

MESOPOTAMIAN MYTHOLOGIES

A Brief History:

Sumer covered about 10,000 square miles in what is now the southern half of Iraq, located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It is a hot and dry area, with no minerals, little stone or timber, but turned into a "Garden of Eden" through irrigation. It was the site of the first great cities, and the source of cuneiform writing.

Each walled city was dedicated to a particular deity, and was surrounded by smaller settlements. Central to each of these cities was a the main temple, in the form of a huge step-tower, or *ziggurat*.

Sumer was first settled in the fifth millennium BCE by a nomadic people now referred to as Ubaidians, who founded a number of cities, and who were the first farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and artisans in the area. The area was subsequently settled by Semitic nomads from Syria and Arabia; the Sumerians themselves arrived about 3500 BCE, possibly from south central Asia. Eventually, infighting between the cities of Ur, Uruk (Erech), and Kish weakened the cities that the area came under foreign rule.

Sumer was conquered by the Semitic ruler Sargon in the mid 2300's, who established his capital at Agade (Akkad). The region then became known as Sumer-Akkad, and related deities are referred to as Akkadian.

Sargon's grandson Naram-Sin desecrated and plundered the shrine at Nippur, and Sumer-Akkad was subsequently conquered by western Iranian barbarians called Gutians, leading to isolation and famine.

Lagash, a city of scholars and archivists that had been the major centre for a brief period prior to Sargon, rose to prominence again. Once the area was freed from the Gutians, Ur-Nammu established the Third Dynasty of Ur (2050-1950). Eventually, the Semitic Elamites destroyed Ur and abducted its king, and another three-way fight, this time among the cities of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon took place.

About 1750 BCE, Hammurabi of Babylon emerged as the sole ruler of Sumer-Akkad. The native Sumerians had been annihilated, but the Semitic settlers adopted what was left of the Sumerian culture.

Sumerian Mythology:

Cosmology: universe formed from the primeval sea (*abzu*), within which heaven (*an*) and earth (*ki*) formed. Boundary was a solid (tin?) vault, earth was a flat disk.

Primary Deities:

An (God of Heavens/Sky): main god of pantheon until 2500 BCE. Principal city Erech.

Ki (Earth Goddess): Also known as **Ninhursag** (Queen of the Mountains), **Ninmah** (Exalted Lady), and **Nintu** (the Lady who gave birth).

Enlil (Air God): "Father of Gods", "King of Heaven and Earth", "King of All the Lands"; leader of pantheon after 2500 BCE. Son of **An** and **Ki**; assumed An's powers. Patriarchal, god of dawn, plant growth, agricultural tools. Principal city Nippur.

Enlil raped **Ninlil** (Goddess of Air and Grain, Nippur) and was banished to **Kur**, the underworld. Ninlil became pregnant with **Nanna** (Moon God), and insisted on following Enlil. Since this would have resulted in the birth of Nanna in the underworld, Enlil devised a scheme whereby Ninlil would become the mother of three underworld deities instead.

Enki (God of Wisdom, God of the Waters): Son of **An** and the sea goddess **Nammu**. God of water, creation, fertility. Keeper of the divine laws (*mes*), which govern (among other things) kingship, priesthood, crafts and craftsmanship. Principal city Eridu. In the myth, His temple at Eridu is a maze-like mountain floating above the primal sea, surrounded by a lush garden, with streams full of fish, and trees full of birds.

The land and city of Dilmun (associated with Bahrain) was viewed as a paradise, populated by harmless animals, without sickness or old age. There, Enki mated with **Ninhursag (Ki)**, who after a nine-day pregnancy, gave birth to the plant goddess **Ninsar**. Enki mated with Ninsar, who gave birth to **Ninkurra**. Enki mated with Ninkurra, who gave birth to **Uttu** (also a plant goddess). Uttu, warned about Enki by Ninhursag, demanded a present of apples olives, and grapes. From their mating, Uttu gave birth to eight plants, which were eaten by Enki before they were named. Enki subsequently produced eight sicknesses and eight deities, created by Ninhursag from his rib.

