

RELIGION IN MESOPOTAMIA

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Religion was central to **Mesopotamians** as they believed that the divine affected every aspect of human life.

Mesopotamians were polytheistic; they worshipped several major Gods and thousands of minor Gods.

Each **Mesopotamian** city, whether Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian or Assyrian, had its own patron God or Goddess.



Triad of Heaven.

The three most important **deities** in the **Mesopotamian** pantheon during all periods were the **Gods- An, Enlil, and Enki.**

- ▣ **An/Anu** was identified with all the stars of the equatorial sky, **Enlil** with those of the northern sky, and **Enki** with those of the southern sky.



Sumerian theocratic government

Each city state worshiped its own god and was ruled by a leader who was said to have acted as an intermediary between the local God and the people in the city state. The leaders led the people into wars and controlled the complex water systems. A council of citizens may have selected the leaders.

- ▣ Some scholars have described the Mesopotamian system of government as a "theocratic socialism." The center of the government was the temple, where projects like the building of dikes and irrigation canals were supervised, and food was divided up after the harvest. Most Sumerian writing recorded administrative information and kept accounts. Only priests were allowed to write.



- Early Sumerians established a powerful priesthood that served local Gods. Much of political and religious activity was oriented towards Gods who controlled the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and nature in general.
- If people respected the Gods and the Gods acted benevolently the Sumerians thought the Gods would provide ample sunshine and water and prevent hardships. If the people went against the wishes of the local God and the God was not so benevolent: droughts, floods, famine and locusts were the result.

Kings took part in important religious rituals. Kings supported temples and were expected to turn over some of the booty from wars and raids to temples.



Religion and culture in Mesopotamia

- The architecture of both temples and palaces are massive and, in consequence of the lack of a hard building-material in the Euphrates Valley, it is perhaps natural that huge brick constructions developed.
- Numerous drawings on limestone and votive tablets on other material during this early period are found.



Religious Literature in Mesopotamia

Practically, the whole of the literature of Babylonia was of a religious character, or touched religion and religious beliefs and customs at some point, in accord with the close bond between religion and culture

The old centres of religion and culture, like Nippur, Sippar, Cuthah, Uruk, and Ur, had retained much of their importance, despite the centralising influence of the capital of the Babylonian empire.

Hammurabi and his successors had endeavoured, as we have seen, to give to Marduk the attributes of the other great gods, Enlil, Anu, Ea, Shamash, Adad, and Sin, and, to emphasise it, had placed shrines to these gods and others in the great temples of Marduk, and of his close associate, Nebo, in Babylon, and in the neighbouring Borsippa.



- ▣ “Along with this policy went, also, a centralising tendency in the cult and, as a consequence, the rituals, omens, and incantations produced in the older centres were transferred to Babylon and combined with the indigenous features of the Marduk cult.
- ▣ Yet this process of gathering in one place the literary remains of the past had never been fully carried out. It was left for Ashurbanapal to harvest within his palace the silent witnesses to the glory of these older centres.
- ▣ While Babylon and Borsippa constituted the chief sources whence came the copies that he had prepared for the royal library, internal evidence shows that he also gathered the literary treasures of other centres, such as Sippar, Nippur, Uruk.
- ▣ “The great bulk of the religious literature in Ashurbanapal's library represents copies or editions of omen-series, incantation-rituals, myths, legends, and collections of prayers, made for the temple-schools, where the candidates for the various branches of the priesthood received their training. Hence we find supplemental to the literature proper, the pedagogical apparatus of those days—lists of signs, grammatical exercises; analyses of texts, texts with commentaries, and commentaries on texts, specimen texts, and school extracts, and pupils’ exercises.”



An/Anu

the divine personification of the sky,
supreme God, and ancestor of all
the deities in ancient Mesopotamian
religion



- ▣ **Anu** or **An** is the divine personification of the sky, Supreme God and ancestor of all the deities in ancient Mesopotamian religion. Anu was believed to be the supreme source of all authority, for the other Gods and for all mortal rulers, and he is described in one text as the one "**who contains the entire universe**". He is identified with the equatorial sky ,and along with his sons Enlil and Enki, constitutes the highest divine triad personifying the three bands of constellations of the sky.
- ▣ By the time of the earliest written records, Anu was rarely worshipped, and veneration was instead devoted to his son Enlil, but, throughout Mesopotamian history, the highest deity in the pantheon was always said to possess the *anûtu*, meaning "**Heavenly power**".
- ▣ Anu's primary role in myths is as the ancestor of the Anunnaki, the major deities of Sumerian religion. His primary cult center was the Eanna temple in the city of Uruk, but, by the Akkadian Period (c. 2334–2154 BCE), his authority in Uruk had largely been ceded to the goddess Inanna, the Queen of Heaven.



