



The Mythology of Mesopotamia

Just as Minoan, Mycenaean, Dorian, and Ionian myths are all part of what we think of as Greek mythology, with its diversity, its conflicting versions of particular events, and its literary as opposed to purely religious and folkloric content, Mesopotamian mythology is made up of the myths and religions of several cultures that over many centuries inhabited the same geographic area—essentially modern Iraq—and assimilated each other's religious understandings and stories. Mesopotamian mythology refers here to the period between the advent of writing in Sumer late in the fourth millennium B.C.E. and the emergence of Christianity in the first century C.E. The mythology in question in all likelihood reaches back in the oral tradition of the pre-literate cultures of the area, but in terms of written records, it begins in Sumer and is absorbed and added to by Sumer's Semitic conquerors and successors, including the various Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian dynasties. The mythology of the Hurrians and Hittites, whose presence in northern Mesopotamia was significant, will be treated in connection with Anatolian traditions.

Much of what we know of Mesopotamian mythology comes from mid- to late-third-millennium Sumerian and Akkadian tablet fragments, including a list of Old Sumerian gods from Fara (ancient Shuruppak, near Nippur) and Lagash dating from c. 2500–2300 B.C.E., as well as from scripts in Sumerian and Akkadian of Hammurabi's period

and from the ruins of the seventh-century-B.C.E. Assurbanipal Library in Nineveh. The preservation of Sumerian language and mythology for some two thousand years after the essential demise of the Sumerians as a viable entity themselves is an indication of the importance of Sumer to Mesopotamian culture as a whole.

The Pantheons

The Mesopotamian pantheon that can be derived from the various sources is clearly based on the Sumerian model contained in the Old Sumerian or pre-Sargonic Fara god list, but aspects and identities of deities change from place to place and from era to era. Sometimes several gods become one or one divides into several. Collectively the deities are the Anuna (Anunnaki), the "royal ones." The names in parentheses below are Semitic (Akkadian) equivalents to the Sumerian originals unless otherwise indicated. The gods and goddesses of the pantheon as originally conceived were often personifications of natural phenomena or aspects of the cosmos, concepts rather than anthropomorphic beings. Often they were paired as male and female aspects of the same phenomenon. They tended to be associated with particular cities or areas and to reflect the characteristics of those areas. These were some of the most important gods and goddesses in the myths of the region.

Sumerian/Babylonian Deities

An (Anu or Anum) was the somewhat distant father god, an embodiment of the sky or heaven. He separated early on from his mate, Uras, later Ki, both personifications of earth, and in so doing made room for the universe. As the great bull, with his roar of thunder and especially his semen-rain, with which he fertilizes Ki, An seems to have been a mythological descendant of the Neolithic bull gods such as the one at Çatal Hüyük. In some cities he was seen as the sky husband of Antu (or Antum), the female version of the sky, who was, like so many ancient mother goddesses, bovine. Her milk flowed from cloud-udders and, like her husband's semen, fertilized the earth. The male An and the female Ki—heaven and earth—were thought in

certain areas to be the offspring of the mother goddess Nammu, believed by some to have been the creatrix of humans. In a Babylonian version, An was born of the primordial couple Anshar and Kishar. An's Sumerian cult center was in Uruk. If at first he was the most powerful of the gods, he lost some of his importance over the centuries, giving way to the gods Enlil and Marduk and the goddess Inanna.

Enlil

Enlil (Ellil) was the storm, air, and wind (*lil*) lord (*en*) and the son of An. He was the only god other than An who could bestow the *me* (*parsu*)—the important elements of the Sumerian concept of divine civilized order—on other deities or on kings, temples, or cities. Like storm gods in other regions of the world—the Norse Thor, for example—Enlil was in some ways more important than the father god. His base was the holy city of Nippur—the Vatican of ancient Sumer—and from there during the Early Dynastic period he gave authority to Sumerian kings in the name of his father from his great protoziggurat temple E-kur (the name means “mountain house”). Enlil was linked in Babylon to his female equivalent, the wind or air-wind (*lil*) goddess or lady (*nin*), Ninlil (Mullissu), who before her marriage had been called Sud and occasionally was identified with the mother goddess Ninhursaga (Belitili), who, with An, Enlil, and Enki, was one of the four principal deities of Sumer. Ninhursaga, “mistress of the foothills” and later “mistress of the gods,” represented fertility and birth; her sign included the uterus of a cow, associating her with Neolithic cow goddesses important to agriculture and animal husbandry. As the wife of Enlil, she was the mother of the seasons. Ninhursaga, as indicated above, was assimilated with various other goddesses, depending on the particular locale and era. Her sometime husband Enlil was the source of fertility and abundance as well as of storms, floods, and destruction. Some cities believed him to be the father of the goddess Inanna, who eventually made her way into what became the top five of Sumerian deities. One of Enlil's sons was Ninurta, the city god of Nippur, an agricultural rain god sometimes identified with the god Ningirsu. His sign was the plow, as that of his father, Enlil, was the hoe. At the yearly fertility festival the king of

Nippur opened the ceremonies behind a plow, in celebration of Ninurta. Other sons of Enlil were the moon god Nanna (Suen, Sin), who with his wife, Ningal, was particularly worshiped at Ur. Nanna and Ningal were the parents of the sun god Utu (Shamash), the lord of judgment, and of the goddess Inanna. Still another son of Enlil (or of An) was the weather god Ishkur (Adad), sometimes the twin brother of the god Enki.

