is that these were based on the
9 rivers. However, recent research suggests the early Mesopotamian urban settlements of the
10 third millennium BCE are on the ancient coast of the Persian Gulf and in the middle of
11 lagoons or marshes. Coastal marsh cultures would not only have looked at the mainland,
12 but also to the sea. Through a study of Sumerian literature and royal inscriptions, the his-
13 torical relationship of the Mesopotamian cultures with the Persian Gulf is discussed. The
14 image of the sea that emerges from literary sources reflects the changes that occurred in
15 coastal region of southern Iraq during the third millennium BCE.

16 **Keywords** Mesopotamia · Sea · Sumerian · Literature · Mythology · Persian gulf

A1 This article is the result of a paper presented at the workshop *Waterscapes: Perspectives on hydro-*
A2 *cultural landscapes in the Ancient Near East* held at the 64th *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*
A3 (Innsbruck 2018). After my lecture, a colleague of mine criticized my historical reconstruction. He
A4 strongly maintained it was wrong, without being able, however, to specify in what I was wrong and in
A5 what he disagreed. I have taken his criticism very seriously. In the year between delivering the paper
A6 and submitting the present article, I went through all the primary sources and most of the secondary
A7 sources on the Persian Gulf in the third millennium BCE. In this article, I maintain the conclusions
A8 I reached in the paper. Primary sources from Mesopotamia are scanty and occasionally super-
A9 interpreted in secondary literature. General reconstructions of the relationship between Mesopotamia
A10 and the Persian Gulf are a matter of conjecture, which I leave to the specialists in the field. Before
A11 presenting my conclusions, I give an overview of the documentary sources mentioning the sea and
A12 the overseas lands without any further discussion, being this neither the focus of the paper presented
A13 at the workshop nor that of the present article. Furthermore, it should be reminded that most of the
A14 Mesopotamian third millennium BCE written sources are related to the central administration, and the
A15 non-state-controlled relationship with the Persian Gulf is absent or marginally represented in written
A16 records. My analysis is based on these sources and thus the reconstruction proposed refers only to state
A17 relationship with the Persian Gulf. Most of the Sumerian literature cited and discussed is available from
A18 the site of the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (= *eTCSL*; <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>).
A19 For the *corpora* of the royal inscriptions I refer to *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early*
A20 *Periods*, here abbreviated *RIME*, i.e. *RIME 2* = Frayne (1993). The chronology of third millennium
A21 BCE Mesopotamia is still subject to discussion. In this article I follow the chronology suggested by
A22 Sallaberger and Schrakamp (2015).

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17 Introduction

18 This article surveys the references to the sea in Sumerian literature and the role it plays
19 in late third millennium Mesopotamian tradition. No previous studies have dealt with this
20 topic.¹ One of the main reasons is the lack of information, but another important reason is
21 the general idea among scholars that the sea is underrepresented in Mesopotamian cultures
22 of the third millennium BCE. The state of the art is synthesised in the entry “sea” (Meer)
23 in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* – the major reference work for Assyriological studies
24 – which is limited to a few pages and deals mainly with lexical data (Edzard 1993). The
25 author concludes that the lack of references to the sea is due to the fact that Mesopotamia is
26 a river civilization.²

27 This statement expresses a common idea about Mesopotamian civilizations and is gen-
28 erally accepted. However, the results of recent research in Southern Iraq³ challenge two of
29 the pillars of the beginnings of the Mesopotamian historical cultures: agriculture and the
30 idea of a river civilisation. The early Mesopotamian urban settlements of the third millen-
31 nium BCE are on the ancient coast of the Persian Gulf and most are settled in the middle
32 of lagoons. The landscape of the early city-state is not the river, but the waterscape of
33 marshes, a seasonal changing environment formed by the meeting of the mouths of the
34 two rivers and the sea. The economies of the city-states were based on the resources of
35 this ecological niche. The role of agriculture in early Mesopotamian state formation must
36 be reconsidered in future research. Furthermore, the view of these coastal marsh cultures
37 is not (only) towards the mainland. The Persian Gulf had a relevant role in these early cul-
38 tures, an observation supported by recent archaeological research on the Gulf area. This
39 situation, however, will drastically change during the third millennium BCE.

40 Following these changes and starting from the same assumption that the sea is underrep-
41 resented in Mesopotamian cultures, this paper aims to give a different perspective on the mat-
42 ter. I analyse references to the sea in third millennium and early second millennium written
43 sources, mainly Sumerian literature and royal inscriptions. In the conclusions, I discuss the
44 historical relationship that Mesopotamian cultures had with the Persian Gulf and I argue that
45 the image of the sea that emerges from literary sources reflects the changes that occurred in
46 the development of the coastal region of southern Iraq during the third millennium BCE.

47 The sea in Sumerian literature

48 The Sumerian word for sea, ab or a-ab-ba (lit. waters of the sea), is poorly attested in
49 the literary compositions in Sumerian language. In these texts, the sea is never properly
50 described; it is instead used as a comparison, as well as a limit and a cosmic border.

¹FL01 The extensive and exhaustive article of Heimpel (1987), despite the title (“The lower sea”), deals with
²FL02 the political and economic relationship with the overseas partners of Sumer in the Persian Gulf, rather than
³FL03 with the sea.

²FL01 ² «Im Zweistromland als einer typischen Flußtalkultur spielt das Meer – im Ganzen gesehen – keine her-
²FL02 vorragende Rolle» (Edzard 1993).

³FL01 ³ In her dissertation, Pournelle (2003) questioned the traditional reconstruction of the environment of the
³FL02 early Mesopotamian city-states. Through the analysis and discussion of archaeological and geological evi-
³FL03 dence, she emphasises the role of the marshes. This work has been the base for successive studies by Pournelle
³FL04 and by other scholars such as C. Hritz and T.J. Wilkinson. Archaeologists publishing the results of
³FL05 their recent excavations in southern Mesopotamia (Abu Tbeirah, Tell Zurghul) have embraced the new per-
³FL06 spective introduced by Pournelle.

51 The sea as a metaphor of vastness and awesomeness

52 Often described as vast (dagal), the sea is used as a comparison for immenseness and ter-
53 ror. The interior of the Ekur, the temple of Enlil in Nippur, «is a wide (lit. empty) sea which
54 knows no horizon» (*Enlil A 44*) and Eridu, the holy city of the god Enki, is said to stretch
55 its shadow «until the midst of the sea» (*Enki's journey to Nippur 53*).

