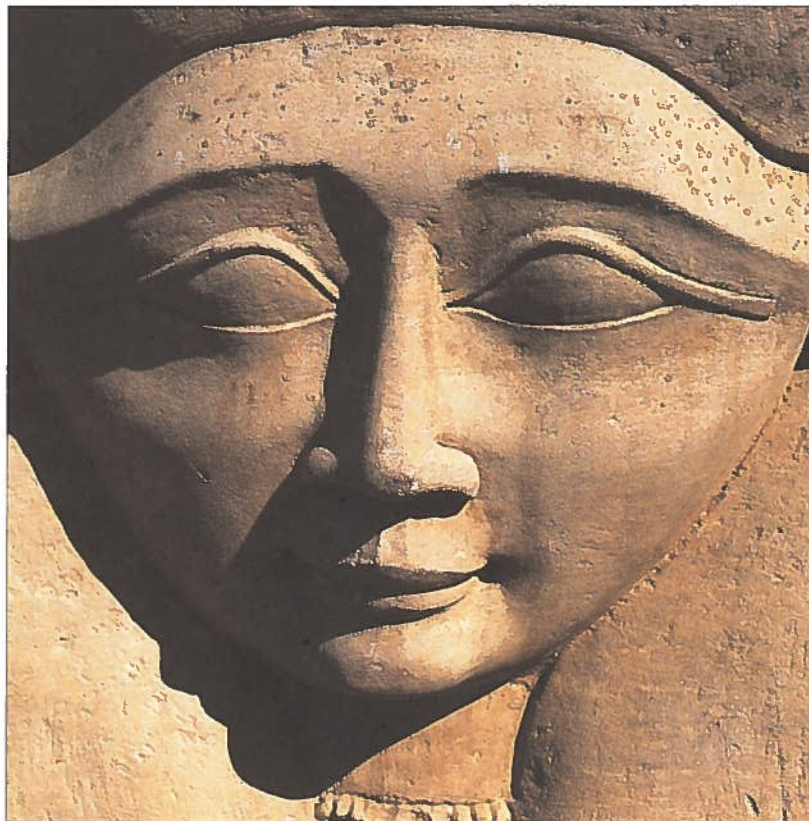


MYTHOLOGY

THE ILLUSTRATED ANTHOLOGY
OF WORLD MYTH & STORYTELLING

General Editor C. Scott Littleton



dbp

DUNCAN BAIRD PUBLISHERS

LONDON



ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

In 1616 an Italian called Pietro della Valle, a traveller through the old fertile river valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates (Mesopotamia, meaning “between the rivers”), dug out a few mud bricks from a spoil-heap the local Arabs called Tell al Muqayyar (“the mound of pitch”). The bricks were marked with writing “in unknown characters” and the puzzle that they presented was revealed only slowly, after generations of scholarly work. It transpired that beneath the neglected mounds lay nothing less than evidence of the origins of civilization – once great cities, such as Babylon, Ur, Nineveh and Ashur, which are referred to in the Bible. By c.3300BC some of these cities were thriving and each was home to thousands of people: Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Hittites, Canaanites and others. Their tales had merely been hidden, waiting to be remembered again.

We now know that the Mesopotamian gods originated either as the personification of towns and cities or as elemental forces, and they were portrayed with a full range of human emotions and individual characteristics. The society of the gods was no different from that of humans, and many myths give a divine justification for those institutions crucial to the organization of Mesopotamian culture, such as the temple.

The senior Sumerian gods were headed by An, or Anu in Akkadian, a remote authority figure in control of kingship and the cosmic laws that determined individual destinies. A more complex god was Enlil (Ellil), a powerful and aggressive warrior who manifested himself in violent storms, but also fostered crop growth. Ninhursaga, the primary goddess, represented motherhood and was known by many other names according to her different functions. She often worked in partnership or rivalry with Enki (Ea), the divine craftsman of the gods, who solved problems not with force like a warrior, but with cleverness and cunning. Enki used his intelligence to bring the clay in Ninhursaga’s hands to life, just as he aided the land by filling the irrigation canals with water (the Sumerian word for water also meant semen).

The kings of Mesopotamia’s city states acted as agents of the gods. In the stories the deities have mortal qualities, in part because the life-force in humans was thought to be derived from the blood of a deity. Humankind was created to perform the drudgery of heavy labour on behalf of the gods, who regarded humans as their progeny, protecting and punishing them by turns.



Above: A heraldic figure, associated with Enkidu, the companion of Gilgamesh, decorates this gold plaque made in Persia c.350BC.

Opposite: The hero in the centre of this Hittite carving has been identified as Gilgamesh. He is shown sheltering under a sacred symbol composed of a winged disc supported by a pair of bull-men.