Enki

Enki (Ea) was one of the most important Mesopotamian gods. Lord (*en*) of the soil or earth (*ki*), whose home was the underground sweet waters (*abzu, apsu*), he was a god necessary to irrigation, a practice important in his home, the city of Eridu in the southern marshlands of what is present-day Iraq. Enki was a trickster of sorts, known for his magical powers and incantations. Wise and skillful at all crafts, he was usually said to be a son of An and the mother-riverbed goddess Nammu (the name means "lady vulva") and was considered third in rank among the deities after An and Enlil. Damgalnuna (Damkina), still another version of the mother goddess, was his wife. Their son Asarluhi was later assimilated in Babylon into the god Marduk. Like most trickster gods, Enki possessed an insatiable sexual appetite, a fact that probably was a metaphorical expression of his role as a god of fertility and irrigation.

Inanna

Eventually the most important of the Mesopotamian goddesses was Inanna (Ishtar), also known as Innin or Ninnin. In her primary center at Uruk, where dates were a staple crop, she was Ninana, "mistress of heaven" and "lady of the date clusters." Like many fertility goddesses, she was sometimes the "cow of heaven." In her assimilation with the Akkadian Semitic astral goddess Ishtar, she was called "mistress of the *me*," making her (with An and Enlil) one of the most powerful of deities. Depending on the tradition, Inanna was the daughter of Enlil, Nanna, or Enki. Above all, she was a goddess of sexuality and reproduction and was central to the ubiquitous Mesopotamian ritual

of the sacred marriage. In hymns for these occasions she longs for and achieves intercourse with a king in order to bring fertility to the land. In Babylon Inanna could also play the role of a possibly dangerous femme fatale, as in the case of her attempt to seduce the hero Gilgamesh. Central to the most famous stories about her are her associations with a sister, Ereshkigal (Allatu), goddess of the underworld, and her relationship with the shepherd—sometimes fisherman—god Dumuzi (Tammuz in Hebrew and Aramaic). Dumuzi was represented by kings in the sacred marriage rites, especially at Uruk. As the husband of the “mistress of the date clusters,” he was identified with a local god, Amaushumgalanna, the fertile power behind the date harvest. Later Dumuzi-Tammuz, whose myth involved his death, would merge with other dying gods of the Middle East.

What stands out about all of the gods whose origins are in Sumer is their association with agriculture and fertility. Although colorful myths about them developed, it seems clear that such myths were, like the principal characters in them, seen not so much as literal histories but as metaphors for natural phenomena and the practices of agriculture and animal husbandry.

Marduk

Other sorts of deities existed in Mesopotamia, especially city gods. Good examples are the eponymous Assyrian Assur and the god Marduk. Assur at various periods was assimilated with earlier gods. He was Enlil, Anshar—the sometime father of An—and eventually Marduk. Marduk is the central figure in the Babylonian creation epic, the *Enuma Elish*. As in the case of Assur, his nature was associated not with fertility in particular but with the rise of the city-state of which he was the patron. He came into his own with the rise to power of Hammurabi early in the second millennium B.C.E. Although he existed in earlier texts and was even said to be the son of Ea (Enki), Marduk was essentially created as a “new” god in Babylon. According to the priests of that city, Anu (An) and Ellil (Enlil) gave him suzerainty over human society, and in popular tradition he, along with his father, Ea, and the sun god Shamash (Utu), was considered to be a deity accessible in prayer, one who cared about human beings and their problems. Marduk’s

popularity grew during the various political developments in Babylonia, and over the centuries his cult spread in Mesopotamia, until by the twelfth century B.C.E., as indicated in the *Enuma Elish*, he was considered to be king not only of humans but of the gods themselves. His power was indicated by his depiction as a young bull.

Kassite Deities

As conquerors of parts of Mesopotamia, the Kassites brought local gods with them, but these deities either did not survive for long or were assimilated into the gods of the area. Thus a Kassite form of Enlil or An was Harbe. The Kassite Burias was equated with the Sumerian weather god Ishkur (Adad). Surias or Sah was Utu (Shamash), and Maruttas was Ninurta (Black and Green, 112).

Elamite Deities

The Elamites of Persia honored the Mesopotamian deities but also introduced their own into that pantheon. These included (among many others about whom little is known) the mother goddess Pienenkir, Nahhunte the sun god, Napir the moon god, and the sky god Humban, perhaps a form of the Mesopotamian Huwawa (Humbaba), Enlil's monstrous guardian of the Cedar Forest who plays an important role in the story of Gilgamesh (Black and Green, 74-75, 106).

Mesopotamian Cosmic Myths

The Sumerian Creation

In *Sumerian Mythology*, Samuel Noah Kramer outlines the Sumerian creation as found in a series of fragments, some of which he calls "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld" (30). He points out that the Sumerian term for the universe was *an-ki* (41), literally the combination of An (heaven) and Ki (earth), which emerged as a primordial mountain from the maternal subterranean waters of the goddess Nammu. An and Ki, as male and female, conceived Enlil and, presumably, the other Anunnaki. As in many creation myths, heaven and earth had to be separated from each other in order that further cre-

ation could take place between them. So it was that the sky god, An, raised the sky and the area of heaven above it, and the air god, Enlil, took his mother, the earth, down, leaving the appropriate space. The goddess Ereshkigal was sent to be queen of the underworld. The gods and goddesses married, were fruitful, and took responsibility for the various aspects of agriculture. The work of farming was difficult, however, and the gods began grumbling, especially as the crafty god Enki, son of Nammu herself, lay sleeping while they worked.

Nammu had the idea of waking up her son and suggesting that he create humans (to work in the fields). Enki delegated the job to Nammu, instructing her to take some clay from the marshes (*abzu*, later *apsu*) in which he lay and to shape the clay into figures. The created humans were put to work under the watchful eyes of the goddess Ninmah-Ninhursaga.