56 The angry sea with its towering waves recalls the feeling of stupor and terror that
57 the awe of the divine should inspire to the worshipper. The god Enki «is awe-inspiring
58 like the water of the sea» (*Enki's journey to Nippur 83*). The Netherworld god (Nergal,
59 Meslamta'ea, Lugalerra), usually described as a fearsome figure, is compared to a sea with
60 high waves and to an angry sea in two royal prayers dedicated to him by the Ur III king
61 Ibbi-Su'en (2026–2003 BCE) and by the Isin king Šu-ilišu (1986–1977 BCE).⁴

62 Sea with high waves, you are imbued with terrible fearsomeness!
63 Mighty god who lives in the Land,
64 You are a great terror which covers heaven and earth!
65 (*Ibbi-Su'en B A 11–13*)

66 Nergal, angry sea, inspiring fearsome terror, whom no one knows how to confront,
67 Youth whose rising is a tempest and a flood devastating the foreign lands,
68 Nergal, dragon covered with gore, drinking the blood of living creatures!
69 (*Šu-ilišu A 14–16*)

70 The perception of terror inspired by the sea is used to describe the temples and the cities as
71 well.

72 The temple of Nungal is an «angry sea which mounts high, no one knows where its
73 rising waves flow» (*Nungal A 4*). Eridu is a «rising sea without a rival» (*Enki's journey to*
74 *Nippur 54*) and Ur is a «city which like the sea inspires awe!» (*Nanna M 2*). In one case
75 the image of the fearsome sea is used to describe the army of the king Šulgi (2092–2045
76 BCE), «an irresistible onrush of water, a fearsome sea, ...» (*Šulgi O A 23–24*).

77 Feelings are occasionally compared to the overpowering sea. The healing goddess Nin-
78 isina helps the weak and the pious but persecutes and kills the wicked ones. In the royal
79 prayer of the Isin king Iddin-Dagan (1975–1956 BCE), the rage of the goddess is described
80 as a sea with towering waves which drowns the foe, her venomous bile covering the enemy
81 like a high tide.

82 [Holy] Ninisina, [...],
83 Whose raging [heart] none can cool – is a heart made like the dusk;
84 Whose angry [heart] no god can confront,
85 Which like the sea, bringing a flood-wave, drowns the foe.
86 Like the high tide, she pours spewed-out bile upon the enemy.
87 (*Iddin-Dagan D 34–38*)

88 In the cylinders of Gudea (end of the XXII cent.), the heart (lit. interior) of the god
89 Ningîrsu is described through images of irresistible and destructive waters.

⁴ See also the passage of a hymn to Nergal, «Like a rising frightening sea ..., with [your] kingship you
^{4FL02}inspire [terrifying fear]» (*Nergal C 54–55*).

90 (O Ninĝirsu) your heart, ever rising as the sea,
 91 Raising as a wave/wall,
 92 Roaring like gushing waters,
 93 Destroying cities like the flood.
 94 ...
 95 The heart of the lord (Ninĝirsu) that rises like the sea,
 96 That washes away like the Euphrates,
 97 That hits like the flood,
 98 That has overflowed with joy after inundating a land which is Enlil's enemy.
 99 (*Cylinders of Gudea* A viii 23–26 and B x 19–23)

100 The sea as a border and a limit

101 The expression “from the lower sea to the upper sea” gives the two extremes of the
 102 “known” world and indicates totality in the royal inscriptions, together with the ruler's epi-
 103 thets “king of totality” and “king of the four regions” (see below). In the literature, this
 104 sentence is found twice, both referring to control over regions in the periphery and the flow
 105 of tributes. In a *tigi* hymn to Enki for the king of Isin Ur-Ninurta (1925–1898 BCE), the
 106 god is asked to «present him with weighty tribute from the upper and the lower seas» so
 107 that the ruler can «bring it into the shining Ekur», the temple of Enlil, head of the pantheon
 108 and patron of kingship (*Ur-Ninurta B* 41–42).

109 A passage from a hymn dedicated to Dumuzi and Inanna is more detailed. The divine
 110 couple should grant the symbols of kingship (the staff and the crook) to the ruler, «from
 111 the rising of the sun to the setting of the sun, from the south to the north, from the upper
 112 sea to the lower sea, from where the *halub* tree grows to where the *eren* tree grows, over all
 113 Sumer and Agade» (*Dumuzi and Inanna D1* 42–46).

114 In literature, the sea, i.e. the Persian Gulf, remains the lower border of the world, but
 115 the mountain is often the opposite extreme. The limits determined by the lower sea – upper
 116 sea area in the “from the lower sea to the upper sea” expression is substituted by an area
 117 bounded by sea – mountain.⁵

118 (Enlil) raised his eyes southwards and there was the wide sea;
 119 He raised his eyes northwards and there was the mountain of the scent of *eren*.
 120 Enlil piled up the barley, gave it to the Mountain.
 121 (*How grain came to Sumer* 5–7)

122 In the literary account of kings' military successes, the sea and the mountain are the limits
 123 of the world and thus of their rulership. In the epic account of the struggle between Uruk
 124 and Aratta (a mythical city in the middle of the Iranian plateau), Ur-ĝirmuna, a sorcerer of
 125 Hamazi, offers his services to the king of Aratta, declaring «I will make (the territories)
 126 from below to above, from the sea to the *eren* mountain, from above to the mountain of the
 127 scent of *eren*, submit to my great army» (*Enmerkar and Esuhgirana* 146–147 // 159–160).
 128 Going from a mythic ruler to a historical one, the Ur III king Šulgi boasts about his cam-
 129 paigning, stating «I carried the weapon across the sea to the south, I jerked up the hostile

⁵ For different aspects of the *kur*, a Sumerian term for mountain, foreign country, and Netherworld, see
^{5FL02} Katz (2003) and Verderame (2011) and, associated with the sea, Verderame (2020b).

130 land of Elam as if it were grass by a gateway, how in the north I the people like grain»
131 (*Šulgi E* 23–25).

132 After the fall of the Ur III dynasty (ca. 2000 BCE), political power in Mesopotamia
133 fragments. Despite episodic military successes outside Mesopotamia, the city-states
134 of Isin, Larsa, and then Babylon, fight to control the region. The rulers barely maintain
135 the ambitious titles and claims of their predecessors. In royal inscriptions, the sentence
136 “from the lower sea to the upper sea” and the titles “king of totality” and “king of the
137 four regions” are more carefully employed. In a hymn to Haya for Rim-Sin (1822–1763
138 BCE), king of Larsa, there is no declaration about the ruler’s control over the world, but the
139 Mesopotamian god Haya still «receives the tribute for the gods, the yield of the Mountain
140 and the distant sea» (*Rim-Sin B* 15). Even for Samsu-iluna (1749–1712 BCE), successor of
141 Hammu-rabi of Babylon, the borders of his rulership are reduced. He is not the lord of all
142 lands, but only of his land, which extends «from the banks of the Tigris and the banks of
143 the Euphrates, to the shores of the sea» (*Samsu-iluna F B* 5).