The Mesopotamian Cosmos

In the Sumerian imagination the universe consisted of an (heaven) and ki (Earth), the latter envisaged as a rectangular field with four corners. Originally these were fused and inhabited by the gods alone, but at some stage they were separated, possibly to accommodate humankind. All around this universe, both above and below, was a boundless saltwater ocean.

Throughout ancient Mesopotamia, heaven and Earth were thought to have been formed by means of a cataclysm which churned up the primordial ocean. According to the Babylonian poem, *Enuma elish*, it was Marduk who accomplished this by splitting open the body of the sea goddess Tiamat (see pages 86–88). In another Sumerian tradition the goddess of the primordial ocean, called Nammu, spontaneously engendered a male sky and a female Earth. At first these two were inseparably joined, until they were parted by their own son Enlil, who then created animals, plants and humans.

But the *Enuma elish* also reveals elements of another widespread view that the cosmos contained several layers: the realm of Anu constituted an upper heaven, the realm of Enlil formed a lower heaven with the Earth beneath, and finally, below that, was the abyss or fresh-water ocean called *apsu*. Other versions of a layered cosmos put the realm of Anu on top, the realm of the Igigi gods (the Sumerian sky gods) below that, and the realm of the stars beneath, closest to Earth.

In addition, there was often said to be an underworld where the dead were thought to dwell, albeit in inferior conditions. This realm was reached by two

flights of steps at the eastern and western horizons. It was thought that the sun passed through gates guarding the underworld each day as it rose and set, even though it was described as residing in the “interior” of heaven overnight. The gates to the underworld were securely barred; and, once inside, there was normally no return (see pages 100–105). The

underworld was also said to be reached across a river sometimes referred to by the names of actual rivers beyond the furthest boundaries of Sumer. Thus the realm of the dead may have been conceived as some remote place on Earth.

A 7th-century BC clay tablet from Sippar shows a map of the world and the ocean surrounding it.



The Birth of Epic Poetry

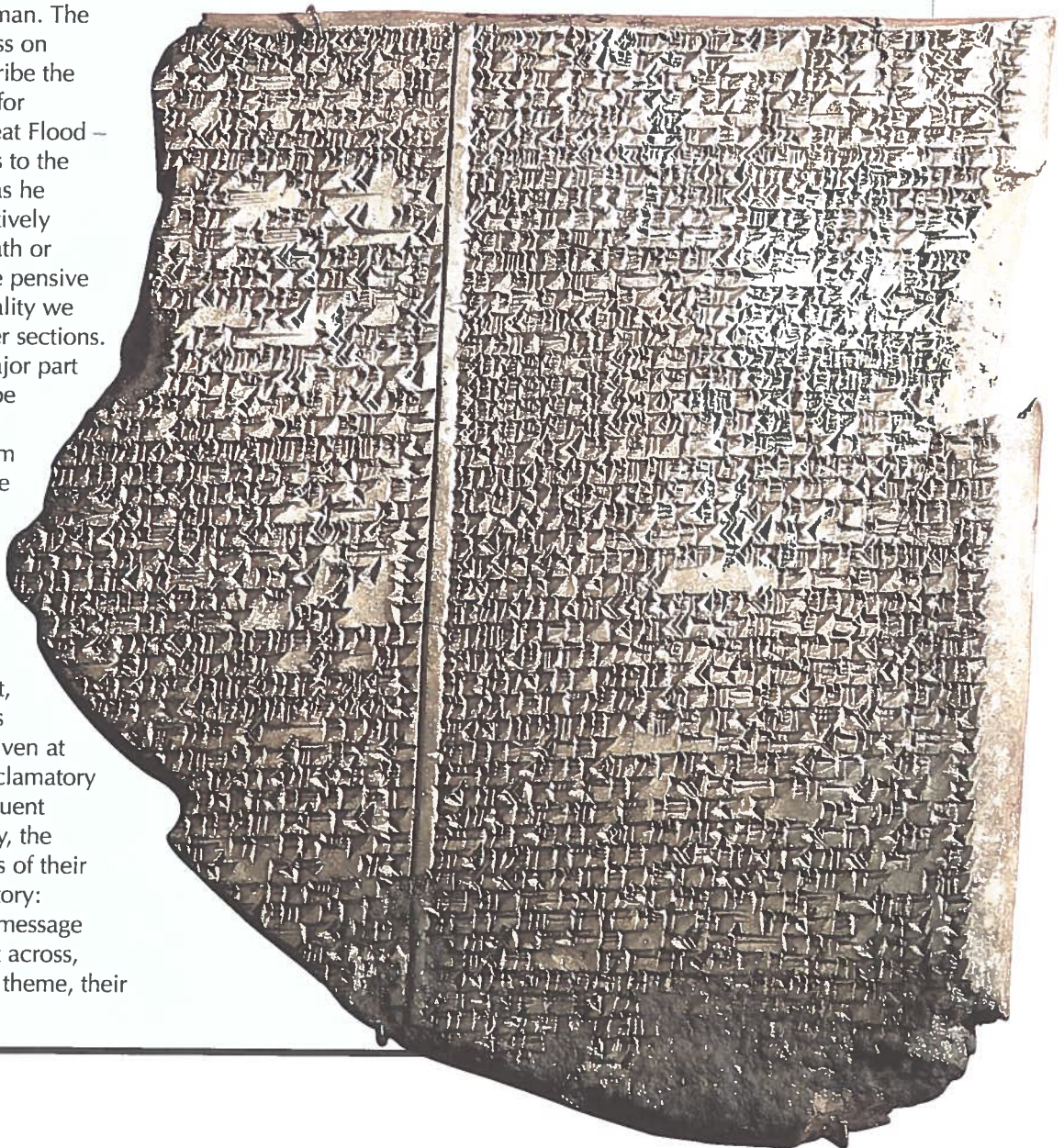
When in the eleventh century BC the scribe Sin-lege-unninni, working in the libraries of Nineveh, wrote down on twelve clay tablets the Gilgamesh cycle in its final, polished form, he created the world's very first recorded epic – and the conventions that he observed have been followed by his successors and continue to be so to this day.