Enki and Ninmah

To celebrate their newfound freedom and the creation of humans, the Anunnaki had a banquet at which Enki and Ninmah drank too much. Ninmah challenged Enki to a creative contest. She would make new humans with any defects she saw fit. Enki agreed but with the idea that he would attempt to choose roles for the misfits that would negate their defects. A man with an eye problem he made a singer. A man who constantly leaked semen he cured with a magic water incantation. There were six such creations and "cures." Then the combatants changed positions. Enki would create humans with defects for Ninmah to counteract. One of these was a being called an *umul* who was so helpless that it could neither talk, walk, nor feed himself. Taunted by Enki to solve the being's problems, Ninmah asked it questions that it could not answer and offered it food that it could not use its hands to hold. Finally she gave up in disgust. Enki had won the contest. At least one scholar has suggested reasonably that the *umul* was probably the first infant (see Leick, 43).

Enki and Ninhursaga

This is a myth that gives expression to Enki's ancient metaphorical aspect as the power behind the irrigation complexities of the southern

marshlands. Enki lived in and was clearly associated with the sweet underground waters (*abzu, apsu*), which later would themselves be personified in Babylon as the god Apsu.

Enki's phallus, we are told, filled the ditches "with semen," that is, water—the words are the same in Sumerian—in the tradition of the father god, An, whose semen was life-giving rain (Wolkstein and Kramer, 139). Married to Damgalnuna (the name means "true wife"), one of several mother goddesses, Enki nevertheless "directed his semen owed to Damgalnuna . . . into the womb of Ninhursag[a]." When that goddess gave birth to the beautiful Ninmu, also a form of the mother goddess, Enki "poured semen into [her] womb." Ninmu gave birth to the goddess Ninkurra (meaning "mistress of the land"), and Enki fertilized her womb, causing the birth of Uttu (meaning "vegetation"). When Enki wished to pour his semen into Uttu, Ninhursaga advised the girl to resist unless Enki could bring her cucumbers, apples, and grapes. Enki obliged by reaching out and fertilizing more dry zones, which then produced these new products. Delighted, Uttu took Enki to "her lap," and he "poured the semen into the womb." But Ninhursaga wiped excess semen from the young goddess's body—the body of "vegetation"—and created eight new plants. In order to name these plants—that is, to declare their fates—Enki had first to eat them. This act so angered Ninhursaga that she cursed Enki, saying he would die, and then she disappeared, leaving the gods—the Anunnaki—sitting in despair "in the dust." Presumably the dust signifies that the land had dried up, deprived of Ninhursaga's fertile presence and of Enki's vital fluids, eight parts of his body now in a sense being clogged by the eight plants he had eaten. It was a little fox who determined a way of bringing the great goddess back. She returned and cured Enki by "fix[ing]" him "in her vulva" and naming eight new deities to counteract the poisoning by the plants.

Enlil and Ninlil

In a Sumerian myth from Nippur discovered in Old and Middle Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian tablets, a myth that bears similarities to the Enki stories of seduction, the god Enlil is attracted to his natural counterpart, the young and beautiful Ninlil. Her mother, realizing that

Ninlil is pubescent, advises her to purify herself in the river but to avoid the canal (irrigation ditch) called Inunbirdu, where Enlil will be lurking, ready to seduce and impregnate her. Naturally, Ninlil goes directly to the canal. Enlil is, in fact, waiting there, and he begins to attempt the seduction. Ninlil at first resists, but later Enlil finds her at a more hidden place and rapes her, engendering the moon god Nanna (Suen or Sin). For this act, or perhaps because Ninlil had not had time for the ritual of purification, he (or his son Nanna) seems to have been expelled by the "fifty great gods," perhaps to the underworld. Enlil leaves but is followed by Ninlil, and in various disguises he impregnates her with gods who may possibly take his or Nanna's place in the underworld. In any case, the myth ends with a hymn to Enlil as the source of abundance and fertility.

Enlil and Sud

In another version of the Enlil-Ninlil myth, also discovered in Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian fragments, Enlil, who is looking for a wife, meets the beautiful Sud. Enlil's advances are not accepted, but later he sends an envoy from Nippur to ask Sud's mother for the girl's hand. Through his agent, he gives Sud a secret love gift and promises her mother that her daughter will rule with him. At the suggestion of the mother, he sends his sister Aruru-Ninmah with a huge assortment of gifts—jewels, of course, but especially fruits of the earth. In a ritual in Enlil's temple Sud's face is anointed with holy oil, and the couple consummates the sacred marriage on the "shining bed." Finally, Enlil renames Sud—that is, he pronounces her fates or her essences—as Nintu (the "lady of birth"), Asnan (meaning "grain"), and Ninlil, his natural complement or queen.

Ninurta and Ninhursaga

In this myth, also called Lugale, Ninurta (also Ningirsu), who in some places was the "firstborn of Enlil" and son of Ninhursaga (of whom Ninlil, as a grain and birth goddess, could be a version), wages a preemptive war against his enemy Azag. Enlil sends a torrential downpour to defeat Azag, leaving Ninurta free to build a *hursag*, a

natural dam (the foothills), and so direct irrigation waters into the Tigris valley. Ninurta-Ningirsu then honors his mother by renaming her Ninhursaga (the "lady of the foothills").

Inanna and Enki

In a myth dating probably from the end of the third millennium B.C.E., the goddess Inanna, lacking any particular office or function among the gods, decides to visit the crafty Enki in the *abzu* at his home in Eridu with the intention of stealing the powerful elements of the *me*. The *me* are the sources of Sumerian civilized order inherent originally in the primal waters, the great goddess Nammu. They include, for example, ritual, priesthood, political power, security, crafts, animal husbandry, agriculture, sexual behavior, family, and decision making. The myth probably was enacted in a festival or cult drama, one type of which was the journey drama, in which a deity traveled ritually from his or her home city to the city of another god, especially to Enki at Eridu, where great power was stored and could be obtained as a boon (Jacobsen, "Mesopotamian Religions," 464).