144 Finally, the apocryphal letters attributed to the Ur III kings offer further evidence to the
145 geographical functions of the sea.

146 My lord, you have given me instructions about every matter, from the sea and the
147 land of Dilmun, from (var.: to) the salty waters and the borders of the land of the
148 Martu, to (var.: from) the *border* of Simurru and the territory of Subir.
149 (*Letter from Aradġu to Šulgi about irrigation work* 3–6)

150 Enlil, my lord, has ... the shepherdship of the land. Enlil has told me to bring before
151 Ninisina the cities, deities and troops of the bank of the Tigris, the bank of the
152 Euphrates, the bank of the Ab-gal and the bank of the Me-Enlila watercourses, from
153 the territory of Hamazi to the sea of Magan.
154 (*Letter from Puzur-Šulgi to Ibbi-Suen about Išbi-Erra’s claim on Isin* 7–14)

155 The overseas countries

156 In the historical period, the sea is a mythical as well as a real border for the Mesopotami-
157 ans. Over the sea, on far shores, are lands that were once of greater importance, but whose
158 relationship with Mesopotamia fade away during the third millennium BCE, if we rely on
159 the scarcity of archaeological and epigraphic evidence.⁶

160 Three geographical entities emerge from the Mesopotamian written sources – liter-
161 ary and otherwise – of the second half of the third millennium BCE. They go under the
162 name of Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha,⁷ and they correspond approximately to the regions
163 around Bahrain, Oman, and the coastal area between Pakistan and northern India (Heimpel
164 1987; Maekawa and Mori 2011; Laursen and Steinkeller 2017). In literature, their status
165 swings from myth to history. They are usually mentioned in relation with the export of pre-
166 cious stones, wood, and exotic animals.⁸

⁶FL01 See below and fn. 32.

⁷FL01 Other lands are occasionally located on the edge of the sea. For example, the *Lament for Sumer and Ur* (1.
⁷FL02 36) mentions the Mount Zabû, while a hymn of Išbi-Erra (2019–1987 BCE) mentions Bašime and another
⁷FL03 place whose name is lost (*Išbi-Erra B C* 4, 10).

⁸FL01 For a detailed analysis of these goods see Heimpel (1987); see also Pettinato (1972) and Kramer (1977).

167 Let the lands of Meluhha, Magan and Dilmun
 168 Look upon me, upon Enki.
 169 Let the Dilmun boats be loaded (?) with timber.
 170 Let the Magan boats ... the horizon.
 171 Let the *magilum* boats of Meluhha exchange gold and silver
 172 And bring them to Nippur for Enlil, [king] of all the lands.
 173 (*Enki and the world order* 124–130)

174 May the land of Meluhha load precious desirable cornelian,
 175 *Meš* wood of Magan and the best *abba* wood
 176 Into large ships for you.
 177 May the land of Marhaši ... you precious stones and ...
 178 May the land of Magan offer you strong, powerful copper,
 179 Dolerite, *u* stone and *šumin* stone.
 180 (*Enki and Ninhursağa* 49C-L)

181 Magan and Meluhha loaded wood from their mountains upon their shoulders for
 182 him.⁹
 183 (*Cylinders of Gudea* A xv 8)

184 Among the three, Dilmun is the most prestigious (Marchesi 2014). The relationship is so
 185 close that Dilmun's status goes far beyond the historical reality. Dilmun becomes part of
 186 Mesopotamian culture and even enters the mythical sphere. In the Sumerian narrative of
 187 the deluge, after surviving the flood, Ziusudra, the Sumerian Noah, is relegated in a land
 188 across the sea, Dilmun.

189 At that time, Ziusudra was the king -
 190 To watch over the animals and the seed of mankind,
 191 They settled him in an overseas country, in the land Dilmun, where the sun rises.
 192 (*The Flood Story* E 9–11)

193 The role of Dilmun in Mesopotamian cultures of the third millennium BCE is so relevant
 194 that a Sumerian myth describes its foundation. The god Enki gives Dilmun to her spouse
 195 (Ninsikila/Ninhursağa), though the site is still in its primordial state. The god transforms
 196 brackish water in fresh water sources, an act that makes Dilmun a proper urban settlement,
 197 a "city" (Verderame 2011):

198 The waters rose up from it into her great basins.
 199 Her city drank water aplenty from them.
 200 Dilmun drank water aplenty from them.
 201 Her pools of salt water indeed became (pools) of fresh water.
 202 Her fields, meadows and furrows indeed produced grain for her.
 203 Her city indeed became an emporium on the quay for the Land.
 204 Dilmun indeed became an emporium on the quay for the Land.
 205 At that moment, on that day, and under that sun, so it indeed happened.
 206 (*Enki and Ninhursağa* 55–62)

⁹FL01 The passage has been translated alternatively as «Magan and Meluhha came in submission from their
⁹FL02 mountain»; see fn. 33.

207 The strategic role of Dilmun is highlighted by the end of the above-mentioned paragraph.
 208 Protruding in the Gulf, the Bahrain peninsula is the gate to Mesopotamia. Dilmun is the
 209 “emporium” of Sumer, the place from which precious and exotic goods coming from
 210 Magan, Meluhha, and other overseas regions reach the quays of Southern Mesopotamian
 211 cities.¹⁰ The antiquity and prestige of Dilmun in Mesopotamia’s relationship with the Per-
 212 sian Gulf is substantiated by non-literary sources of the earlier periods, where only Dilmun
 213 is mentioned among the overseas regions. Magan and Meluhha appear with the founder of
 214 the Agade dynasty, Sargon (ca. 2300 BCE), who claims in his inscriptions to have made
 215 Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha boats moor at the quay of Agade. It is during the Agade
 216 period that Magan begins its ascent and possibly reaches a leading role in the Gulf, accord-
 217 ing to archaeological and epigraphic evidences (Laursen and Steinkeller 2017).

