

Mesopotamian Deities

Works of Art



Essay

Mesopotamian civilization existed for well over 3,000 years, from the formation of the first cities at the end of the fourth millennium B.C. to the early years of the Roman empire. During this period, religion was a major factor influencing behavior, political decision making, and material culture.

Unlike some later monotheistic religions, in Mesopotamian mythology there existed no systematic theological tractate on the nature of the deities. Examination of ancient myths, legends, ritual texts, and images reveals that most gods were conceived in human terms. They had human or humanlike forms, were male or female, engaged in intercourse, and reacted to stimuli with both reason and emotion. Being similar to humans, they were considered to be unpredictable and oftentimes capricious. Their need for food and drink, housing, and care mirrored that of humans. Unlike humans, however, they were immortal and, like kings and holy temples, they possessed a splendor called *melammu*. *Melammu* is a radiance or aura, a glamour that the god embodied. It could be fearsome or awe-inspiring. Temples also had *melammu*. If a god descended into the Netherworld, he lost his *melammu*. Except for the goddess Inanna (Ishtar in Akkadian), the principal gods were masculine and had at least one consort. Gods also had families.

Possessing powers greater than that of humans, many gods were associated with astral phenomena such as the sun, moon, and stars, others with the forces of nature such as winds and fresh and ocean waters, yet others with real animals—lions, bulls, wild oxen—and imagined creatures such as fire-spitting dragons. In

the Sumerian hymn “Enlil in the E-Kur,” the god Enlil is described as controlling and animating nature:

Without the Great Mountain Enlil . . . the carp would not . . . come straight up[?] from the sea, they would not dart about. The sea would not produce all its heavy treasure, no freshwater fish would lay eggs in the reedbeds, no bird of the sky would build nests in the spacious lands; in the sky, the thick clouds would not open their mouths; on the fields, dappled grain would not fill the arable lands, vegetation would not grow lushly on the plain; in the gardens, the spreading trees of the mountain would not yield fruit.

As supreme figures, the gods were transcendent and awesome, but unlike most modern conceptions of the divine, they were distant. Feared and admired rather than loved, the great gods were revered and praised as masters. They could display kindness, but were also fickle and at times, as explained in mythology, poor decision makers, which explains why humans suffer such hardships in life.

Generally speaking, gods lived a life of ease and slumber. While humans were destined to lives of toil, often for a marginal existence, the gods of heaven did no work. Humankind was created to ease their burdens and provide them with daily care and food. Humans, but not animals, thus served the gods. Often aloof, the gods might respond well to offerings, but at a moment’s notice might also rage and strike out at humans with a vengeance that could result in illness, loss of livelihood, or death.

Cuneiform tablets as early as the third millennium indicate that the gods were associated with cities. Each community worshipped its city’s patron deity in the main temple. The sky god An and his daughter Inanna were worshipped at Uruk; Enlil, the god of earth, at Nippur; and Enki, lord of the subterranean freshwaters, at Eridu. This association of city with deity was celebrated in both ritual and myth. A city’s political strength could be measured by the prominence of its deity in the hierarchy of the gods. Babylon, a minor city in the third millennium, had become an important military presence by the Old Babylonian

period, and its patron deity, noted in a mid-third millennium text from Abu-Salabikh as ranking near the bottom of the gods, rose to become the head of the pantheon when Babylon ascended to military supremacy in the late second millennium.

Political events influenced the makeup of the pantheon. With the fall of Sumerian hegemony at the end of the third millennium, Babylonian culture and political control spread throughout southern Mesopotamia. At the end of the third millennium B.C., Sumerian texts list approximately 3,600 deities. With the fall of Sumerian political might and the rise of the Amorite dynasties at the end of the third millennium and beginning of the second millennium, religious traditions began to merge. Older Sumerian deities were absorbed into the pantheon of Semitic-speaking peoples. Some were reduced to subordinate status while newer gods took on the characteristics of older deities. The Sumerian god An became the Semitic Anu, while Enki became Ea, Inanna became Ishtar, and Utu became Shamash. As Enlil, the supreme Sumerian god, had no counterpart in the Semitic pantheon, his name remained unchanged. Most of the lesser Sumerian deities now faded from the scene. At the end of the second millennium, the Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish* refers to only 300 gods of the heavens. In this process of associating Semitic gods with political supremacy, Marduk surpassed Enlil as chief of the gods, and, according to the *Enuma Elish*, Enlil gave Marduk his own name so that Marduk now became “Lord of the World.” Similarly, Ea, the god of the subterranean freshwaters, says of Marduk in the same myth, “His name, like mine, shall be Ea. He shall provide the procedures for all my offices. He shall take charge of all my commands.”

Beginning in the second millennium B.C., Babylonian theologians classified their major gods in a hierarchical numerical order. Anu was represented by the number 60, Enlil by 50, Ea by 40, Sin, the moon god, by 30, Shamash by 20, Ishtar by 15, and Adad, the god of storms, by 6.

While the great gods of the pantheon were worshipped by priests at rituals in cultic centers, ordinary people had no direct contact with these deities. In their homes, they worshipped personal gods, who were conceived as divine parents

and were thought to be deities who could intercede on their behalf to ensure health and protection for their families.

Demons were viewed as being either good or evil. Evil demons were thought to be agents of the gods sent to carry out divine orders, often as punishment for sins. They could attack at any moment by bringing disease, destitution, or death. *Lamastu*-demons were associated with the death of newborn babies; *gala*-demons could enter one's dreams. Demons could include the angry ghosts of the dead or spirits associated with storms. Some gods played a beneficent role to protect against demonic scourges. A deity depicted with the body of a lion and the head and arms of a bearded man was thought to ward off the attacks of lion-demons. Pazuzu, a demonic-looking god with a canine face and scaly body, possessing talons and wings, could bring evil, but could also act as a protector against evil winds or attacks by *lamastu*-demons. Rituals and magic were used to ward off both present and future demonic attacks and counter misfortune. Demons were also represented as hybrid human-animal creatures, some with birdlike characteristics.

Although the gods were said to be immortal, some slain in divine combat had to reside in the Underworld along with demons. The "Land of No Return" was to be found beneath the earth and under the *abzu*, the freshwater ocean. There the spirits of the dead (*gidim*) dwelt in complete darkness with nothing to eat but dust and no water to drink. The Underworld was ruled by Eresh-kigal, its queen, and her husband Nergal, together with their household of laborers and administrators.

From about the middle of the third millennium B.C., many deities were depicted in human form, distinguished from mortals by their size and by the presence of horned headgear. Statues of the gods were mainly fashioned out of wood, covered with an overlay of gold, and adorned with decorated garments. The goddess Inanna wore a necklace of lapis lazuli and, according to the myth "The Descent of Ishtar into the Netherworld," she was outfitted with elaborate jewelry. Texts refer to chests, the property of the god, filled with gold rings, pendants, rosettes, stars, and other types of ornaments that could adorn their

clothing. Statues were not thought to be actual gods but were regarded as being imbued with the divine presence. Being humanlike, they were washed, dressed, given food and drink, and provided with a lavishly adorned bedchamber.

Deities could also be represented by symbols or emblems. Some divine symbols, such as the dagger of the god Ashur or the net of Enlil, were used in oath-taking to confirm a declaration. Divine symbols appear on stelae and *naru* (boundary stones) representing gods and goddesses. Marduk, for example, the patron deity of Babylon, was symbolized with a triangular-headed spade; Nabu, the patron of writing, by a cuneiform wedge; Sin, the moon god, had a crescent moon as his symbol; and Ishtar, the goddess of heaven, was represented by a rosette, star, or lion.

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