

# A Mesopotamian notion of intelligence and creativity: the ingenious nature of Enki/Ea

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## Abstract

In Antiquity, by the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates, throughout more than three millennia, several intertwined innovations were developed that would forever change the course of history. When analysed together, these innovations manifest a rather dynamic, pragmatic, and imaginative mental framework, where intelligence, creativity and fantasy run side by side.

Deeply religious, the Mesopotamians also created a complex mythical discourse, where the transcendental nature of deities was accommodated through the hyperbolised and metaphorical projection of their own reality. Following a History of Religions perspective, with this chapter, we aim to examine a Mesopotamian notion of intelligence, by linking its historical agents with the envisioned nature of Enki/Ea, the god of wisdom and knowledge.

**Keywords:** History of Religions, Sumero-Akkadian Mythology, Mesopotamian Literature Wisdom Deities, Ancient Knowledge.

## 1. Mesopotamia, a cradle of innovations and pragmatic thinking

After numerous technological advances that allowed the Mesopotamian communities to exploit their surroundings better, urbanism first appeared in that territory during the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Algaze, 2008). This new development prompted the creation of centralised political powers in every “city-state”, and the invention of the first known writing system – the cuneiform, which was initially used to record bureaucratized economic data.

Through the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, the economic growth allowed for these *urbs* to become sophisticated at every level, namely the artistic one. It was then that the Mesopotamians scribes started to develop an extremely rich literary *corpus*, where fantasy and reality were blended to produce some of the oldest mythic narratives known to humankind<sup>1</sup>. Schools would soon be created where the young apprentices became scribes, constituting also exceptional centres to the development of literary novelties (George, 2005).

On another level, a deductive method based on the observation of natural phenomena, followed by the identification and registration of causal-effect relations was developed by true experts in scrutinising nature - the diviners (Akkadian: *bārû*). These specialists acted upon the belief “that deities painted nature with signs which bore their divine will, in order for communities to know it and more importantly, to act accordingly” (Lopes & Almeida,

2017, p. 11).

From the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC on, several divinatory *compendia* were gathered, containing an immense variety of data related to astronomy, mathematics, medicine, animal behaviour, etc. The study of these compilations allows the identification of Mesopotamian scientific knowledge, though driven by religious practices (Bottéro, 1998, p. 344; Rochberg 2004, p. 237-286).

The vast collections of Mesopotamian texts, whether literary, divinatory, cultic, economic, legal or diplomatic, were systematically reunited and organised in the royal archives and libraries. Alongside, Mesopotamians were keen to compile extensive lists of items considered important in their daily organisation, whether referring to lexicon or professions, to past ruling kings or worshipped deities<sup>2</sup>. It is worth referring that the latter appeared organised by the ranking of importance, family ties, and cosmic functions, thus being an excellent aid in the understanding of the Mesopotamian religious system, in a given period (Rubio, 2011, pp. 97-101).

This enormous quantity of data, which survived until the present day in thousands of clay tablets, presents itself as an extraordinary means for a holistic study of the Mesopotamian civilisation. For what this paper is concerned, it shows a profoundly organised and pragmatic mental framework, where everything that was considered important was recorded, annotated, and systematised for time to come.

1 For instance, the adventures of the famous Gilgameš have their origins in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC literature

(Abush, 2001).

2 The first lists are attested to ca. 2600 BC.

## 2. Enki/Ea, the archetypal divine figure of intelligence

Simultaneously, the Mesopotamian mental framework was profoundly theocentric. In a *longue durée* analysis, this religious system appears guided by the notion that everything is explained by divine will and power. Hence, the reality was observed through a religious filter which, as Jean Bottéro (1998, p. 55) stated, coloured and conditioned its perception/understanding.

This belief led to the creation of a complex mythical discourse (expressed in ritual practices and oral, iconographic and written narratives), which provided a way to appease the anxieties Mesopotamians felt regarding their own existence in a reality controlled by numinous powers.