When Inanna visits him Enki provides a grand feast at which he becomes drunk and acts impulsively, eventually handing the *me* to the goddess. When, after a drunken sleep, he realizes what he has done, he sends his servant to get the *me* back, but Inanna has already departed, placing the *me* in her "boat of heaven," that is, the boat of Uruk-based An but also perhaps her ample vulva (Wolkstein and Kramer, 147). Enki's followers, aided by demons, chase the ship, but Inanna and her handmaiden Ninshubur hold off the pursuers with arguments and magic spells. Returning to Uruk with the *me*, the basis of what will be the well-being of the people of Uruk, a city that now perhaps achieves dominance over Eridu, Inanna holds a celebratory feast, and Enki accepts her new higher position among the gods.

Inanna and Utu

One day Inanna asks her twin brother, the sun god Utu (Shamash), son of the moon god Nanna, to go with her to earth (*kur*), where she will eat various plants and trees that will cause her to understand the

mysteries of sex. Like Eve in the Garden of Eden, Inanna tastes the fruit and gains knowledge. In a related myth she descends to the *kur* (in this case *kur* is used in the sense of “underworld”) to learn about good and evil. Returning from the *kur*, she falls asleep in a garden and is raped by a Sumerian man who then leaves her. Unable to find the man, the goddess sends plagues into Sumer in revenge. Later, apparently bathed by Enki in the *abzu*, she returns home purified.

Inanna and Dumuzi

After her adventures with Enki, Inanna becomes one of the four most important deities—truly a queen of heaven—but she has yet to fulfill her destiny as a goddess of erotic love and fertility. Utu, the sun god, who watches over growth on earth, reminds his twin sister that she is now ripe for love. Inanna has two suitors, the farmer Enkimdu and the shepherd Dumuzi. Inanna at first favors the farmer but finally decides on the shepherd, who woos her with Utu’s enthusiastic support. Advised by her mother Ningal to “open [her] house” to Dumuzi, the goddess prepares her body for her husband-to-be. When she opens the door to him they are both overcome by passion. Inanna calls on her lover to fill her with his love:

My vulva, the horn,
The Boat of Heaven,
Is full of eagerness like the young moon.
My untilled land lies fallow.

And Dumuzi, the shepherd-farmer-king, obliges:

I, Dumuzi, the King, will plow your vulva.
(Wolkstein and Kramer, 37)

The love songs that follow are more explicit but in tone not unlike those to be found later in the biblical Song of Songs. All the senses play roles in the joyful private exploration of the physical that marks the sexual experience of Dumuzi and Inanna. But after the public consummation of the marriage, Dumuzi wishes to attend to his

kingly duties and begs his wife to "set me free"; he no longer has time to make love "fifty times" (Wolkstein and Kramer, 150–53). This part of the myth is probably the earliest version of the universal story of conflict between love and duty.

The tradition of the sacred marriage is central to Mesopotamian culture, beginning probably at Inanna's city, Uruk, where, in a sacred ritual drama, the *en* enacted the role of Dumuzi as Amaushumgalana, the date palm god, bringing the harvest to Inanna, goddess of the storehouse-temple, who "opens [her] door" for him, signifying a marriage that would bring abundance to the city (Jacobsen, "Mesopotamian Religions," 464). The myth of the relationship between Inanna and Dumuzi, of course, underlies the sacred marriage ritual, even though some scholars have argued that Inanna was a goddess of erotic love, not a version of the mother goddess (Black and Green, 109). Certainly Inanna's marriage is a celebration of sexuality for its own sake as well as for fertility in Uruk. As noted above, Inanna's primary temple was at Uruk, where a king called Dumuzi, like Gilgamesh, appears on the king lists as an actual king of the city toward the end of the third millennium B.C.E.

Inanna's Descent to the Underworld

The myth of the hero's descent to the underworld is found in most cultures. The particular myth of Inanna's descent and Dumuzi's sacrifice adds the element of resurrection that links it in varying degrees to such stories as those of the Greek Persephone, the Egyptian Isis and Osiris, and the Christian Jesus. And these stories and others like them have in common the celebration of physical or spiritual fertility related to a ritual journey to the depths where shamanic powers are experienced or gained.

As queen of the above, Inanna, always in search of knowledge, longs to know the below of her sister Ereshkigal, the negative or opposite aspect of the ripe goddess of love. She understands life more fully than anyone, but she knows nothing of death or of the unhealthy, unfruitful sexuality of Ereshkigal. Before leaving for the underworld, Inanna instructs her faithful helper Ninshubur to arrange official mourning for her and to approach Enlil, Nanna, and Enki, in that order, for help if she should fail to return.

Inanna abandons her seven cities and seven temples, thus stripping herself in an official sense for the ritual journey to the dead. But she takes seven of the *me*, wearing them transformed into seven pieces of magnificent clothing and jewelry, and approaches the underworld in personal glory. She knocks on the great gates and demands admittance. When reasons are demanded, she first mentions her relationship to Ereshkigal and then claims to have come for the funeral of Gugalanna, the bull of heaven.

The bull of heaven was a figure traditionally linked to the generic great goddess, at least from the Neolithic period, and was important in Sumer as an animal representing the king of Uruk (in the present case, Dumuzi) as well as other kings and gods of Mesopotamia. He was also an astrological figure (Taurus), who disappeared in the winter in Sumer and returned in spring. The Gugalanna theme, then, supports the descent myth's association with agriculture and beneficial sacrifice (see Wolkstein and Kramer, 155ff.).

Neti, the guardian of the gates, informs the naked Ereshkigal of the grand visitor decked in the seven *me*. Furious at the intrusion of her opposite, of everything that she can never be—lover, mother—the queen of the underworld instructs her servant to allow Inanna through the seven locked gates of the underworld only if she gives up one of the seven objects (the *me* as ornaments and clothing) at each gate. When Inanna arrives at her sister's throne, then, she is as naked as her host and is thus effectively stripped of her great powers. The significance seems to be that powers that function in life—sexual, familial, political, and priestly powers, for example—are useless in death. Inanna, always in search of new roles, nevertheless tries to usurp her sister's throne and is condemned by the underworld Anunnaki (gods) to death for her efforts. She dies and is hung up on the wall like a piece of meat.

