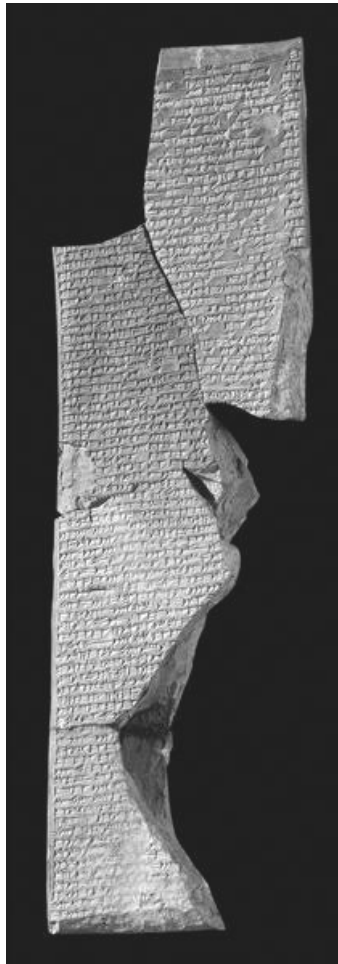


ENUMA ELISH

Date, language, and provenance –

- *Enuma Elish* (lit. “From Above”; named after the first words of the poem) is a Babylonian epic describing theogony, cosmogony, anthropogony, the foundation of the city of Babylon, and the ascendancy of the god Marduk to the status of supreme deity, ruler of all of the gods of heaven and earth. It was written in Akkadian.
- As with *Gilgamesh*, cuneiform tablets of the *Enuma Elish* were first discovered by archeologists in the 19th century CE among ruins in Nineveh; these fragments date from around the 7th c. BCE. Later, fragments from around 1000 BCE were discovered in Ashur as well as fragment from around the 6th c. BCE fragments at Uruk and other locales in the ancient Near East.



- It also survives in an Assyrian version (which, e.g., replaces the god Marduk with the god Ashur). As with *Gilgamesh*, the Babylonian (and later Assyrian) tale may build on older Sumerian traditions – in this case, Sumerian traditions about cosmology and the gods.
- As with other ancient Near Eastern texts, the precise authorship is unknown. Although the precise date too is uncertain, it is notable that there are parallels in early inscriptional evidence and that the purpose of the epic is to promote the preeminence of the god Marduk, on the one hand, and the city Babylon, on the other. It may originate, then, as early as the period of the rise of Babylonia (2000-1600 BCE) to power in the ancient Near East, specifically during the First Babylonian Dynasty (1894-1595 BCE) when Marduk was established as the god of Babylon.

KEY TERMS

Aetiology (also spelled “Etiology”) – Story explaining how something came to be.

Theogony – Story about the creation of the gods

Cosmogony – Story about the creation of the cosmos.

Anthropogony – Story about the creation of humankind.

Purpose and literary genre

- *Enuma Elish* is an epic poem written for oral recitation. Its specific purpose and use was liturgical (contrast, e.g., *Gilgamesh*): it seems to have been composed for recitation during the Babylonian New Year celebration.
- The New Year’s celebration took place for 10 days (the first to eleventh of the Babylonian month Nisan, which occurred in the spring). *Enuma Elish* was recited on the fourth day, likely in glorification of the god Marduk and the new age which he ushered in as well as in celebration, remembrance, and reenactment of his victory over Tiamat – a paradigmatic fight between order and chaos that would have been especially poignant in the spring, when Babylon was beset with floods that threatened to return the great city to the state of primordial watery disorder.

Theogony/cosmogony (Tablet I)

- The tale begins at a time before the existence of anything except the two oldest deities, Apsu (the fresh water ocean), his wife Tiamat (the saltwater ocean), together with their son Mummu (the mist rising from them).
- Other gods are born from them: Tiamat bears two brother/sister pairs, Lahmu and Lahamu, then Anshar and Kishar. Anshar and Kishar bear Anu (the sky), who bears Ea (subterranean sweet waters).
- The oldest gods are here metonymies for natural elements primary to the cosmos (i.e., Anu is “god of the sky” in the sense of being both god and sky)—theogony and cosmogony are inseparable. In the beginning, prior to the formation of the earth, are only different types of waters, the mist that floats above them, and the sky above.

Divine war and the creation of the earth (Tablets I-IV)

- The younger gods ("sons of the gods"; cf. Gen 6) are so rambunctious and noisy that Apsu wishes to quiet them so that the older gods can better sleep. When other means fail, he decides to destroy them!
- Ea learns of the plan and kills Apsu. In his body, he establishes a dwelling place for him and his wife Damkina, as well as sanctuaries for the Gods. It is here that Damkina then gives birth to Marduk, whom Ea bestows with special powers.
- Apsu's wife, Tiamat, is enraged at the murder of her husband. She vows revenge and creates eleven monsters to help her carry out her vengeance. Tiamat takes a new husband, Kingu, in place of the slain Apsu and puts him in charge of her newly assembled army.
- Ea likewise learns of Tiamat's plan and attempts – unsuccessfully – to confront her. Then Anu tries to challenge her but also fails. The gods become afraid that no one will be able to stop Tiamat's vengeful rampage. Anshar's minister Gaga is dispatched to the other gods to report the activities of Tiamat and to tell them of Marduk's willingness to face her.
- The council of the gods tests Marduk's powers by having him make a garment disappear and then reappear. After passing the test, the council enthrones Marduk as high king and commissions him to fight Tiamat.
- With the authority and power of the council, Marduk assembles his weapons, the four winds as well as the seven winds of destruction. He rides in his chariot of clouds with the weapons of the storm to confront Tiamat. After entangling her in a net, Marduk unleashes the Evil Wind to inflate Tiamat. When she is incapacitated by the wind, Marduk kills her with an arrow through her heart and takes captive the other gods and monsters who were her allies. He also captured her husband Kingu.
- After smashing Tiamat's head with a club, Marduk divided her corpse, using half to create the earth and the other half to create the sky complete with bars to keep the chaotic waters from escaping. He installs Anu, Enlil (god of air), and Ea in their places. He establishes stations in the sky, gates for the sun, and the calendar. From the spit of Tiamat, Marduk creates rain for the earth.