From the Religious Studies perspective, the mythical discourse finds its roots in the mundane reality, where the *homo religiosus* dwells. The particular aspects are profoundly transformed, through exercises which used a “controlled and calculated imagination” (Bottéro, 1998, p. 55), where the tangible is metamorphosed into symbolic.

Thus, myth should be understood as an account with its own logic and reason, “presenting a form of truth” (Hatab, 1990, p. 10), where the reality and the experiences of the individual/community are, somehow, reflected in the metaphorical and hyperbolised significances created<sup>3</sup>.

Consequently, it is interesting to examine the Sumerian-Akkadian mythology regarding Enki/Ea, the deity responsible for the principles of knowledge and wisdom, to understand the Mesopotamian archetypal construction of intelligence and creativity.

Diachronically, Enki/Ea was regarded as one of the most important figures in the Mesopotamian divine universe, occupying the third position in the lists of deities (López & Sanmartín, 1993, pp. 302-303). It is curious to note that he was the patron god of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Eridu (modern Tell Abu Shahrain, Iraq), where kingship first descended from heavens, according to the *Sumerian King List* (ETCSL 2.1.1).

Enki/Ea was thought to inhabit and control the cosmic domain of the fresh, and pure subterranean waters (*abzu/apsû*), hence his association with aquatic animals, like the turtle or the goat-fish. In glyptic art, Enki/Ea was commonly depicted with flowing streams coming out of his shoulders, with fish swimming on it (Black & Green, 1998, p. 76).

In his cosmic domain, this god was accompanied by

his divine wife, Damgalnuna/Damkina, his divine minister, Isimu/Usmû, and the seven sages (*apkallû*), antediluvian figures who were to protect and to teach wisdom to humankind (Black & Green 1998, p. 27, pp. 163-164).

Given the cumulative nature of the Mesopotamian religious system, depending on the literary traditions, his divine genealogy may differ. The Sumerian composition *Enki and Ninmah* presents Enki/Ea as the son of the goddess Namma/Nammu, who was the primeval divine ocean that gave birth to all deities (ETCSL 1.1.2). On its turn, the Babylonian epic of creation, *Enûma eliš*, describes him as the son of the celestial god An/Anu, and father of the patron god of Babylon, Marduk (Dalley, 2000, pp. 228-277).

The association of Enki/Ea with the pure waters (through his divine mother and/or through his cosmic abode) might help to explain his abundant character and fertile sexual nature. In *Enki and the world order*, he is depicted fertilising the Tigris and the Euphrates with his semen (ETCSL 1.1.3) and, in *Enki and Ninḫursaĝa*, he is responsible for impregnating several goddesses (ETCSL 1.1.1).

Moreover, his connection with magic and ritual knowledge, and his tutelage of the arts and crafts (Foster, 20015, pp. 151-152) turned him into a divine figure keen to establish order. In fact, the composition *Enki and the world order*, states how the god Enlil, the leader of the pantheon, sent him out to inspect the land and to organise the world, by means of assigning different responsibilities/functions to the gods and goddesses of the divine assembly (ETCSL 1.1.3).

Possibly due to all these attributes, Enki/Ea appears as the divine guardian of the innumerable *me*, in *Inana and Enki* (ETCSL 1.3.1). This Mesopotamian concept is still difficult to translate and to fully grasp but appears to be “the eternal and unchangeable first principles, or quintessences, of everything that exists. They are also the blueprints for everything that exists, in that they prescribe how it should exist” (Vantsiphout, 2009, p. 35). Enki/Ea’s orderly and wise character surely mattered to this function.

