

Enuma Elish

The Epic of Creation

The *Epic of Creation* is named an epic in a sense quite different to that of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Here is no struggle against fate, no mortal heroes, no sense of suspense over the outcome of events. The success of the hero-god Marduk (in the Babylonian version, Assur in the Assyrian version) is a foregone conclusion. None of the good gods is injured or killed; no tears are shed. Yet cosmic events are narrated: the earliest generations of gods are recounted leading up to the birth of the latest hero-god; the forces of evil and chaos are overcome, whereupon the present order of the universe can be established, with its religious centres, its divisions of time, its celestial bodies moving according to proper rules, and with mankind invented to serve the gods. The gods themselves behave in an orderly fashion: they assemble, discuss, agree, and elect their leaders in a gathering of males; after Tiamat's primeval parturition and the spawning of monsters, goddesses play no part in creating the civilized world, not even in creating mankind.

DATE OF COMPOSITION

The date of the epic cannot be fixed precisely. Tablets on which the work was written date mainly to the first millennium, and the epic continued well into the Seleucid period when it was used by Berossus in his *Babyloniaca*, and was still known in the fifth to sixth centuries AD, when the writer Damascius quoted from Berossus. But the tradition must be earlier. No date can be given to the hymnic-epic dialect in which it was written, for such dialectic features are not found in any groups of non-literary or more easily datable inscriptions. It is usually assumed that the version featuring Marduk is primary and the version featuring Assur is secondary, for no traces of Assyrian dialect are apparent. Although plenty of literary texts of the early second millennium have been found, none of them contains the *Epic of Creation*, but this, of course, is an argument from silence. A

surprising lack of textual variation is to be found in the tablets, which came from a variety of sites and periods. This may be explained either as indicating that composition is relatively late, and that there is no oral background; or as showing that a text became 'canonized' if it was used for a particular ritual, as this epic was. When Sennacherib described scenes from the epic with which he decorated the doors of the Temple of the New Year Festival, he included details which are not found in the extant version, such as that the god Amurru was Assur's charioteer, and so we may deduce that there were indeed different versions in circulation.

If it is correct that the version with Marduk is the original one, the epic cannot have been composed before the reign of Sumula-el (1936-1901 bc), an Amorite ruler under whom Babylon, with Marduk as its patron-god, first achieved eminence. Unfortunately, nothing is yet known of literary activity, style, or dialect during his rule. Hammurabi's reign (1848-1806 bc) has been suggested as a possibility, but there are no allusions to the epic in the poetic prologue and epilogue to his great Code of Laws, nor does that work contain features of the hymnic-epic dialect. The next possibility comes from the reign of an early Kassite king Agum-Kakrime in the sixteenth century, under whom the cult statue of Marduk was brought back from years in captivity and reinstated in Babylon. Such an occasion is likely to have inspired the composition of new hymns, and an inscription of that king described new doors for the temple as being decorated with composite monsters similar to those who join Tiamat's army in the epic. But they are not exactly the same, and some scholars have questioned the authenticity of the inscription; it may have been written several centuries later as a pious fraud, although a motive for such deception is hard to find. The reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104 bc) has also been suggested, during which the cult statue of Marduk was returned once again from captivity, and Marduk is attested with the title 'King of the gods', but there is now good evidence to show that such a date for composition is too low. A lexical text known as *An-Anum* lists the major gods of the Babylonian pantheon together with their secondary names by assimilation and some of their epithets. A long section with the names of Marduk includes a subsection that corresponds very closely indeed to the