It happened that at one time the gods had difficulty obtaining food. Enki was asleep, so didn't hear the grumblings of the gods until his mother **Nammu** asked for servants. Enki and the midwife goddess **Ninmah** became thoroughly drunk, but Ninmah collected clay to mold six kinds of people while Enki decreed their fates. One couldn't bend its limbs, another was blind, another had paralyzed feet, another dripped semen, another was a barren woman, another was asexual (a eunuch, which Enki decreed to stand before the king). Enki also tried to produce a seventh, but failed, resulting in a feeble, sick creature. Ninmah cursed Enki, but he eventually appeased her.

The Seven Who Decreed Fate: These included the four principal deities listed above, plus:

Nanna (Moon God): Also known as **Sin**; child by rape of Enlil and Ninlil. Mated with sun goddess **Ningal** to produce **Inanna** and **Utu**. Principal city Ur. At New Moon, He travels to the underworld, decreeing the fate of the dead.

Utu (Sun God, God of Justice): At sunset, he, too travels to the underworld to determine the fate of the dead. Principal city Sippar.

Inanna (Queen of Heaven and Earth, Goddess of Love (and War)): Principal city Uruk. A number of myths are associated with her.

The Huluppu-Tree: In the beginning times, after **An** had carried off the heavens and **Enlil** had carried off the earth, and **Ereshkigal** was given the underworld, Enki attempted to sail to the underworld, but Ereshkigal fought back with stones, hail, and the power of the sea. It so happened that at that time a single tree, the *huluppu*-tree, had been planted on the Euphrates, and the raging waters carried it off. Young Inanna rescued it from the river, and planted it in her garden at Uruk, anticipating the throne and the bed she could make from it. But after ten years, three creatures infest it. A serpent that cannot be tamed makes its nest in the roots. The lion headed thunderbird, the *Anzu*-bird, who had craved power and knowledge to the point where it had once tried to steal the *mes* from Enki, set its young in the branches. And **Lilith**, a goddess associated with sexuality, lawlessness, and death, resides in the trunk.

Inanna goes to her brother, the warrior **Utu**, but he refuses to help her. She then goes to the hero **Gilgamesh**, who takes up his mighty axe, enters the garden, slays the serpent, and drives off the *anzu*-bird and Lilith. He and his men harvest the tree, and he carves a throne and a bed for Inanna from the trunk. She in turn makes two gifts for Gilgamesh, the *pikku* from the roots and the *mikku* from the crown. The precise meaning of these gifts are not known, but they are commonly believed to be a drum and drumsticks.

Inanna and Enki: Inanna, now in "Mother" form, is covetous of the *mes* of Enki, God of Wisdom. She takes her reed Boat of Heaven to His temple at Eridu, where She is welcomed by His two-faced servant **Isimud** with buttercake, cold water, and beer. Enki and Inanna get into a bout of drinking, and Enki gives Her more and more of his *mes*, until He has given Her all of them (including the power to make decisions). Inanna takes the *mes* away in the Boat. When Enki sobers up and realizes what has happened, He sends Isimud to retrieve them, but Inanna refuses. Five times He sends monsters to stop the Boat, and five times Inanna's servant **Ninshubur**, who is outside of Enki's influence, defeats them. There is great celebration at Uruk when Inanna returns with the *mes*; She also unloads new *mes* relating to the "womanly arts".

Inanna and Dumuzi: The farmer god **Enkimdu** and the shepherd god **Dumuzi** both vie for the hand of Inanna. Dumuzi buys Enkimdu off, and **Utu**, Inanna's brother, favours Dumuzi, but Inanna prefers Enkimdu, who can fill Her storehouses and clothe and feed Her. Dumuzi and Inanna quarrel, but it turns to passion. (Note the similarity to the Cain and Abel story; Dumuzi may be associated with Gilgamesh).

The Descent of Inanna: In the Sumerian version of this great myth, Inanna sets out for the Underworld, ruled by Her sister **Ereshkigal**, to witness the funeral rites of **Gugalanna**, the Bull of Heaven and mate of Ereshkigal. Inanna dresses Herself in seven *mes* symbolic of her power, and tells **Ninshubur** to plead Her case with **Enlil**, **Nanna**, and **Enki** if She does not return. At each of the gates of the Underworld, Inanna must remove one of Her *mes*, until She arrives naked in the Underworld. There, Ereshkigal and the **Anunnaki** (the judges) place Her on Ereshkigal's throne and condemn Her to death. Inanna's corpse hangs lifeless from a hook for three days before Ninshubur pleads with the gods. Enlil and Nanna each refuse, saying that no one who desires the *mes* of the Underworld may return. Enki, however, takes pity, wills a pregnancy on Ereshkigal, and fashions two creatures to rescue Inanna, bearing the Food of Life and the Water of Life.