218 The yield of the sea

219 Literary passages dwell on the abundance or yield (he₂-ĝal₂, ma-dam) of the sea.¹¹ After
 220 creating Dilmun, among the blessings pronounced by Enki on the behalf of Ninsikila is
 221 that «the wide sea [may bear to you] its yield» (*Enki and Ninhursaĝa* 49P). A similar bless-
 222 ing is kept in the final passages of an apocryphal composition describing the destruction of
 223 Southern Mesopotamian cities at the end of the Ur III dynasty (ca. 2000 BCE): the future
 224 of reconstruction implies «that the sea should bear yield by itself» (*The lamentation for*
 225 *Sumer and Ur* 508). A reference to the yield of the sea is contained in the above-mentioned
 226 passage of Rim-Sin’s hymn to Haia (*Rim-Sin B* 15). In a hymn of the same king, the moon
 227 god Nanna is asked to provide «from the sea, the wide sea, from the standing reservoirs, an
 228 unending bearing (of yield) for your kingship» (*Rim-Sin G* 35–36). In the long list of things
 229 that Enlil makes happen, it is stated that without the god «the sea would not bear by itself
 230 its heavy treasure» (*Enlil A* 117).¹²

231 The frequent mention of the yield of the sea may appear quite surprising in a tradition
 232 where references to the sea are lacking and, even in administrative documents, fishing is
 233 mostly related to rivers. On the other hand, recent archaeological investigations of early
 234 settlements of Southern Mesopotamia have shown how the economy and diet of coastal
 235 sites heavily depend on marsh and sea products. The literary passages highlight another
 236 interesting aspect of the perception of the sea in Mesopotamian cultures. The sea, in fact,
 237 is said to produce by itself the yield, and moreover the verb employed is “to give birth”
 238 (u₃-tu).¹³ Thus, the sea, often conceived as a female element, “gives birth” by herself to the
 239 abundant product.¹⁴

¹⁰FL01 In the sources of the Syrian city of Ebla, there is only one reference to Dilmun as a toponym (*ARET V* 7
¹⁰FL02 rev. IV 1). On the so-called mina of “Dilmun” at Ebla see Maiocchi (2005).

¹¹FL01 ¹¹ For the Akkadian term *miširtu* “produce of the river or the sea”, see *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* M₂
¹¹FL02 123–125.

¹²FL01 ¹² *Temple Hymns* 305 mentions «the abundance of the midst of the sea» referred to the Ebursigsig, the tem-
¹²FL02 ple of the god Šara in Umma. For fish “growing” see also the passage of *Nanše B* 10–11 discussed below.

¹³FL01 ¹³ See also the passage from *Winter and Summer* 31, cited below.

¹⁴FL01 ¹⁴ See also the passage from the hymn to Nanše (*Nanše B*) discussed below, where fish are said to grow for
¹⁴FL02 the goddess. For the engendering of the sea and other cosmic regions see Verderame (2020b). This perspec-
¹⁴FL03 tive may oppose the products of the sea to that of agriculture, which instead needs “fecundation” and cul-
¹⁴FL04 tivation, and may also explain the lack of reference to sea products in central administration records: while
¹⁴FL05 agriculture is the result of state-controlled work, sea products are perceived as something spontaneous and
¹⁴FL06 alien.

240 The midst of the sea

241 The midst of the sea (ab-ša₃) is mentioned in several literary passages.¹⁵ The general mean-
 242 ing is that of a remote place which, on a horizontal plane, is a remote point, far from the
 243 seashore, and, on a vertical plane, it means the depth of the sea. Thus, large *u* birds come
 244 far away from the midst of the sea (*Copper and Silver* 82). Frequent is the reference to
 245 the shadow extending out into the midst of the sea. It may be the case of the shadow of a
 246 god, meaning the extension of the god's power, as in an Old Akkadian incantation from
 247 Susa (*MDP* 14, 91), where Enki's shadow «stretches out into the midst of the sea». Or it
 248 may be the case of a temple, referring to the hugeness of the building. The shadow of the
 249 Ekišnuḡal, the temple of Nanna at Ur, «extends out into the midst of the sea» (*Nanna G B*
 250 12) and the temple of the god NinMARki in Guabba is called «House which stretches over
 251 the midst of the sea» (e₂-ab-ša₃-ga-la₂).¹⁶

252 Alternatively, the midst of the sea in the sense of abyss is a dark place, inaccessible to
 253 light and sight. «Fish light up the interior of the sea like fires» (*Nanše B B* 3), but the rays
 254 of the sun do not illuminate it and the sight of the gods cannot scrutinise its interior («My
 255 brother, the midst of the sea my eyes», *Utu F* 32).¹⁷ In this sense and in the light of
 256 the engendering of the sea above discussed, the relationship of the *abzu* and the womb
 257 must be noted.¹⁸

258 Other references to the sea

259 In the following section, other isolated and unsystematised references to the sea are
 260 discussed.

261 In the *Sumerian King List*, at the end of his kingdom, the ruler «Meš-ki-aḡ-gašer entered
 262 the sea and descended to the Kur» (*Sumerian King List* 99–101), an expression that clearly
 263 refers to dying. The relationship of the sea with the Netherworld is not diffused in Meso-
 264 potamia. All located below the earth, the domain of the god Enki, the underground sweet
 265 waters (*abzu*), and the Netherworld occasionally overlap.¹⁹ The same god Enki is the pro-
 266 tagonist of a myth which is briefly mentioned at the beginning of *Gilgameš*, *Enkidu*, and
 267 *the Netherworld* and relates him to the Kur. In the later Akkadian tradition, a “river” of

¹⁵FL01 For the “midst of the sea” see also fn. 12.

¹⁶FL01 It should be noted, however, that the two temples belong to gods related to the marsh and the sea (see
¹⁶FL02 below). Furthermore, they are settled in cities which are on the edge of the lagoon or directly on the sea-
¹⁶FL03 shore. Guabba means literally “shore of the sea”; for this site see the recent synthesis in Laursen and Stein-
¹⁶FL04 keller (2017).

¹⁷FL01 Compare the description of the sweet water abyss, seat of the god Enki: «the deep *engur*, the subterra-
¹⁷FL02 nean water, the place the inside of which no god knows» (*Enki and Ninmah* 13).

¹⁸FL01 See, for example, the beginning of the Old Babylonian childbirth incantations *YOS* 11, 86, which begins
¹⁸FL02 «In the fluid of the coitus, the bones are created. In the flesh of tissues, the *homunculus* is created. In the
¹⁸FL03 water of the fierce and frightening ocean, in the water of the distant sea, the place where the child has his
¹⁸FL04 hand bounded, whose interior is not illuminated by the sun», and *CUSAS* 32, 28a, «In the fluid of the coitus
¹⁸FL05 the [...] was cr[eated]. In the remote water of the Apsû, in the water of the ocean, the wide sea, (in) a place
¹⁸FL06 whose interior nobody knows, the baby, his hands are bound, his eyes are covered». For these and other
¹⁸FL07 aspects see below and Verderame (2020b).