Enki/Ea was, thus, a deity deeply connected with cosmic abundance, wisdom, and order, being summoned by divine and human actors to carry out tasks that required intelligence. However, the way this deity acted in the mythic literary compositions manifests a certain type of creative intelligence, that made some modern scholars qualify him as “cunning” or “crafty”<sup>4</sup> (Jacobsen, 1976, p. 110;

3 As Meslin (1973, 232) stressed, in the same cultural context “le mythe peut être à la fois l'expression de réalités supérieures à l'homme, et tenues par lui pour sacrées, et en même temps un moyen de justifier un ordre social [...]”

d'expliquer des situation types que tout homme, peu ou prou, rencontrera au long chemin de sa vie’.

4 Kramer and Maier (1989, p. 5) stated how they preferred to adjective Enki/Ea as “crafty” instead of “wise”, given

Kramer & Maier 1989, p. 5).

Likewise, the Mesopotamian notion of intelligence must have had something to do with its divine patron.



Fig. 1: Enki/Ea. Detail of the *Adda Seal* (ca. 2300 BC). The British Museum Collection. Retrieved from <http://commons.wikimedia.org>

### 3. The ingenious ability to solve divine and human problems

Enki/Ea was one of the most active deities in Mesopotamian mythic literature. To better illustrate our argument, we will focus our attention in three different compositions: in the first two, Enki/Ea deals with problems related to the goddess Inanna/Ištar; and in the third, this deity presents original solutions to chaotic events, in the divine and human spheres.

### 4. Enki and the rebellious “Queen of Heaven and Earth”

The first references to Inanna/Ištar are dated to the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC and attest her as the patron goddess of Uruk (modern Warka, Iraq). From the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC onwards, her cult spread all over the “land between the rivers”, and even beyond, through multiple and intricate syncretic processes with other local/regional deities (Westenholz, 2010, p. 336; Selz, 2000).

The long and complex construction processes that this divine figure went through, led her to accumulate several features, which in turn made her patron of numerous domains: royal power, war, abundance, love, and sex, to quote just a few (Almeida, 2015).

Her insatiable ambition for power led to a challenging behaviour, which provoked several

conflicts with other deities, and some setbacks in her divine life. The Sumerian composition *Inanna’s descent to the netherworld* (ETCSL 1.4.1)<sup>5</sup> and the Akkadian song *Agušaya Hymn* (Foster, 2005, pp. 78-88) stand as excellent examples of such defiant and problematic character, which requires Enki/Ea intervention.

The first narrative depicts the journey of the goddess to the realm of the dead, which was ruled by her divine sister, Ereškigal. Inanna/Ištar’s main goal was to gain control over this subterranean domain, enlarging her already powerful cosmic sovereignty, as she was the “Queen of Heaven and Earth”.

However, usurpation was considered a capital crime in Mesopotamia, given the belief that kingship descended from heavens, and thus earthly rulers were chosen by deities to govern in their name.

Accordingly, the goddess’ attempt to usurp her sister’s throne, “which were assigned to Ereškigal by the great gods (...) is not merely an offense against Ereškigal, but also a violation of the world order, and, therefore, an offense against the great gods who determine the world order” (Katz, 2003, p. 403). Consequently, the goddess is imprisoned in the netherworld, suffering a kind of death, which prevents her to return to her earthly and heavenly functions.

Thus, it becomes imperative to save Inanna/Ištar. Her minister, Ninšubur, rushes off to the presence of the great gods Enlil and Nanna/Sîn (the moon God and father of Inanna/Ištar) asking for their help. However, because of the gravity of her offence, both gods dismiss Ninšubur. It is then that the minister turns to Enki/Ea, who decides to help in the matter. From a piece of mud, that he removes from the tip of his fingernail, Enki/Ea creates the *kurgarra* and the *galaturra*, two creatures of undefined sex, who are sent to the netherworld with a life-giving plant and water, respectively (ETCSL 1.4.1, Is 220-223). Moreover, the god carefully instructs them on how to act in front of Ereškigal. Following Enki/Ea’s plan, Inanna/Ištar is successfully brought to life and can begin the process of escaping the netherworld.