Back in Uruk, three days and nights have passed and the faithful Ninshubur follows her mistress's orders. The temples and cities go into deep mourning and Ninshubur approaches Inanna's paternal grandfather, Enlil, and then her father, Nanna, for help, but both refuse, blaming the goddess for her excessive pride in going to the underworld. But Enki, the wise shamanic god who from his home in the underground waters of the *abzu* has his ear to the underworld, agrees to help. He understands how important his granddaughter's existence is to the welfare of the living world (Wolkstein and Kramer, 159–60).

Enki creates two creatures from the mud under his fingernails. Apparently lacking sexuality or gender, these beings will not offend the infertile underworld, where Ereshkigal is screaming in pain as she gives negative birth, as it were, perhaps to the stillborn of the earth. To his two creatures Enki gives the plant of life and the water of life and instructs them to comfort the suffering Ereshkigal. In return the underworld queen will offer them gifts, which they will refuse, demanding instead the body of Inanna, which they will revive with the two sacred elements. Everything happens as foreseen by Enki, but the underworld Anunnaki demand a substitute for the revived Inanna. Although she has been reborn in the underworld, she must leave a part of herself there. As Samuel Noah Kramer suggests, from the world of consciousness above she must retain contact with the dark world of the unconscious below: "Inanna must not forget her neglected, abandoned older 'sister'—that part of herself that is Ereshkigal" (Wolkstein and Kramer, 161).

As Inanna leaves her sister's land, gathering up her clothing—her old *me* and power—she is accompanied by watchful demons who will ensure the payment of the sacrificial substitute. Entering her own world as once more the glorious queen of heaven, Inanna is greeted by Ninshubur, whose ragged clothes indicate her genuine mourning. When the demons claim the faithful servant as the sacrificial victim, Inanna refuses to give her up. Other faithful mourners—Inanna's two sons—are also spared, but when the great goddess and her underworld demons arrive at Uruk, a cheerful, well-dressed Dumuzi is acting as king, apparently unmindful of the loss of his once beloved wife. An enraged Inanna condemns him to the sacrifice. Terrified, Dumuzi begs his brother-in-law Utu for help, but even when he is turned by the sun god into a snake, he cannot escape. He, too, must experience the dark world of Inanna's other side, Ereshkigal, in order, as Kramer suggests, to become a "truly 'great' king" (163). Thus, Dumuzi is taken away, but his sister Gestinanna arranges to spend six months of the year in the underworld so that he can spend those months back in the world above.

Marduk, the Enuma Elish, and the Babylonian Creation

The Babylonian creation epic, the *Enuma Elish*, as we know it, is based on first-millennium B.C.E. tablet texts found at Assur, Nineveh,

Kish, and Uruk. In fact, the epic is primarily a celebration of the city of Babylon and its city god Marduk (*Bel*, "Lord"). It was recited at new year festivals in Babylon (and in Assyria at Nineveh, where Assur replaced Marduk as the protagonist). The composition of the epic probably coincides with and is intended to justify the rise of Marduk from his status as a minor Sumerian deity to chief of the Babylonian pantheon during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I in the twelfth century B.C.E. (Leick, 52).

The rise of Marduk (and Assur) marks a significant change in the mythology of Mesopotamia, reflecting a movement from cultural principles centered on fertility and the balance of male and female roles to a much more patriarchal perspective such as the one that was emerging, for instance, among the Hebrews.

The *Enuma Elish* (the title translates as "when above") begins with a description of the beginning of time: "When the skies above were not yet named / Nor earth below pronounced by name, / Apsu, the first one, their begetter / And maker [*mummu*] Tiamat, who bore them all, / Had mixed their waters together" (Dalley, 233). Out of this mixture of sweet (Apsu) and salt water (Tiamat) came the gods—first the ill-defined Lahmu and Lahamu ("hairy ones"), then Anshar and Kishar, who produced Anu (the Sumerian An). Ea (Nudimmud, Sumerian Enki) was born in Anu's image. The new beings made so much noise that Apsu became irritated; encouraged by his vizier Mummu, he decided to get rid of them to restore peace and quiet. Tiamat, however, could not bear to harm her offspring. In this she resembles the Greek primal mother goddesses who try to protect their offspring against their child-destroying father-god mates. It was Ea who, like Zeus in Greek mythology, came to the rescue of the new gods. Using his inborn shamanic or magical powers, he cast a spell over Apsu, sending him to sleep forever as the underground waters, the *apsu* (Sumerian *abzu*), where, with his wife, Damkina (Sumerian Damgalnuna), he produced the great Marduk. Marduk was a huge, powerful god with four heads who irritated Tiamat by causing great waves and noise, thus establishing his identity as a storm god. When Anu created the winds, they added to Tiamat's noise, and Tiamat, assisted and encouraged by certain other gods, began to form an army of monsters led by her son Qingu (Kingu) to do away with Marduk and the noise. Worried about what Tiamat might do to them, the gods

called on Anu and Ea for help, but they realized their powerlessness against Tiamat and refused. Ea advised Marduk to take up their cause, and he agreed, but with the stipulation that the gods recognize him as their new king. It was he who from now on would decide destinies.

Marduk approached the wild and angry Tiamat as a storm god and filled her grotesque and open mouth with wind so that she could not devour him, and then he pierced her bloated belly with an arrow and threw her dead body to the ground. When the monster-mother's army tried to escape, Marduk captured them and took the tablets of destiny away from Qingu. Now Marduk was ready to create the world.