¹⁹FL01 For the Kur see fn. 5 and, for its geography, Katz (2003) and Verderame (2014).

268 salty water encircles the world,²⁰ as depicted in the *Babylonian Map of the World*, a draw-
269 ing on a clay tablet kept in the British Museum (BM 92687) and dated around the mid of
270 the first millennium BCE. The world is encircled by a bitter water river. This “salty” river
271 is the ocean that separates the Land of the Living from that of the Dead. In *The Epic of*
272 *Gilgameš*, the king of Uruk reaches the hero of the deluge, Uta-napišti, who had been re-
273 legated to an island across the ocean.²¹ In order to do so, Gilgameš crosses the ocean and its
274 Waters of Death by sailing with Ur-Šanabi, all elements recalling the dead souls’ crossing a
275 water border with the infernal ferryman (Verderame 2014).

276 The powerful flowing of the waters of the Tigris in the sea is used as a metaphor for
277 impressive and massive phenomena.²² A passage of the *Lugal-e* describes the primordial
278 situation when the river waters did not yet flow into the sea: «(At that time,) the Tigris
279 did not bring to heaven its flowing in its fullness. Its mouth did not [finish] in the sea, it
280 did not [carry] sweet water» (*Lugal-e* 340–341). In *The Curse of Agade*, Inanna opens the
281 city-gates and makes «Sumer bring its own possessions upstream by boats»; her action is
282 compared to the Tigris flowing into the sea (*The Curse of Agade* 43–45).

283 In the debate between *Winter and Summer*, the former, besides regulating the floods and
284 the flowing of the two rivers, «shaped lagoons in the sea and made the sea generate fishes
285 and birds by itself» (*Winter and Summer* 30–31).

286 Both in *Heron and Turtle* and *Bird and Fish*, the eggs from the bird’s nest are smashed
287 into the sea by the deceitful neighbour (the turtle or the fish).

288 The storm god Iškur is said to «howl over the sea» (*Sin-iddinam E* 15); the verb “to
289 howl” (sa₄) describes the sound of the marshes as well (Verderame 2020a).

290 Two passages mention the light reverberating over the water of the sea. Concerning the
291 boat of the goddess Nanše, its gold canopy sparkles and its cabin shines like the moonlight
292 on the sea (*Nanše B* B15–18). In a hymn to Ninurta, the god is said to cover «the edge of
293 the sea with rays of light» (*Ninurta G* 134–135). The composition continues with a long
294 passage calling Ninurta as Ena-tum or Enakam in relation with precious stones and foreign
295 land from where they come from: gold of Harali, cornelian and lapis lazuli from Meluhha,
296 *dušia* stone from Marhaši, silver of “fifteen cities”, copper and tin from Magan, bronze
297 from [...], silver from Dilmun, etc. (*Ninurta G* 136–154).

298 Finally, the sea is mentioned in three proverbs. The first and most famous is that of the
299 fox which, after having urinated into the sea, says «The *depths* of the sea are my urine!»
300 (*Proverbs collection 2+6 2.67*). The second and the third refer to fish of the sea (*Proverbs*
301 *collection 2+6 2.d13* and *11 C15*).

302 The sea in the Sumerian pantheon

303 In addition to the few references to the sea in the Sumerian literary tradition, we note its
304 lack of relevance in religious thought, and the absence of a distinct god or goddess of the
305 sea.

²⁰ For the “salty” river of the *Babylonian Map of the World* and the Netherworld elements in Gilgameš’
^{20FL01}travel in *The Epic of Gilgameš* as well as the river/sea as the border between the Land of the Living and that
^{20FL02}of the Dead see Horowitz (1998) and Verderame (2014), with previous bibliography.

²¹ In the Sumerian version of the deluge story, Ziusudra is relegated in Dilmun, “an overseas country”; see
^{21FL01}above.

²² See also the passage of *Šulgi O A* 23–24 discussed above.

306 In the Akkadian tradition, the divinised sea, Tiamat, plays a minor role. In the Babylo-
 307 nian cosmogony, kept in the *Poem of the Creation (Enūma eliš)*, everything did originate
 308 from the female salty water by melting with the male sweet water. The two elements are
 309 personified by Tiamat and Apsū.²³ They may be considered two titans, pre-divine beings
 310 whose role is relegated to the primordial time. Tiamat and Apsū are the first of a series
 311 of couples from which the gods were finally created.²⁴ Upon their deaths, their bodies are
 312 transformed into cosmic regions. In the *Poem of the Creation*, Ea²⁵ kills Apsū and trans-
 313 forms it in his abode, while Marduk slaughters Tiamat and from her body creates the world.

314 It should be noted that the Sumerian name of the Abzu, the watery cosmic region, abode
 315 and domain of the god Enki, is always written through two signs, ZU:AB, the latter refer-
 316 ring possibly to the “sea” (ab). A passage from the Sumerian myth *Enki and the World*
 317 *Order* substantiates the connection of the Abzu with the sea. In fact, Enki establishes his
 318 abode in the sea.

319 The lord established a shrine – it is a holy shrine, whose interior is skilfully built.
 320 In the sea, he established a shrine – it is a holy shrine, whose interior is skilfully
 321 built.
 322 ...
 323 ... a terrifying sea – it is a rising wave, its aura is fearsome.
 324 (*Enki and the World Order* 285–286, 290)

325 Besides being the god of the sweet underground waters, Enki is somehow connected to the
 326 sea and most of the literary passages mentioning the sea refer to him or his domains. Enki’s
 327 holy city, Eridu, lies on the seashore or on a lagoon directly connected to the sea. Eridu is
 328 a rising sea without a rival (*Enki’s journey to Nippur* 54) and its shadow stretches far away
 329 on the sea (*Enki’s journey to Nippur* 53). A far echo of the relationship among the god, its
 330 city and the sea are found in the Akkadian myth of *Adapa*, where the wise citizen of Eridu,
 331 *protégé* of Ea, sails into the wide sea for the daily fish for the cult of Eridu.²⁶ In *Enki and*
 332 *the World Order*, however, Enki gives patronage over the sea to another goddess, Nanše.