Contrary to *Inanna’s descent to the netherworld*, which is very well preserved in several copies, the *Agušaya Hymn* survived to the present day in very few and fragmented tablets. This prevents a complete understanding of the episodes, though it is possible to grasp its general themes and meanings. The song opens with a praise to the martial features of Inanna/Ištar, but as the composition goes on, her warrior character appears

that this term better suits the strength, astute and technological ability that this god manifests.

5 There is also an Akkadian composition with the same

theme, *The Descent of Ištar to the netherworld* (Dalley, 2000, pp. 154-162). About their differences and similarities, see Almeida, 2012.

excessive and unrestrained, which seems to provoke some preoccupation in the divine assembly.

After a long gap, we find Enki/Ea reacting to Inanna/Ištar's uproar (Foster, 2005, tab. I, col. iv, ls. 19-20), but a long hiatus in the song prevent us of identifying his first actions. Bottéro suggests that in this gap, Enki/Ea presented a contingency plan to the divine assembly: to create a double of the goddess, who would confront, win and humiliate her, and consequently control her intimidating character (Bottéro & Kramer 1989, p. 207). In fact, when the narrative is resumed, Enki/Ea is describing the incredible strength and warrior skills this double would have. The divine assembly is, thus, convinced and delegates the task of fashioning the creature to Enki/Ea, given he was the only one capable of performing such a mission.

Like in *Inana's descent to the netherworld*, Enki takes a piece of mud from the tip of his fingernail, and creates Šaltu, the discordance, as the double of Inanna/Ištar, the warrior. He then carefully instructs the creature to prepare her for the confrontation (Foster, 2005, tab. I, col. vi, ls. 20-26). Unfortunately, the passage regarding the clash between the two is too fragmented, so we do not know exactly what happened. But when the composition is resumed, Inanna/Ištar appears offended and asks Enki/Ea to make Šaltu disappear. The god attends to her request, only because her warrior defiant character is finally controlled. Again, the order is restored through Enki/Ea's efforts.

In both narratives, Inanna/Ištar's actions and behaviour constitute a menace to the cosmic order: in the first one, her imprisonment in the netherworld disables her to act as patron deity of her earthly and heavenly domains; in the second, her uncontrolled warrior side can spread war through the land, bringing chaos both to humans and deities. As the wisest of all the divine beings, Enki/Ea is the first to understand the threats and the first (and probably the only one able) to quickly react to them.

The association with the pure waters and cosmic abundance gives him the fertility skills needed to create new beings, and even to hold the life-giving plant and water, which enables to restore the goddess's life. However, it is his creative intelligence that allows him to design the successful plots.

The undefined sex of the *kurgarra* and the *galaturra* did not happen by chance, given that it allowed blurring their identity, which helped them to fulfil their task in the realm of the dead. In fact, Enki/Ea instructs them to pass the netherworld gates like phantoms (sic) and to take advantage of Ereškigal's doubt about their true nature (ETCSL 1.4.1, 226-245). Through this confusion, they would

attract the goddess's attention, and then, by lamenting themselves for the queen of the dead's suffering, they would make her appeased by their presence (ETCSL 1.4.1, 263-272).

Their behaviour shows close resemblances to the ones of the male *gala*, the Mesopotamian professional cultic mourners, which were usually depicted with no beard, long hair, and gender-neutral apparel. They were also referred to as intoning their lamentations for the deceased in the Sumerian dialect *emesal*, which was used by feminine voices in literature. Cohen suggests that this ambiguous behaviour had an apotropaic significance: by confusing the limits of gender identity, they were protected on their liminal function between life and death (Cohen, 2005, p. 55). In the same way, the undefined identity of the *kurgarra* and the *galaturra*, and their sympathetic conduct towards Ereškigal would protect them while in the realm of the dead, allowing the successful execution of their mission.