The creation myths express the cultures' sense of themselves, their essential identities. For several millennia Mesopotamia had generally accepted the old Sumerian creation story in which the female aspect is positive and important, basic to the fertility and irrigation principles so necessary for the agricultural practices of the Sumerians. But now the storm god Marduk, the all-dominant male, would create a world out of the dead body of the defeated feminine power that had been Tiamat. In the context of the new Babylonian national priorities—including a determination to confront threats to their hegemony by people of the so-called Sea Land in the old Sumerian territory south of them—his victory and creation signify strong hierarchical power and male reason as opposed to a kind of irrational, watery chaos represented by the female Tiamat and the old ways (Frymer-Kensky, *"Enuma Elish,"* 124–26).

Marduk creates the world by crushing Tiamat and dividing her dead body into two parts. Half of the body he sets up as the sky, the other half as the earth. Her head becomes a mountain, her eyes the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Her breasts he turns into hills, her nostrils reservoirs. Besides this, Marduk creates the planets and stars, establishes the separation of waters, and generally gets the world operating properly. Finally, he establishes the city of Babylon as a temple home for all of the gods, thus achieving cultural and national unity and hegemony. Marduk instructs Ea to make use of the dead Qingu's blood to create humans, who would do the work that otherwise the gods would have to do, and he prescribes functions for each of the gods. In short, he brings order to what the Babylonians had seen as the chaotic religious and social system of the past. So it is that

the gods build the temple of Marduk as the primary temple of Babylon and celebrate him there as the supreme deity.

Mesopotamian Heroes and Their Myths

As in much of the world, a tradition developed in ancient Mesopotamia in which historical figures were mythologized into heroes possessing supernatural origins and superhuman powers. Etana, a Sumerian shepherd-king of Kish, sought the plant of life and ascended to heaven. Sargon of Akkad, who conquered Sumer in the third millennium, was said to have been born of a humble mother and a mysteriously unknown father. Like Moses, Siegfried, and many other heroes after him, he was placed in a basket as a child, abandoned in the river (in this case the Euphrates), and found and brought up by a person of the menial class. The goddess Ishtar supported him, however, and he became king and then "living god" of Akkad (Campbell, *Hero*, 321). At least three kings of Uruk were mythologized as heroes in epic-type literature written down about 2100 B.C.E. from earlier oral versions. These kings had lived before 2600 B.C.E. First there was Enmerkar, who was said to have been closely related to Utu and Inanna, his protector, and to have invented writing. Then there was Lugalbanda, whose wife was said to have been the mother of Dumuzi and Gilgamesh. This goddess, Ninsun, was "mistress of the cows," a designation that ties her to the most ancient of Middle Eastern goddesses. Finally, there was the greatest of Mesopotamian heroes, Gilgamesh himself.

Enmerkar and Enshukeshdanna

In a text from the Ur III period, Enshukeshdanna, lord of Aratta, challenges his rival, Enmerkar, king of Uruk, by claiming to be the true husband of the goddess Inanna. As Inanna is particularly the patroness of Uruk and the ritual "bride" of its king, Enmerkar takes the challenge seriously and reacts with great anger, condemning Enshukeshdanna and asserting his right to Inanna. The king of Aratta sends a magician to Eres, a town near Uruk, where he dries up the

milk of the sacred stables. The shepherds in the area beg the god Utu for help, and suddenly Sagburru, a wise crone from Eres, comes on the scene and challenges the sorcerer of Aratta to a contest involving the transformation of objects. Both magicians throw metal objects into the river. The man's turns into a carp, the woman's into an eagle that eats the carp. Then the man's ewe and lamb are eaten by the woman's wolf, and so it goes until the man gives in and the old woman throws him to his death in the river. Upon hearing the news, Enshukeshdanna agrees that Enmerkar is the true bridegroom of Inanna (Leick, 50; Kerrigan, Lothian, and Vitebsky, 66–68).

Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta

Another story about the same rivalry dates from the Old Babylonian period.

King Enmerkar of Uruk decides that the people of Aratta should come to Uruk with valuables and building materials so as to build temples for him there and in Eridu. Inanna, always Uruk's patroness, agrees to help and advises the king to send a messenger to Aratta demanding the materials in question. When the lord of Aratta refuses, claiming his own closeness to Inanna, the messenger reminds him of Enmerkar's even closer relationship and of Inanna's claim that Aratta would have to submit to Uruk. The king agrees to submit to Enmerkar if the latter will agree to a contest. Enmerkar agrees, as his success will prove Inanna's loyalty to him. In the midst of completing several impossible tasks, Enmerkar sends a herald with a written message to Aratta. Thus he invents writing. In the message he agrees to a combat between dogs from each city, again demands the materials for temple building and decoration, and threatens the destruction of Aratta should the conditions of the demand not be met. Although much of the text is lost, it seems likely that Enmerkar's dog wins the fight, as the story ends with the people of Aratta bringing the requested materials to Uruk (Leick, 51–52).

Lugalbanda in the Mountains

Lugalbanda is with his king, Enmerkar, in the mountains on the way to a war with the lord of Aratta in the east. Suddenly he loses his ability to

move, and his comrades are forced to leave him alone with some food and some weapons until they can retrieve him on their way home. The hero prays to Utu, Inanna, and Nanna, the paralysis leaves him, and good demons find him the plant and water of life, which he eats and drinks. Now full of energy, he hunts for more food and captures several wild animals. In his sleep he is told to sacrifice the animals and to offer the hearts to Utu and the blood to the mountain serpents. Lugalbanda does as he is instructed and then prepares a feast to which he invites An, Enlil, and Ninhursaga. As evening approaches, the astral deities to whom he has prayed and for whom he has made special altars reveal themselves in the night sky and chase away any evil powers (Leick, III).