333 Her who ride [the *makurru* boat?] in the holy shrine,
 334 Who establishes *sexual intercourse*,
 335 Who over the enormous high flood of the subterranean waters,
 336 The terrifying waves, the tide of the sea,
 337 Who comes forth from the,
 338 The mistress of Sirara, ... fish ... – Nanše,
 339 Over the waters of the sea, a place of vastness,
 340 Enki appointed (her).
 341 (*Enki and the World Order* 301–308)

²³ Tiamat is related to the Akkadian term for “sea” (*tiāmtu*); Apsū is the Akkadian form of the Sumerian
^{23FL01} Abzu, the underground sweet waters.
^{23FL02}

²⁴ Tiamat (Sea, ♀) and Apsū (Sweet water, ♂) generate Lahmu (♀) and Lahamu (♂) who generate Anšar
^{24FL01} (Sky, ♂) and Kišar (Earth, ♀); *Poem of the Creation* I 1–13, see Verderame (2020b).
^{24FL02}

²⁵ Ea is the Akkadian counterpart of the Sumerian god Enki.
^{25FL01}

²⁶ For the relationship of Eridu with the sea according to archaeological and textual evidence, see the
^{26FL01} results of the excavation of the site by Safar, Mustafa and Lloyd (1981), where clay models of sail boats
^{26FL02} have been found. In 2019 an international team (Italian, French, Iraqi) has returned to the excavation of
^{26FL03} Eridu and will undoubtedly provide relevant new data on the site’s environment.
^{26FL04}

The sea in Sumerian literature

342 The *Temple Hymns* composition describes Nanše as «a great storm, a mighty flood, born
343 on the shore of the sea, who laughs on the foam of the sea, who plays on [the water] of the
344 waves» (*Temple Hymns* 276–279). However, Nanše is properly a goddess of the lagoon and
345 the marshes.²⁷ Her temple (Sirara) and her city (Nina/Niĝin) lies on the marshes and Nanše
346 is exalted as the mistress of fishes and birds that prosper in the marshes under her protec-
347 tion. The composition known as *Nanše and the birds* (*Nanše C*) lists in detail the birds
348 that thrive thanks to Nanše, particularly those who make their nest in the reed bed. The
349 relationship of Nanše with the fish and the sea is the focus of another hymn unfortunately
350 fragmentary (*Nanše B*):

351 A fish is held in her hand as a staff [...]
352 Fishes are put on her feet as sandals [...]
353 Fishes light up the interior of the sea like fires [...]
354 Fishes play on instruments for her like *sur* priests.
355 Fishes bellow for her like oxen.
356 Fishes wrap around her body as a *ba* garment.
357 The runner-fish (kaš₄-kaš₄) runs (kaš₄) to her.
358 The *gurgur* fish *thicken* (gur₄-gur₄) the sea for her.
359 The flash-fish (ĝir) makes the sea sparkle (ĝir) for her.
360 She spreads out fish spawn in sheaves,
361 So that fish will grow for her in the sea.
362 Fishes fly around for her like swallows.
363 “I, the lady, will ride on my *makurru* boat, I will ride home.
364 I will ride on the prow of the boat, I will ride home.”
365 (The boat’s) canopy of gold and fragrant *eren* wood
366 Sparkles for her on the sea;
367 Its cabin like a merry moonlight
368 Illuminates the sea.
369 “My husband is the *enku* of the sea,
370 Nindara is the *enku* of the sea.”
371 (*Nanše B B* 1–20)

372 If *Nanše C* celebrates the birds, *Nanše B* praises the goddess’ patronage over the fish of the
373 sea. She is responsible for their growth (*Nanše B B* 10–11). In *Enki and the World Order*,
374 Enki gives Nanše the office of inspector of the fish of the sea (*enku*), a prerogative that she
375 shares with her husband, Nindara, and her daughter, NinMARki.

376 (Enlil said:) “Nanše, the powerful lady, who rests her feet on the holy *goose*,
377 Is to be the *enku* of the sea.
378 Fish which are delicious things and birds which are sweet things,
379 She will provide to Nippur for her father Enlil”.
380 (*Enki and the World Order* 418–421)

381 Nanše’s husband is called «the lord of the holy sea, the francolin (*dar*), Nindara, the king of
382 Lagaš» (*Hendursaga A A* 25–26) and Nanše’s statement about Nindara’s function as *enku*
383 closes the above-mentioned hymn of the goddess (*Nanše B B* 19–20).

²⁷FL01 The hymn *Nanše A* describes all the prerogatives of the goddess, among which we find no references to
²⁷FL02 the sea or the marshes. For a general overview on Nanše see Heimpel (1998).

384 NinMARKi, first-born daughter (dumu-saĝ) of Nanše, is the goddess of the seashore city
385 of Guabba and her temple is called “House which stretches over the midst of the sea”.²⁸ A
386 passage from the *Temple Hymns* recalls the fact that she holds the title of *enku* “like her
387 father”.

388 O “House which stretches over the midst of the sea”, built in a holy place,
389 Guabba, your interior gives birth to everything²⁹ and is a well-established storehouse.
390 ...
391 Born in ..., ... in the flood of the sea,
392 Like her father ... inspector (enku) of the pure sea.
393 [In Guabba(?)] holy NinMARKi
394 Has established her house in your [...] and taken her seat upon your (Guabba’s) dais.
395 (*Temple Hymns* 283–284, 289–292)

396 Nanše, patron of the fish, is the protective goddess of the fishermen as well, as stated in a
397 fishing song which ends «(O fish,) [Nanše], the mistress of the fishermen, will be delighted
398 with you» (*The home of the fish* C 16–17). This prerogative is shared with another god of
399 Nanše’s circle, Hendursaĝa, who is celebrated as rescuer of mariners in a hymn dedicated
400 to him³⁰:

401 The god who has looked upon him will give him great strength.
402 The gusting south wind in the marshes will not sink (the pious’) boat thanks to him
403 (Hendursaĝa);
404 He will complete (his journey) as if he were in a carriage.
405 On the water of the sea – its vast place, the strong breaker does not touch him.
406 (*Hendursaĝa A C* 25–28)

407 **The sea in the historical setting of third millennium BCE Mesopotamia**

408 The lack of relevance of the sea in the Sumerian literature and religion is related to the
409 historical development of the region (Nissen 1988; Liverani 2013). Early urban states arise
410 in South Mesopotamia in the area lately identified as Sumer at the end of the fourth mil-
411 lennium BCE. Placed on the coast, amid marshes and lagoons, or with access to the sea
412 through watercourses, these early city-states lie between the interior of the Mesopotamian
413 plain and the Persian Gulf. They are part of an economic and cultural network that con-
414 nects the settlements on the coasts of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean (Potts 2009;
415 Steinkeller 2013; Barjamovic 2018). Archaeological evidence from the Gulf sites, rather
416 than from Mesopotamia, documents these relationships in the early phases (Laursen and
417 Steinkeller 2017). Many domesticated vegetal and animal species which become central for
418 the economy and the culture of Mesopotamia are imported from the Persian Gulf, particu-
419 larly from the Indian peninsula (Potts 1997).