On what concerns Šaltu, it is important to notice how carefully Enki/Ea instructed this creature about Inanna/Ištar's idiosyncrasies, which for sure gave her leverage when the confrontation occurred. The arrogant goddess was probably struck by the existence of a perfectly designed double. In fact, she furiously shouted to Enki/Ea: "Why did you create Šaltu against me (...) The daughter of Ningal is unique!" (Foster, 2005, Tab. II, col. v, ls. 4 and 7).

Hence, the way both plans were orchestrated manifest an ingenious mind at work, that knows and uses the weaknesses of his adversaries (the suffering of Ereškigal and the arrogance of Inanna/Ištar), through the creation of beings that closely follow his sage instructions.

A last note about these creatures must be made: Enki/Ea fashioned them from the mud, that is, clay, a perishable material that dictates their finite existence. After fulfilling their mission, the *kurgarra* and the *galaturra* go absent from the narrative, and as for Šaltu, as we have seen, she is destroyed upon Inanna/Ištar's request. Simultaneously, clay is the ubiquitous material of the "land between the rivers" that was used by Mesopotamians to shape every building, every day-to-day utensil, every written tablet... Likewise, Enki/Ea makes wonders with this cheap raw material.

## 5. Enki/Ea, the divine strike, and the noisy humankind

In the Akkadian composition *Atrahasis* (Dalley, 2000, pp. 1-38) the resourceful skills of Enki/Ea are, again, summoned to restore cosmic order. The narrative begins in a time where there were no humans, and where a group of deities, the Igigi, "did the work, bore the load", while another group, the Annunaki, received the products of that labour

(Dalley, 2005, Tab. I, l. 2). This divine social order lasted for so many years that the Igigi became profoundly tired, disturbed and angry. At some point, they decided to confront the Annunaki, stopping the work, and declaring war to the *status quo*.

The divine universe was on the verge of a conflict, which could have cosmic consequences if not stopped in time. Hence, an urgent reunion of the great Annunaki was called. Upon a clamorous debate, Enki/Ea made his voice heard and defended the cause of the Igigi (Dalley, 2005, tab I, ls. 42-43). He then offered a solution: the creation of humankind to substitute the Igigi in the hard labour. Together with the goddess responsible for the principles of maternity, Enki/Ea fashioned the first seven pairs of humans from clay, promptly resolving a divine/cosmic crisis.

Many years after this, the humans multiplied and became so noisy that the sleep of Enlil was disturbed. In an impetuous rage, he decided to annihilate the creatures, by cursing them with a mortal disease. Upon such catastrophe, Atrahasis, a man of the city of Šuruppak (modern Tell Fara, Iraq), called for Enki/Ea's help. The wise god, probably foreseeing the cosmic threat the destruction of humans entailed, and taking pity on humans, gave instructions to appease the patron god of the illness, by means of offerings. The plan was successful, and many years later the humans had multiplied again, and once more, were extremely noisy...

After several episodes like the one summarised above, Enlil was furious. Suspecting that humans had divine help, he made the divine assembly swear secrecy about his newest plan: he would send a torrent, a storm and a flood that would forever silence humans, for they would return to clay. Wise Enki/Ea's, again foreseeing chaotic consequences, found himself trapped in the oath of secrecy. However, he quickly found unconventional means to solve his problem: he would give all the necessary instructions to Atrahasis survive the flood, by pretending to speak to a reed wall. The Šuruppak's hero was thus advised to build a boat, where he was to protect himself, his family and his cattle when the diluvial waters stroke.

The event, which lasted for seven days and nights, was so terrifying that even deities searched shelter in heavens. When the waters finally retreated, no human was to be seen, except for Atrahasis. Following Enki/Ea's instructions, he made a sacrifice to the gods and goddesses, who were so starving that they quickly devoured the offering. After this, Enlil was finally appeased, and resumed the good relations with humankind, given that he understood the imperative need for human existence. Several mechanisms to control human population were created to prevent their excessive

multiplication, and a new era for the relationship between deities and humans begun.