Gilgamesh

Easily the most famous of Mesopotamian heroes is Gilgamesh. The mythologizing of this Early Dynastic period Sumerian king of Unug (Uruk) had already begun by about 2400 B.C.E., when Gilgamesh, or Bilgamesh, was worshiped at several Sumerian sites. It is even possible that he was deified during his lifetime (c. 2650 B.C.E.), because of his building of the walls of Uruk and his defense of Uruk against the rival city of Kish. By the Ur III period he had become lord of the underworld, a role that led in later years to a complex burial cult. Gilgamesh was always closely associated with the sun god Utu (Shamash) and was often identified with Dumuzi, also a deified king of Uruk. As noted above, it was said that his mother was the goddess Ninsun and his father the deified hero Lugalbanda. Ur III and Isin kings (c. 2100–1900) especially considered Gilgamesh their ancestor and used that connection to justify their rule. It is usually suggested that the Sumerian myths of Gilgamesh were developed during this period, perhaps including a hero birth story that, however, does not appear in any text until classical times (Black and Green, 91). In that story, which has archetypal relatives in those of Etana, Sargon, Moses, and even Jesus, a king's daughter becomes pregnant, and a court magus asserts that the child will take the king's throne. This causes the king to have the child thrown from a tower. The child is saved in midfall by a flying eagle and is adopted and raised by an orchard worker. Later, of course, he becomes king.

There are five written stories of Gilgamesh dating from the Sumerian period, and they do not seem to have been combined in anything like the epic form of the tale that was composed later in Babylon.

"Gilgamesh and Agga" (or "The Man of Sumer") tells how King Gilgamesh of Uruk, besieged behind his walls by his enemy, Agga of Kish, used a distracting trick and was able to capture his enemy before generously pardoning him.

"Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living" (or "Gilgamesh and Huwawa" or "Gilgamesh and the Cedar Forest") exists in many forms and plays a role in the Babylonian epic as well. Hating the sight of death and wishing to achieve fame and immortality, Gilgamesh, with his follower Enkidu and with guidance from the sun god Utu, sets out to fight Huwawa, the monstrous caretaker of the Cedar Forest sacred to the great god Enlil. When they get there Enkidu is fearful, but Gilgamesh braves the powerful rays with which the monster plagues them, and cuts down trees so as to be able to capture him. After the capture Huwawa pleads for his life, but the angry Enkidu cuts off his head. For this act the heroes are cursed by Enlil.

"Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven," which exists only in fragments, tells how Gilgamesh disdainfully refused the advances of the beautiful Inanna and how he killed the bull of heaven sent by the goddess to avenge the insult to her.

"Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld" (or "Gilgamesh and the *Huluppu* Tree") does not follow logically from the bull of heaven story, as it reveals a much different relationship between the hero and Inanna. It is from the beginning of or introduction to this myth that the Sumerian creation story discussed earlier can be derived. After the creation, Inanna takes a windswept *huluppu* tree from the riverbank and plants it in her temple at Uruk. Her plan is to make furniture from it when it is full-grown, but when that time comes she finds that her plans are foiled by the inhabitants of the tree, the powerful and dangerous *anzu* bird, the despondent maiden Lilit (Lilith), and a mean serpent. Even Inanna's brother Utu cannot help her dislodge the three demonic creatures, but Gilgamesh can. He successfully kills the serpent, scaring away the other demons, and the tree is cut down and used for Inanna's sacred furniture. Inanna uses part of the wood to make two mysterious objects called the *pukku* and the *mukku*,

which somehow fall into the netherworld. When Enkidu offers to retrieve them, Gilgamesh cautions his friend and servant about the taboos of the underworld and allows him to go. Because Enkidu fails to follow the instructions he is not able to return to the world above. Even Enlil and Enki are unable to help the hero retrieve his friend, but the shamanic Enki instructs Utu to burn a hole in the ground, by way of which Enkidu's ghost emerges and tells Gilgamesh about existence in the underworld.

"The Death of Gilgamesh" is a mere fragment in which Gilgamesh expresses resentment about his death. Several scholars have suggested that it might really be the story of Enkidu's death (Leick, 71; Black and Green, 89).

We know Gilgamesh best through what is probably the earliest example of an epic poem. The so-called epic of Gilgamesh certainly had oral roots, but it was first expressed in written (Akkadian) form in the Old Babylonian period of the early second millennium B.C.E. A more complete version was written later, in the Middle Babylonian period, supposedly by one Sin-leqe-unnini, and there are Neo-Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian, Hittite, and other versions. The epic had gained popularity in much of the Middle East by the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. It was apparently the Middle Babylonian version that was the basis for most of the Ninevite recension, the approximately 1,500-line epic in twelve tablets discovered in the Assyrian Library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh dating from the seventh century B.C.E.

Unlike the Gilgamesh of the Sumerian fragments, the hero of the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic is distinctly human rather than divine. In fact, if there is an underlying theme to the whole epic, it is Gilgamesh's discovery of his mortality in his passage from arrogance to humility in a quest for immortality. William Moran suggests that Gilgamesh's passage reflects the "ideological developments of the period that to some extent demythologized kingship and rejected the divinity that kings had been claiming for five centuries or so." Furthermore, the epic emphasizes the difference between humans and deities in general, based in the fact that even a hero, a goddess's son, "must perform the very human and undivine act of dying" (Moran, 559).

The epic opens with what is essentially a hymn to the great King Gilgamesh of Uruk, builder of city walls, writer of his many experiences

and journeys on tablets, son of Ninsun. In a sense this is a hymn of praise and even human arrogance that serves as the preface for the rites of passage from ignorance to knowledge that will follow. The seed of disillusionment, the existence of a significant flaw, makes itself evident even within the first tablet, when we learn that the king has tyrannized his people by demanding conjugal rights to brides. When the people complain to Anu, the god instructs Aruru, the mother goddess, to create a being who can balance Gilgamesh's power. The new creation is the hairy, bestial Enkidu, who eats grass and frees animals trapped by hunters. When the existence of Enkidu is reported to Gilgamesh he follows the advice of the hunters and sends out the beautiful prostitute Samhat to tame him. It should be remembered that prostitutes were sacred to Ishtar (Inanna). The tactic works. Enkidu and Samhat make love for six days and seven nights until Enkidu has been humanized, told about Gilgamesh, and deprived of some of his purely animal nature. The reader here can hardly avoid a fleeting vision of the story of Samson and Delilah.

