



"Inanna" ("Ishtar" by Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians) is an ancient Mesopotamian goddess associated with love, beauty, sex, war, justice, and political power. She was known as the "Queen of Heaven".

The relief is displayed in the British Museum, which has dated it between 1800 and 1750 BCE.

## **The Queen Who Listened Downward**

Before the descent, there was a listening.

Inanna was Queen of Heaven and Earth. She held dominion over love and war, over the morning star and the evening star, over the threshold between darkness and light. She was radiant with power. Her crown sat upon her head like a second sun.

And yet.

Something reached her from below. Not a voice exactly. More like a vibration in the deep earth, a low hum beneath the roots of things. Her sister Ereshkigal, Queen of the Great Below, was in mourning. The underworld was groaning with it.

Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.

This is how it begins — not with catastrophe, not with being seized or tricked or forced. Inanna chooses. She turns her ear to the ground and she hears something she cannot unhear. Something in her recognizes the call. Something in her knows she must go.

She prepares herself carefully. She gathers her seven divine powers and holds them in her hands. She places the shugurra, the crown of the steppe, upon her head. She arranges her dark hair across her forehead. She fastens the lapis lazuli beads around her neck, the breastplate against her chest, the gold ring around her wrist. She takes up the measuring rod and line. She wraps herself in her royal robe.

She is dressed in everything she is.

She instructs her faithful servant Ninshubur to wait. If she has not returned in three days, go to the gods. Beat the drum. Tear at your garments. Do not let them forget me.

Then she descends.

At the outer gate of the underworld she pounds on the door. She does not knock gently. She is Inanna. She calls out in her full voice: *Open the door. I have come.*

The gatekeeper Neti asks who she is and why she has come to the land from which no traveler returns.

She tells him. He goes to consult his queen.

Ereshkigal hears that her sister has arrived at the gate in all her radiance and power. She slaps her thigh. She bites her lip. She does not say welcome. She says: *Let her enter. But let her enter according to the ancient rites. Gate by gate. Let her be treated as all others are treated here.*

Neti returns. He opens the outer gate just enough.

*Enter, he says.*

And as Inanna steps through the first gate, he reaches up and removes her crown.  
The shugurra. The crown of the steppe. The first thing she is.

Inanna stops.

*What is this?* she asks. *Why have you taken my crown?*

Neti does not soften it. He does not explain. He says only:

*Be quiet, Inanna. The ways of the underworld are perfect. They may not be questioned.*

She stands there without her crown for the first time in her existence. The air where it rested is cold. She does not know what she looks like now. She does not know what she is without it.

She keeps going.

***What have you worn as your crown? What would you be without it?***