Gods of Enuma Elish

***Apsu** - god of fresh water and embodiment of male fertility; existed prior to all else, together with his wife Tiamat and was the ancestor to the rest of the gods; he decides, however, to destroy them, peeved at their noisiness.

***Tiamat** – Wife of Apsu, goddess of the sea and thus embodiment of originary chaos; also one of the primeval parents of all of the rest of the gods; upon the murder of Apsu, however, she declares war on all the gods responsible and causes great destruction only halted by Marduk's victory over her.

Mummu – son of Apsu and Tiamat; god of the mist rising and hovering over the two bodies of water.

Lahmu and Lahama – children of Tiamat.

Anshar and Kishar – children of Tiamat, gods who represented the boundary between the earth and sky.

Anu – son of Anshar and Kishar; god of sky.

***Ea** (also called Nudimmud, Enki) – son of Anu; a wise and powerful god (associated also w/magic), who kills Apsu when Apsu decides to destroy his divine progeny

Damkina – wife of Ea and mother of Marduk

***Marduk** – patron god of Babylon; the god of spring, symbolized both by the light of the sun and the lightning in storm and rain; after his victory over Tiamat in the divine war initiated by the death of her husband, Apsu, at Ea's hands, he creates the earth from her body, founds Babylon, and creates humankind to serve the gods.

Kingu – husband of Tiamat after the death of Apsu.

- From the description of Tiamat in these tablets, it is clear that she embodies the forces of disorder and chaos in the world as well as the water that lay at its beginning.
- In other words, creation is here conceived as coming from chaos but its completion lies in the process of overcoming chaos, as effected by the victory of the young god Marduk. Likewise, in the cycle of seasons, Tiamat is winter and barrenness, who is conquered by Marduk, springtime and new life (note resonance with liturgical use of the poem).
- The liturgical use of the poem is also reflected in the place of Babylon, the place which Marduk chooses to be his home. It is given a privileged place in the cosmos as the home of the gods.

Anthropogony and the establishment of Babylon (Tablet V-VI)

- The defeated divine hosts of Tiamat were first installed as a service class to the rest of the gods. After their complaints and so as to avoid the threat of further divine wars, Marduk decides to create human beings to serve the gods.
- He needs blood and bone from which to fashion them, and Ea advises that only one of the gods should die to provide the materials for creation – the one who was guilty of plotting evil against the gods. Marduk inquires of the assembly of the gods about who incited Tiamat’s rebellion and is told that it was her husband Kingu. Ea kills Kingu and uses his blood to fashion humankind.
- To honor Marduk, the gods construct the city Babylon and a great temple to Marduk. After its completion, Marduk gives a great feast for the gods in his new house. All praise Marduk for his greatness in subduing Tiamat.
- Babylon is here depicted as the city of the god (i.e. Marduk) who defeated chaos and brought order to the cosmos. In effect, its political and military supremacy are thus articulated and defended in mythic terms.



Praise of Marduk (Tablets VI-VII)

- The final section celebrates Marduk as champion of gods and creator of heaven and earth, and it stresses the importance of retelling and remembering his story.
- Especially from the lengthy praise of Marduk at the end of the poem, it is clear that the purpose of the piece is not to explain creation per se, let alone the creation of humankind—both themes are given relatively little attention. The aim is to celebrate Marduk and tell his deeds.

Resonance with Sumerian and Babylonian Traditions

Last time, we noted how Gilgamesh is a Babylonian retelling/redaction of Sumerian text/tradition. What about *Enuma Elish*? The *Enuma Elish* is our major and most extensive source for ancient Mesopotamian cosmogony. Yet scholars speculate about a Sumerian version of this myth which has as its central god as Enlil (the most important god in Babylon prior to Marduk’s rise to prominence). Sumerians ascribed the separation of heaven and earth to Enlil—quite aptly, as he was the god of the air. All the gods except Tiamat have Sumerian names. Apsu, Anu, and Enlil are Sumerian gods.

Beginning of the *Code of Hammurabi* (ca. 1780 BCE; trans. L.W. King): “When Anu the Sublime, King of the Anunaki, and Bel, the lord of Heaven and earth, who decreed the fate of the land, assigned to Marduk, the over-ruling son of Ea, God of righteousness, dominion over earthly man, and made him great among the Igigi, they called Babylon by his illustrious name, made it great on earth, and founded an everlasting kingdom in it, whose foundations are laid so solidly as those of heaven and earth; then Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak...”

Images: P. 1 7th century BCE fragment of *Enuma Elish* from Ninevah (British Museum); Cylinder Seal depicting battle w/Tiamat (origin unknown); P. 3 Snake-dragon (emblem of Marduk), clay plaque, Babylonian, 800-550 BC (BM)