The distinctive stamp of the epic genre is the way in which the hero almost always occupies the centre of the story, and Gilgamesh conforms with this. The poem is not ultimately about the fate of cities, kingdoms or civilizations, but about the destiny of just one man. The narrative may digress on occasions – to describe the creation of Enkidu, for example, or the Great Flood – but it always returns to the actions of its hero, as he matures from a relatively uncomplicated “death or glory” warrior to the pensive seeker after immortality we see in the epic’s later sections.

Dreams play a major part in the plot, as is to be expected from a society that saw them as messages from the gods. The dream material is often presented in a terse style that cranks up the dramatic tension of the story. By contrast, the speeches of gods and men alike are given at some length in a declamatory style marked by frequent repetition. Ultimately, the writers are conscious of their duty to tell a good story: whatever the moral message they are trying to get across, however grand their theme, their role is to entertain.

In later times, Greek, Indian, Roman and northern European poets were to adopt similar techniques in works such as the *Odyssey*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Aeneid* and *Beowulf*.

The Babylonian account of the Flood was recorded on the 11th tablet of the Gilgamesh epic. The story dates back to the 11th century BC and was possibly the source of the biblical version in *Genesis*.



The Historical Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh was no literary invention. The hero of the epic was based on a real king who ruled Uruk c.2600BC, and whose prowess was the subject of tales circulating centuries before the poem was written. The Sumerian King List records him as the fifth ruler in Uruk's First Dynasty and provides him with the customary divine antecedents: his mother, it is said, was the goddess Ninsun.

Such divine ancestry was obligatory, for kingship in ancient Sumer was a blend of secular politics and religion. As ruler, Gilgamesh was *en* of the city. The word meant "lord", but had priestly associations too. The *en* was the conduit through which the city's gods spoke to their people. It was an intimate relationship: each year, the *en* went through a ritual marriage with the goddess Inana, who made Uruk her special charge.

The ceremony was also a way of ensuring the fertility of both the city's fields and its female inhabitants. A successful *en*, one who presided over abundant harvests and a contented population, could expect not only the citizens' loyalty while he lived, but even greater esteem after he died, when he would become a godlike figure to whom prayers and sacrifices might be offered.

Gilgamesh's role was not solely religious. He was also the military leader of a city state that was one among many jostling for supremacy. The political situation resembled that of classical Greece: no one city was strong enough to impose its will on all the others, but many were keen to try. To have thrived in such circumstances, Gilgamesh must have been skilled in battle and diplomacy.

Surviving historical records are non-existent, but the veneration accorded to Gilgamesh in Sumerian tradition suggests that he was successful in both roles. Long before the epic was written, religious writings testify to his deification, and he regularly features in tales of Uruk's military might.

The kings of Ur's Third Dynasty, c.2100BC, liked to boast of their supposed descent from Gilgamesh, and by c.1800BC he

was credited with having built the city's walls – which in fact predate his lifetime by at least 1,000 years.

Gilgamesh demonstrates his legendary strength by raising a lion above his head, on this impression of an Assyrian cylinder seal from c.1350–1000BC.



Further episodes have been assembled from a variety of archaeological sources, most of them fragmentary. Some are "official" copies of the epic from city archives, especially the great library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh. Others may be the remains of assignments at Mesopotamia's many scribal schools: some tablets are clearly the work of student copyists, and there are variant readings. But we have reason to be grateful to these sometimes clumsy trainee scribes. The enormous quantity of cuneiform writing left behind means that

although many tablets are badly damaged, they are seldom damaged in the same way, so it has been possible to reconstitute most of the text.