The creatures descend to the Underworld in the form of flies, and find Ereshkigal suffering the pains of childbirth. They empathize with Her, and She rewards them with any gift they wish. Of course, they choose Inanna's corpse, and bring Her back to life with the Food and Water of Life. Inanna prepares to ascend, but the Anunnaki insist on a substitute. She returns to the world above, followed by demons. The demons encourage Inanna to choose Ninshubur, or each of Her two sons, but She refuses each time. Finally She finds Dumuzi sitting on Her throne, proudly wearing Her *mes*, and in a fit of anger, chooses Dumuzi, who is pursued and eventually caught.

Dumuzi's sister **Geshtinanna** grieves for Her lost brother, and Inanna comes to realize that if Her own Sacred Marriage to Dumuzi is not consummated, the land will be barren. So she arranges a plan whereby Dumuzi and Geshtinanna each spend half a year in the Underworld. Geshtinanna is the goddess having divine authority over autumn vines, and wine.

Babylonian Mythology:

Apsu: "The first one, the begetter". The underworld ocean, the primeval abyss of sweet water, from which all things spring. Originally, Apsu was female, the Akkadian version of **Tiamat**, but later became male.

Tiamat: The vast bottomless mass of bitter (salt) waters. Primeval chaos, frequently depicted in the form of a serpent or dragon. The early part of the cosmology appears to take part inside Her body; the universe is later fashioned from it.

Mommu: Son and adviser of Apsu and Tiamat. A craftsman god, and somewhat of a trickster.

Lahmu (god) and **Lahamu** (goddess): Children of Tiamat, born of the silt from the primeval ocean. Little is known of these, other than they are depicted as each having three curls, and naked except for a triple sash.

Anshar ("host of heaven", god) and **Kishar** ("host of earth", goddess). Babylonian equivalents of **An** and **Ki**. Children of Lahmu and Lahamu, depicted as serpents.

Great Triad of Gods:

Anu: Father and king of the gods, god of monarchs, ruler of destiny. Babylonian equivalent of **An**. He mates with the earth goddess **Antu** to produce the **Anunnaki**, the **Utukki** (seven evil demons), **Ea**, **Ellil**, and **Ishtar**.

Ea: First-born son of Anu; god of the waters, god of wisdom, god of incantations. Babylonian equivalent of **Enki**. Mates with goddess **Damkina** to produce **Marduk**.

Ellil: God of wind and storms. Babylonian equivalent of **Enlil**, some versions use that name. Initially head of the pantheon, he relinquished the role to **Anu**. Creator of mankind, responsible for the flood, guards Tablets of Destiny, controls fate.

Marduk: Son of **Ea**, god of spring sun and vegetation, dies at Midsummer. A giant, he has four eyes and four ears, his mouth spurts fire. He later becomes the central figure of the pantheon.

The Enuma Elish:

In this, the Babylonian epic of creation, **Apsu** becomes disturbed by the behaviour of the new generation of gods, who are undisciplined and prideful. He wants to destroy them to restore the peace, but **Tiamat** begs tolerance. **Mommu** maliciously supports Apsu, and the decision is made.

When the new gods hear of this, they are confounded and silenced. **Ea** weaves a powerful spell and drowns Apsu, taking his flaming glory coat and crown for himself. He captures Mommu and has him led off. Anu creates the four winds and tornado to worry Tiamat.

The younger gods go to Tiamat, begging her to avenge Apsu's death. The gods plot war, and Tiamat gives birth to eleven monsters, the Eleven Mighty Helpers, who together with Marduk, may make up the Babylonian zodiac. These include a Viper, Lakhmu the shining snake, the Great Lion, the Ravening Dog, the Scorpion Man, the Goat Fish, the Storm Winds, the Fish Man, among others.