- **Eanna** (*house of heavens*) was an ancient Sumerian temple in Uruk.
- Considered "the residence of **Inanna**" and Anu or An, it is mentioned several times in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and elsewhere. The evolution of the Gods to whom the temple was dedicated is the subject of scholarly study.
- **Inanna** is the ancient Sumerian Goddess of love, sensuality, fertility, procreation, and also of war. She later became identified by the Akkadians and Assyrians as the Goddess **Ishtar**, and further with the Hittite **Sauska**, the Phoenician **Astarte** and the Greek **Aphrodite**, among many others.



**Sun god *Utu* was later ‘morphed’
into Akkadian *Shamash*.**



- ▣ The pantheon of the region was a religious extension of this ancient cultural overlap, and as such many of the Mesopotamian Gods were commonly worshiped by Sumerians, Babylonians and even Assyrians alike.
- ▣ The Sumerian sun god *Utu* was later ‘morphed’ into Akkadian *Shamash*.

Some of these Mesopotamian Gods were honoured more as patron deities of individual cities.



Primordial Goddess of the oceans, Tiamat



- ▣ Depicted as the primordial goddess of the oceans, Tiamat . In essence, the first part of her *myth* projects the goddess as the creator, who in sacred bond with freshwater sources (represented by god *Apsû*), gives birth to the cosmos and its successive generations.
- ▣ In the second part of the *myth*, Tiamat takes the form of a giant dragon to wreak havoc on the younger generation of Gods (as an act of revenge, instigated by the murder of her husband *Apsû*). She is also said to have created the first batch of monsters and ‘poison-filled’ dragons, and ultimately ends up being slain by god *Marduk*, who in turn then proceeds to construct both heaven and earth from her remnant body.
- ▣ As for the historical side of affairs, there are theories that suggest that Tiamat as a Mesopotamian Goddess worshiped as a part of the cult of *Nammu* .



ENIL



Enlil was considered as one of the Mesopotamian Gods in the supreme triad, along with *Anu* (God of the heavens) and *Enki* (God of wisdom and earth).

- ▣ Enlil may have been portrayed as the ‘**Lord** of Air’ or basically a deity representing the sky and atmosphere.
- ▣ However, in terms of the history of religion, Enlil, the patron deity of the city of Nippur, was much more than a master of a singular elemental force. In fact, in various Mesopotamian inscriptions and tablets, he had been described with different exalted epithets, including the ‘King of all lands’, the ‘Father of black-headed people’ (referring to Sumerians) and even the ‘Father of Gods.’
- ▣ Pertaining to the latter quality, it was Enlil who brought upon the great flood upon humanity (according to the Akkadian epic *Atra-Hasis*, circa 18th century BC), after being perturbed by their higher rate of fertility and the general ‘noise’ they made (that disturbed his sleep). However, his divine ‘colleague’ Enki, the God of earth, intervenes and warns a human sage named Atrahasis – who in turn proceeds to build an ark, thus mirroring the later Biblical story of Noah, along with numerous other ancient tales of the flood.



Enki
(Ea)



- **Enki** (known as *Ea* in Akkadian and Babylonian mythology), was one of the important Mesopotamian Gods of the supreme triad.
- Commonly translated as the ‘Lord of the Earth’, Enki had also been depicted as a deity of creation, crafts, intelligence and even magic.
- Often considered as the patron deity of the city of Eridu (in southern Mesopotamia), Enki was said to have resided in a unique geographical location known as *abzu* (Akkadian *apsû*), attended by his seven mythical sages.
- In many Sumerian sources, he is also mentioned as being the son of primeval Goddess *Tiamat*. According to those legends, it was Enki who took the fight to his father *Apsû* after he learned that *Apsû* was planning to kill all the younger Gods. He was also said to have created the first humans (when depicted as *Ea*) from clay, in a bid to gather ‘free’ laborers for the Gods.



Marduk



Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon, is one of the major Mesopotamian Gods, which in itself suggests a shift in cultural prominence from the ancient Sumerians to the later Babylonians. Marduk was portrayed as the very **King of Gods** (or even Storm God), wearing royal robes, whose fields of ‘expertise’ ranged from justice, healing to agriculture and magic. Historically, the famous **ziggurat of Babylon was also dedicated to Marduk**



In terms of mythology, Marduk was the son of Enki, and he was responsible for defeating and killing Tiamat, the primeval goddess who took a dragon form to challenge many of the younger gods. Marduk then proceeded on to ‘source’ the rivers Tigris and Euphrates from the slain goddess’ eyes, while her body was carved up to create heaven and earth.

Ishtar



Mesopotamian goddess of contrasting traits, **Ishtar** (or *Inanna* in Sumerian) was projected as the female divine entity of beauty, sex, and desire, while at the same time being the symbolic purveyor of war and combat. And is often the case with mythology, her later Babylonian legends diverged from the earlier Sumerian tales.