There are irritating gaps here and there, and the surviving sections of the story do not connect in the way that their original authors perhaps intended. But the tale can be read in much the same form as the old Mesopotamians had it, and for the same reasons: for philosophical instruction in the ways of men and gods, of course, but also for sheer entertainment.

Lady of Heaven

Inana is the most complex of all the Mesopotamian goddesses. Her name is Sumerian and probably means "Lady of Heaven", while her name in Akkadian, Ishtar, is related to that of the Syrian goddess Astarte. Inana was variously said to be the daughter of An, Enlil or even Enki. In the myths of the death of her lover Dumuzi (see page 103), Inana is the daughter of the moon god Suen and sister of the sun god Utu. Her elder sister is Ereshkigal, queen of the underworld, and an intense jealousy rages between the two of them.

Inana's principal shrine was in the great city of Uruk, although it is likely that local goddesses in other places were also assimilated into her cult over time. This may explain why Inana combines several different roles which seem incompatible.

As Lady of Heaven, Inana was identified with the planet Venus, whose disappearance and reappearance in the night sky may be reflected in the myth of the goddess's descent to and return from the underworld (see pages 100–103).

Inana is also sometimes portrayed as keeper of the cosmic laws, or *me*, which, in one myth, she obtained from her father Enki (see box, opposite). Her constant quest for greater powers led her to try to take control of her sister's realm of the dead. This lust for power may have complemented her role as a goddess of war, in which she is described as enjoying battle as if it were a game or a dance. She is portrayed in Mesopotamian art as a heavily armed warrior.



A relief from Tell Asmar shows Ishtar (Inana), standing on her sacred lion. This 8th-century BC Babylonian artefact depicts the goddess as a powerful warrior.

Yet Inana is perhaps best known as the goddess of amorous liaisons and sexual love. In the Gilgamesh epic (see pages 116–133), Inana is reproached for her maltreatment of a series of lovers, and the hero himself turns her down. More tragically, her passionate affair with the shepherd god Dumuzi ends with his death and the goddess's grief.

Inana was also the protectress of prostitutes. In this aspect, one of her most important jobs was to couple once a year with the real-life king. This union may have been performed ritually by the living king with a temple prostitute, who stood in for the goddess.

The combination of all these aspects creates a fully rounded character who is headstrong, ruthless and dangerously seductive to men. Whether she appears as a virgin or as sexually promiscuous, Inana is always portrayed as a young woman free of the usual responsibilities of a wife and a mother.

The Sacred Marriage

According to the Mesopotamian world-view, the sole purpose of man's existence was to serve the gods. And the best way to do this and to ensure divine favour was through the scrupulously accurate performance of prescribed rituals.

One of the most important ceremonies was the traditional sacred marriage between earthly kings and the goddess Inana (Ishtar in Akkadian). Uruk's three greatest heroes – a priest-king Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh – were all described as “bridegrooms of Inana”, and their union with the goddess played a decisive part in their stories. Indeed, when Gilgamesh was foolish enough to reject her advances (see page 124), he precipitated both the death of his closest friend and his own obsessive quest for immortality.

Although the three heroes all claimed a privileged relationship with Inana, the status of divine bridegroom was something they shared with the king of every Sumerian city state. Each New Year's Day, a ritual marriage between ruler and goddess confirmed the structure of

temporal power and ensured the goddess's favour in the months to come. Naturally, it was also the occasion for great public celebration and feasting.

Surviving texts of these rituals have both charm and a steamy intimacy. Thus at one ritual wedding Inana welcomed her suitor in these forthright terms: “My parts are well-watered lowlands ... Who will put plough oxen to them?”

In fact, the ceremony may have involved actual sexual congress. For ritual purposes, the king temporarily assumed divine status, and the symbolic marriage was celebrated in poems in which the king took on the role of Inana's husband.

The seductive goddess of love was a favourite subject for Babylonian craftsmen. This statuette dates from the 3rd century BC.



number its days. Whatever may be achieved, it is only wind.” Now, faced with the terrible reality of a death, he began to understand that such heroic attitudes are meaningless. It dawned on him that he too was mortal. He roamed the countryside around Uruk, sick with apprehension at the thought of his own extinction. “Shall I die too? Am I not like Enkidu? Grief has entered my innermost being. I am afraid of death.”

The Gilgamesh epic might have ended at this point. Instead, the story sets off in a new and rather different direction. Perhaps, Gilgamesh

thought, a way may be found to defeat death. Searching his memory, he recalled the story of Ut-napishti (see page 109), one of his own distant ancestors. This man had stood before the gods' assembly and sought eternal life. Might it be possible to discover immortality as he had done?

For Gilgamesh, it was no longer a matter of merely seeking adventure. No longer was he to battle with men and monsters for the sake of fame: now he waged war with death itself, and eternal life was the prize. A journey to find Ut-napishti had to be the first step.