420 From the mid third millennium BCE the relationship of Mesopotamia with the Persian
421 Gulf changes. The development of Southern Mesopotamian cultures is now towards the

²⁸ For Guabba see fn. 16; for the “House which stretches over the midst of the sea” (e₂-ab-ša₃-ga-la₂) see
28FL02 George (1993).

²⁹ For the relationship of the abyss with the womb and the use of the verb “to give birth” related to the sea,
29FL01 see above.
29FL02

³⁰ In Old Babylonian Ur is Ningal, the spouse of the moon god Sin, who protects the seafarers (Oppenheim
30FL01 1954).
30FL02

422 north and the interior of the plain. Urbanisation and political power move upstream, fol-
423 lowing the Tigris and the Euphrates, leading to the pre-eminence of centres settled in the
424 region north of Sumer, Agade. The first enduring unification of the region is undertaken
425 by the kings of Agade (ca. XXIV cent. BCE), a kingdom whose capital (Agade) lay on the
426 centre of the Southern Mesopotamian plain.³¹ After the fall of the Akkadian dynasty, the
427 Sumerian city-states occasionally regain independence or political control over the region.
428 The last Mesopotamian kingdom of the third millennium has its capital in the southern city
429 of Ur (Ur III dynasty, XXI cent. BCE), but the political and strategic scenario is no longer
430 the Persian Gulf. Military and commercial activities are now mainly directed towards the
431 Iranian plateau, Anatolia, Syria, and the Mediterranean regions. The literature celebrates
432 the wars of Enmerkar, the king of Uruk, against Aratta, a city located in the eastern moun-
433 tains, as well as the campaigns of Sargon of Agade in Anatolia. Royal inscriptions exten-
434 sively record the periodic campaigning of Mesopotamian kings attempting to control the
435 areas of production, trading routes, and hubs.

436 The development of the archaeological investigations in the Gulf has shed light on the
437 development of the cultures and economies of these areas and their relationships with
438 Mesopotamia. However, the archaeological and epigraphic evidence from Mesopotamia
439 remains scanty. The few cuneiform evidences have been available for decades and have not
440 increased in quantity or quality in recent years. They provide no clear clues on the nature
441 of these relationships. They are few, vague, and thus subject to different interpretations by
442 modern scholars.³²

443 In fact, in administrative texts and royal inscriptions, references to the sea are even
444 scarcer than in literature. Administrative texts record quantities of goods as well as boats,
445 officials, and persons related to the overseas lands of Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha. In
446 comparison with the total amount of documents known for an archive or a historical
447 period, administrative texts related to overseas trade are infinitesimally few; the quantities
448 of goods or boats they record, on the other hand, being occasionally exceptional in number,
449 raise doubt about the interpretation of the data.

450 In royal inscriptions, the sea is mentioned occasionally and twofold, always in spatial
451 references. It is a political border and an empty space across which lie exotic countries
452 which provide essential precious goods (stone, metal, wood) and with which Mesopotami-
453 ans maintain alternate relationships along the third millennium BCE.

454 The earliest reference to the Gulf in a royal inscription can be dated back to the XXV
455 cent. BCE. Ur-Nanše, the founder of the First dynasty of Lagaš, mentions Dilmun in a sen-
456 tence that appears in several of his inscriptions, “(Ur-Nanše) made the boat of Dilmun to
457 bring timber from the mountain (or: the foreign country) to the shore (of Sumer/Lagaš)”.³³
458 The words of Ur-Nanše sound like a foundation act, at least in the perspective of the king.
459 It is he who made the boats of Dilmun bring timber to Lagaš, suggesting that this has not
460 been done before or, at least, that when he became king this was not the norm. We know
461 from archaeological sources that this is not the case, but this kind of statement will become

³¹FL01 The site of the ancient city of Agade has not been identified; it is believed to lay somewhere between
³¹FL02 Baghdad and Babylon.

³²FL01 ³² Compare, for instance, the collected essays edited by Potts (1983) and the review of this work by How-
³²FL02 ard-Carter (1987), as well as the article on the Persian Gulf by Heimpel (1987) and the recent synthesis by
³²FL03 Laursen and Steinkeller (2017); the latter provides an almost complete bibliography on the topic.

³³FL01 ³³ ma₂-dilmun kur-ta gu₂ ġiš mu-ġal₂; see Heimpel (1987). This sentence (see also fn. 9) has been alter-
³³FL02 natively translated as “he made the ships of Dilmun to submit themselves to him (to deliver goods) from
³³FL03 (their) land”, see Laursen and Steinkeller (2017).

462 frequent in royal inscriptions of the successive periods. Recalling Ur-Nanše's sentence or
463 using other words, later kings celebrate the success of making the boat of Dilmun, Magan,
464 and Meluhha mooring at the quay of the Mesopotamian cities or of subduing these regions
465 and making them providing goods. This periodical reference to re-establishing contacts
466 with overseas countries reveals the unstable relationship with the Gulf partners, at least as
467 regards royal control.

468 The record of successful overseas military campaigns documented in royal inscriptions
469 of the Agade kings (ca. XXIV cent. BCE) and their successors should be considered in the
470 same light. These are very few, particularly compared with the inland campaigns against
471 Elam, northern Mesopotamia, and Syria. Isolated and ephemeral, the overseas exploits of
472 Mesopotamian kings are described with the enrichment of exotic details and heroic deeds
473 that marks their exceptionality. Sargon claims in an inscription that « he moored the ships
474 of Meluhha, Magan, and Dilmun at the quay of Agade» (*RIME* 2.1.1.12 and 28).³⁴ After
475 him, Maništusu crossed the Lower Sea and, after the defeat of a coalition of “thirty-two cit-
476 ies”, «quarried the black stone of the mountains across the Lower Sea, loaded (it) on ships,
477 and moored (the ships) at the quay of Agade» (*RIME* 2.1.3.1). His successor, Naram-Sin
478 conquered Magan, defeated his ruler (Manium) and «in their mountains he quarried diorite
479 stone and brought it to Agade, his city» (*RIME* 2.1.4.13). This means that in a period of ca.
480 fifty years between the beginning of Maništusu's reign and Naram-Sin's, two successive
481 campaigns were led against overseas countries to provide stone to Mesopotamian rulers.
482 With regards to Sargon's claim that he made the boats of Meluhha, Magan and Dilmun
483 mooring at Agade's quay, the exploits of Maništusu and Naram-Sin reveal that they had
484 recourse to a violent act instead of a regular and peaceful exchange. Furthermore, their
485 campaigns are a failed attempt to control the production area or trading posts.