- ▣ Several of the Assyrian kings prayed in her temple before their military campaigns and actions of wars. And beyond just war ceremonies, the temple was viewed as a fortified sanctuary for Assyrian queens during their pregnancy. And as a demonstration of the Assyrian elites' association to war as a ritual extension of their power.



Sin (Nanna)



- Sin or *Nanna* was the tutelary god of Ur, one of the major ancient Mesopotamian urban centers
Associated with the moon, Sin was represented as the bull, with the symbol alluding to the resemblance of the waxing moon to the horns of the animal. Interestingly enough, this mythic connection to the moon also associated Sin to fertility'.genealogical pedigree – which projected him as the first-born of *Enlil*
- He was also portrayed, during various time-periods, as the father of two major divine entities – *Utu* (the sun god) and *Inanna* (the goddess of beauty).



Shamash and Hammurabi



- The Akkadian god **Shamash** was probably directly derived from the Sumerian counterpart *Utu*, with both entities being projected as the god of the sun and divine justice. However, interestingly enough, while Utu had been depicted as the son of **Moon-god** *Sin* (summarized in the earlier entry), Shamash, as one of the Mesopotamian gods, was represented as the son of *Enlil* . In any case, Shamash (or Utu) was one of the most important deities in the ancient Mesopotamian culture, attested by the fact that the entity was mentioned as early as circa 3500 BC (5,500-years ago) in the nascent forms of Sumerian writings.
- Now when it comes to historical connection, Shamash is most famously known to feature in the renowned law code of Hammurabi (18th century) BC, with the Babylonians attributing the very provision of land laws to the divine entity. This representation took a more a symbolic route during the later Neo-Assyrian Empire, with the god depicted as just a solar disc with wings. His immense popularity among the populace is also suggested by three different ancient cult centers in all of Mesopotamia – Larsa and Eridu in (southern) Sumer, along with Sippar in (northern) Akkad.

Nisaba



The Sumerian civilization can be credited with many of humanity's cultural inventions and achievements, including the world's oldest known pieces of literature. To that end, Sumerians even had one of the Mesopotamian gods dedicated to pursuits of writing, and she was called Nisaba (or *Nissaba*).

- ▣ Probably having her origins from a grain goddess, circa 2700 BC, Nisaba later became the primary deity of the Mesopotamian city of Eresh.
- ▣ She was often portrayed as the primary scribe of the Gods and keeper of both divine and mortal accounts. Interestingly enough, with varied myths followed in different city-states of ancient Mesopotamia, in some tales, Nisaba was represented as the daughter of *Enlil*. However more famous stories establish *Enlil* as being the son-in-law of Nisaba.



ASSUR-Ashurnasirpal, Ashurbanipa I. Esarhaddon (*Ashur-aha-iddina*)



- ▣ *Assur* pertains to the interesting synthesis of an ancient city and its patron deity, with the latter originating as an East Semitic God mainly worshiped in the northern regions of Mesopotamia, along with the north-eastern regions corresponding more-or-less to the realm of Old Assyria. To that end, there is a theory that the God himself was the deified form of the Old Assyrian capital Assur, an urban center that dates back from 3rd millennium BC.
- ▣ In essence, Ashur, as one of the Mesopotamian gods, rather signified the clash of cultural overtones between the northern and southern parts of Mesopotamia. For example, by Hammurabi's time, *Marduk* replaced *Enlil* as the chief deity of the majority of the southern Mesopotamian lands. Almost as a reactionary process, Ashur took the position of *Enlil* (and his mythic lineage) in northern Mesopotamia, and this religious shift extended till the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In fact, many of the Assyrian imperial propaganda inscriptions went on to mention how their conquered subjects' gods have abandoned them, overshadowed by the rising power of Ashur.
- ▣ The geopolitical scenario of the Assyrian Empire rather favored such contrived outlooks, with their eponymous royal capital of Ashur being transformed into a city of lavish palaces, imposing temples and even cultural centers for learning. This emphasis on the intrinsic ties between Assyrian imperialism and the divine entity even led to the adoption of king names that included the word 'Ashur', like Ashurnasirpal, Esarhaddon (*Ashur-aha-iddina*), and Ashurbanipal.



NINKASI



Ninkasi, the ancient Sumerian tutelary goddess of beer (and alcohol). Symbolizing the role of women in brewing and preparation of beverages in ancient Mesopotamia, historically also alluded to how beer consumption in itself was an important marker for societal and civilized virtues. To give an example, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the wild man *En-kidu* “did not know how to eat bread, / nor had he ever learned to drink beer!”, with the latter phrase suggesting how drinking beer was seen as a ‘quality’ of a civilized person.

- ▣ And since we are talking about history, like many of the oldest cultural achievements pertaining to humanity, the oldest recipe for brewing beer comes from the land of Mesopotamia. These earliest beers were possibly concocted with the aid of barley that was extracted from bread. A 3900-year-old Sumerian poem was there honoring Ninkasi (*the Hymn to Ninkasi*)