Back in Uruk Gilgamesh dreams of Enkidu and then recurrently of heavy objects that have come from the sky, objects to which he feels sexually attracted. Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, interprets the dreams for her son, explaining that they are about a man who will become his companion and closest friend. Many critics have suggested a homosexual aspect to the Gilgamesh-Enkidu relationship, as indicated first by these dreams and then by later events (Leick, 73; Moran, 558).

In Tablet 2 the love of Gilgamesh and Enkidu is consummated, as it were, in a manly wrestling match that is barely won by the king, but Enkidu's courage and power impress Gilgamesh and the two become companions. The next three tablets concern the adventures of the two heroes in the Cedar Forest of Enlil, guarded by Humbaba (the Sumerian Huwawa). There, presumably, they kill the monster, as indicated in other versions of the story.

What follows, in Tablet 6, is the surprising story of Gilgamesh's refusal of Ishtar (Sumerian Inanna), based on the Sumerian story mentioned above. The heroes are back in Uruk, and the newly cleansed and adorned king is approached by Ishtar with a proposition of love and marriage and fertility for himself, his city, and its fields and animals. Gilgamesh rejects the offer outright, pointing to the tragic ends

of so many of the goddess's former lovers. Furious, Ishtar has Anu send the bull of heaven to attack the heroes. After the beast kills hundreds of people—perhaps representing a plague—the heroes succeed in killing him. Gilgamesh further insults his divine enemy by flinging a thigh of the beast at her.

Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar is difficult to understand, given the fact that she was the city goddess of Uruk and that the sacred marriage of king and goddess had been a foundation of Mesopotamian culture at least since the Old Sumerian period. There is the possibility that the incident somehow reflects the demythologizing of divine kings as well as a movement away from the strong goddess aspect of religion and culture to the kind of patriarchy revealed also in the *Enuma Elish*. But this interpretation is somewhat undermined by the existence of the earlier Sumerian version of the story. It is possible that the reaction of Gilgamesh is simply demanded by his particular character or persona, one that prefers the company of Enkidu to that of Ishtar.

In Tablet 7 Enkidu dreams that Anu, Ea, and Shamash have decided that for the killing of Humbaba and the bull of heaven either he or Gilgamesh must pay with his life. Enkidu fades into sickness; in Tablet 8 he dies and is lamented by the heartbroken Gilgamesh.

Tablet 9 concerns Gilgamesh's fear of death and his danger-filled journey in what is, in effect, a kind of archetypal underworld. He must convince the horrible scorpion people to let him pass through a long, dark tunnel. And there is the relationship with the beautiful alewife Siduri in her jeweled garden. Siduri will have "sisters" in the *Odyssey*'s Calypso and Circe and the *Aeneid*'s Dido, women who, through love, would prevent the patriarchal hero from completing his mission. Like Ishtar, Siduri is a comfortable alternative that must be overcome. Still, like Circe in the *Odyssey*, she finally helps the hero on his way with advice on how to proceed, and in Tablet 10 Gilgamesh is ferried across the waters of death by the ferryman Urshanabi. On the other side he finds the ancient flood hero Utnapishtim (Ziusudra in an older Sumerian flood myth), who reminds his visitor that only the gods determine life and death.

Tablet 11 contains the flood myth, which is remarkably similar to the one found in Genesis in the Bible. Gilgamesh asks Utnapishtim

to explain how he has attained eternal life, and the old man answers by reciting the story of the flood.

Utnapishtim and his wife had lived in Shuruppak. Ea had come to him there to announce that a flood was about to destroy humanity. He and his family would be spared only if they built a boat, for which the gods provided the measurements. When the boat was finished, Utnapishtim filled it with valuables, his own family, and representatives of all the species. Then came the most terrible of storms and a deluge that destroyed the earth. After seven days the storm died down and the ship landed on Mount Nisir. After another week a dove was released to find land, but it returned unsuccessful to the ship. The same thing happened when a swallow was released, but when a released raven did not come back Utnapishtim realized that he had been saved. He made offerings of thanks to the gods; the mother goddess, in great distress, promised always to remember him. After much discussion Enlil granted Utnapishtim eternal life.

Gilgamesh, too, longs for eternal life, but Utnapishtim is skeptical of his ability to obtain it. As a test, he challenges the hero to stay awake for six days and seven nights. Gilgamesh, exhausted, immediately falls asleep, and the flood hero's wife bakes a loaf of bread for each day he remains in that state. When Gilgamesh wakes up he sees the now moldy bread and realizes the point of Utnapishtim's challenge. He is human, with human frailties. Eternal life is beyond his powers. Before he leaves, Utnapishtim, at the urging of his wife, tells Gilgamesh about a plant under the water that can provide youth. On his way home with Urshaniabi the hero dives for the plant and retrieves it. But once again, being merely human, he falls asleep, and a serpent steals the plant. So it is that serpents slough off old skin and become new again.

Gilgamesh weeps in despair, but he and Urshaniabi, abandoning the latter's boat, make their way to Uruk. There Gilgamesh proudly asks the ferryman to inspect his great wall and his fine city. In a sense, the hero accepts his humanity.

Tablet 12 is a late addition to the epic, present only in the Ninevite recension. It is a retelling of "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld," in which the shade of Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about the underworld and the necessity of burying the dead. (Black and Green, 89-91; Leick, 68-77; Moran, 557-60; Dalley, 39-49).

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