Tiamat puts her consort, the clumsy labourer **Kingu**, in command, giving him the Tablets of Destiny as a breastplate, making his word literally law.

Ea, hearing of this, goes to his grandfather **Anshar**, who advises him to kill Kingu. Ea goes to encounter Tiamat, but falls back in fear. Anshar then tells Anu to face her. He, too, falls back. Finally, **Marduk** is chosen as champion, but agrees only if the other gods will give him supremacy. This they do, and armed with a bow and a mace, and a net given to him by Anu, he gathers the winds and storms to meet Tiamat in single combat. She is entangled in the net, and

swallows the winds, inflating her. Marduk pierces her belly with an arrow, and she splits in two and dies. He divides her body in two, creates heaven and earth from it, and allocates 300 gods to watch over each.

Marduk traps the rebellious gods, and captures the Eleven Mighty Helpers. He takes the Tablets of Destiny from Kingu and kills him, fashioning mankind from the his blood and earth. He returns the Tablets to Anu.

Babylon is created as a home for Marduk, Ellil and Ea. Anu blesses Marduk's bow, giving it the triple aspect of the long wood, the rainbow, and the starry bow (Milky Way).

A related myth in the creation of humanity is the story of **Atrahasis** (c. 17th Century BCE). The gods were disenchanted with the labours of creation and maintenance of the world, especially the irrigation canals. They went on strike before Ellil. **Gestu**, the god of intellect, is sacrificed, and his blood is mixed with clay. The birth goddess **Mami** (or **Nintu**) and Ea work together on the creation. The gods spit on the clay and trample it, and Mami divides it into fourteen pieces, seven male and seven female.

After about six hundred years, the earth is overpopulated. The gods want to regulate overpopulation through the balance of nature, causing drought, famine, and disease, but they overdo it, and only a few survive. Then they send a seven-day flood. (Note when Euphrates floods, it can inundate the plains to the lower-lying Tigris.) Atrahasis ("extra wise") is advised by **Ea**, and builds a boat taking all the living things on it. Ellil becomes upset by this, but Ea reasons with him, until the gods agree that population will regulated with compassion.

Ishtar: Mother Goddess, goddess of fertility. Babylonian equivalent of **Inanna**.

Tammuz: God of spring sowing, killed in the autumn. Brother and lover of **Belili**, spouse of **Ishtar**. Babylonian equivalent of **Dumuzi**, he is the ritual husband of the harvest goddess.

Belili: Moon goddess. A goddess of trees, love, and the underworld. Babylonian equivalent of **Geshtinanna**.

In the Babylonian version of "the Descent", Ishtar goes to the Underworld (called **Aralu** or **Meslam**), to retrieve Tammuz. She finds the gates shut, and threatens to break them down, free the dead, and devour the living. This version largely parallels the Sumerian, with **Ereshkigal** also known as **Allatu**. The sun god here is **Shamash** (Sumerian **Utu**), and the messenger god **Papsukkal** takes the place of **Ninshubur**.

The Epic of Gilgamesh:

Gilgamesh here is a warrior king of Uruk, gone arrogant, prideful, and lustful. The people call to **Anu** for help, and **Anu** and **Aruru** (another name for **Mami**) create **Enkidu**, the archetypical wild man, as a peer for him. Enkidu terrorizes the countryside, until Gilgamesh sends a temple prostitute to tame him (which she does). The animals reject Enkidu, and he and Gilgamesh fight, and become friends.

Gilgamesh wants to strengthen his reputation by fighting **Humbaba**, Ellil's guardian of the forest. Enkidu goes with him, and they spend much time in preparation. Eventually they find him, and defeat him.

Ishtar offers to become Gilgamesh's lover, but he insults her, saying she's had many lovers, and has not been faithful. Ishtar asks **Anu** to send **Lugalbanda**, the Bull of Heaven, to punish Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill **Lugalbanda**, but Enkidu falls ill and dies.

Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu and visits **Utnapishtim**, the only human who does not die,

who tells him the tale of the flood and challenges him to remain awake for seven days and six nights. He fails, but Utnapishtim's wife urges him to reveal to Gilgamesh a plant that restores lost youth. Gilgamesh takes it, but loses it to a serpent, who immediately sloughs its skin. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, writes down his tale, and eventually dies of old age.