486 Economic documents corroborate the idea of irregular contact between Mesopotamia and
487 the Gulf in central administration archives.³⁵ The earliest reliable evidence is in the Early
488 Dynastic (ca. XXV–XXIV cent. BCE) sources, where only Dilmun is mentioned among the
489 overseas commercial partners. This confirms the antiquity and prestige of Dilmun, whose
490 mythical status is often referenced in Sumerian literature, besides the foundation by Enki
491 celebrated in *Enki and Ninhursaga*. Except for Ur-Nanše's, Dilmun does not appear in
492 other royal inscriptions of this period, but it is frequent in administrative records, particu-
493 larly from Ĝirsu,³⁶ where the term *dilmun* qualifies different types of goods, and it appears
494 occasionally in personal names (amar-dilmun-na^{ki}, dilmun-ĝu¹⁰, lugal-saĝ-dilmun) or pro-
495 fessions (gal-dilmun).³⁷ In the Old Akkadian period (ca. XXIV cent. BCE), references to

³⁴FL01 ³⁴ In a later Akkadian composition celebrating the great revolt against Naram-Sin, the latter claims that
³⁴FL02 before him, Sargon crossed the sea, defeated Magan and «washed his weapon in the Lower Sea» (Wilcke
³⁴FL03 1997).

³⁵FL01 ³⁵ These data have been interpreted differently by other scholars. For example, Carter (2013) quotes the few
³⁵FL02 administrative records as evidence for intense and continuous exchange relationship between Mesopotamia
³⁵FL03 and the Persian Gulf.

³⁶FL01 ³⁶ See in general Heimpel (1987) for the references to the boats arriving to or departing to Dilmun and to
³⁶FL02 the goods traded. The ideogram DILMUN appears several times in Early Dynastic documents from Ur (ca.
³⁶FL03 XXVI cent. BCE); in some cases, it seems to be part of a personal name, but in other cases the fragmentary
³⁶FL04 state of conservation of the tablet or the obscure meaning of the text does not allow a proper interpretation.

³⁷FL01 ³⁷ The administrative documents record an apprentice (dumu gal-dilmun, *WF* 142: obv, ii 6) as well. The
³⁷FL02 gal-dilmun appears in line 51 of the Early Dynastic list of officials, preceded by kuš₇/šuš₃ “(a profession or
³⁷FL03 title)” and followed by šidim “carpenter”. The term dilmun alone is found in the Early Dynastic Lu₂ E list
³⁷FL04 41, between the potter (bahar₂) and the boat-builder (ma₂-gin₂).

496 Dilmun are drastically reduced. A dozen documents from different Sumerian cities record
497 boats, merchants, and people of Dilmun, but Magan and Meluhha appear for the first time in
498 the same quantity. This is parallel to the first mentions of Magan and Meluhha in Akkadian
499 kings' inscriptions. The Neo-Sumerian administrative documents of the end of the third mil-
500 lennium BCE give a clear idea of the development of the relationship of Mesopotamia with
501 the Gulf. Among the ca. 95.000 Neo-Sumerian documents we have only 10 references to
502 Dilmun, ca. 55 to Meluhha, ca. 50 to Magan. These meagre results show firstly the absence
503 of a constant and continued relationship of the Ur III state with the Gulf partners, and sec-
504 ondly the eventual loss of importance of Dilmun on behalf of the other two regions.

505 In royal ideology, the sea becomes soon the limit of the world. The expression introduced
506 by Lugalzagesi (XXIV cent. ca.), from "the lower sea to the upper sea" is adopted by the suc-
507 cessive rulers together with other expressions such as "reaching the seashore" or "cleaning the
508 weapons in the sea" as a final act of a military campaign that has reached the limit of the world.

509 From the mid third millennium BCE, the centre of power and the urbanisation shift to
510 the north. The cities of Kiš and Agade, located in the area north of Sumer (Agade), are
511 the seat of the kings who control the region. The settlements develop in the same region,
512 while those of Sumer decrease. Despite criticisms (Powell 1985), overexploitation of agri-
513 culture and salinization of the soil have traditionally been claimed as reasons for the crisis
514 of Southern Mesopotamia (Jacobsen 1982; Altaweel 2018). The urbanisation of the coastal
515 area collapses by the end of the third millennium BCE, after which the area is deurbanised.
516 The main cities of Sumer fall and are abandoned (Umma, Ĝirsu, Adab), or survive only as
517 cultic centres (Nippur, Eridu, Ur). The collapse of urbanisation leads to a power vacuum,
518 which involves the abandonment of the maintenance of the centralised system of canals;
519 the area returns to marshes. The centres of power now settled in the north are unable to—
520 or not interested in the—control (of) this area. "Wild" and uncontrolled, the coastal region
521 becomes a periphery and an obstruction to access the Persian Gulf.

522 Conclusions

523 The historical development of the region during the third millennium BCE determines the
524 scarcity of references to the sea in written sources. These reflect a general and increasing
525 loss of importance of the sea between the mid third millennium, when the Persian Gulf is
526 still the strategic focus, and the end of the millennium, when the coastal area is abandoned
527 and almost inaccessible to urban states. Despite the limited references, the image of the sea
528 in Sumerian literature is well defined. Wide, vast, and empty, the sea is celebrated for its
529 force and the fear it inspires. The towering waves, the mighty tide, and the irresistible flood
530 are synonyms and metaphors of awesomeness and terror as well as of overpowering forces.
531 Rather than a space of communication that can be crossed and through which different
532 lands are in contact, the sea is a space of delimitation, a natural, political, and mythological
533 border. Its geography is vague. Its vastness is a parameter for spatial extension. Its "centre"
534 is the most remote place, unknown and unfathomable, even for the gods. The lands that lie
535 across the sea are exotic, almost mythical. Female engendered, the sea produces its abun-
536 dant yield by itself. Finally, several elements relate the sea with the Kur and the realm of
537 death. The sea, or the "salty" river, as a water border which divides the land of the living
538 and the land of the dead is an idea suggested by Sumerian literary passages and will be
539 fully developed in the successive Akkadian tradition. In short, the sea is depicted as an
540 unfamiliar and alien element in the Sumerian literary sources.

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