Through this mythic construction, the Mesopotamians explained when, why and how they come to existence: humans were created to solve a cosmic crisis, as substitutes for the divine workers. Though mortals, given the perishable material used for their creation, they could multiply and live a prosperous existence, but only if they kept their divine architects appeased. On their side, deities would refrain from destroying them.

For the present argument, it is interesting to compare Enki/Ea's role in this composition with the ones displayed in the previous narratives. The several menaces to cosmic order (the divine strike, the curses sent to destroy humanity, and the flood) are quickly foreseen by the god, who is the first and probably the only one able to prevent them. Contrary to his fellow divine companions, Enki/Ea does not react impetuously, but with common sense and reason.

Similarly, his ingenious plot takes advantage of the weaknesses of his opponents, in this case, their lust for offerings, but also Enlil's naivety on the arrangement of the oath's secrecy terms. Finally, the solution for the divine strike is achieved by fashioning mortal creatures from the clay. However, given the interminable mission, humans were to carry on, the relation between the god and these creatures appears more intimate, and durable. Enki/Ea is not only the creator of humans but also their divine champion.

## 6. Enki/Ea's weaknesses – a realistic approach to wisdom?

So far, the god of wisdom appears as an orderly and mature figure, who predicts and solves cosmic crises, in ingenious ways. However, in the above-mentioned narratives *Enki and Ninḫursaĝa*, *Enki and Ninmaḥ* and *Inana and Enki*, we find a different side of the god, where he acts carelessly, impetuously and even violently.

In the first one, Enki/Ea is astounded by the sight of the young and beautiful Ninisig, his and Ninḫursaĝa's daughter. In a rampant act, he rapes her, impregnating her with Ninkura. Later, when the god sees the young and beautiful Ninkura, he repeats his violent act, originating Ninimma, who, in time, is also raped and impregnated by the god. In this composition, the wise and orderly Enki/Ea is depicted in an uncontrolled and violent sexual spree, perpetrating a serious crime, according to the Mesopotamian legal compilations (Sanmartín, 1999, p. 123).

In the second narrative, Enki/Ea and the goddess Ninmaḥ embark on a creative competition, after having drunk too much beer. They fashioned beings with disabilities, having to decree good fates for each other's creatures. Here, Enki/Ea appears

rather arrogant, and excessively proud of his creative powers, while in an alcoholic haze.

In the third one, Enki/Ea is stunned at the sight of the amazing beauty of Inanna/Ištar. To seduce her, he offers a feast, plenty of wine and beer. Soon, completely inebriated, Enki/Ea offers the me to the goddess, who is clearly taking advantage of the god's weaknesses to feminine allure and liquor. When he sobers up, he understands his fault, but it was too late to reverse his reckless action.

When analysed together, Enki/Ea's nature and behaviour in mythic literature seems contradictory: on the one hand, he is the wise and cunning deity, who finds unconventional and pragmatic means to restore order; on the other, he indulges himself in sexual and alcoholic splurges, which makes him a condemnable menace to others and even to himself.

However, it is our understanding that this does not constitute a contradiction. The logical and messy behaviour of the god of wisdom perfectly corresponds to the delicate cosmic balance between order and chaos of the Mesopotamian mental framework. It should be recalled that, accordingly to *Enūma eliš*, the cosmos was created from a chaotic primaeval aquatic mass; and according to *Atrahasis*, the menace of returning to that chaotic state (through the flood) impelled a new cosmic era. Likewise, both deities and humans were prone to clash between orderly and chaotic behaviours.

In what intelligence is concerned, the archetypical divine figure of such notion was inventive, original, and extremely pragmatic, finding solutions by actively operating within reality. However, because Enki/Ea ingenious agency found its roots in that reality, he was also prone to its temptations, and to deviate himself from the order he tutelages, to begin with.

Hence, through the exam of Enki/Ea's dual nature, one can argue that, for the Mesopotamians, intelligence and creativity were not locked in an ivory tower but sprung from the everyday capacity to deal with a reality that moved back and forth, between order and chaos.

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