

Definition: **Tiamat** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

In the mythology and religion of Mesopotamia, the primordial salt-water goddess whose death at the hands of Marduk gives rise to the creation of the world.

Summary Article: **TIAMAT**

From *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*

According to the Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish*, the goddess Tiamat was the embodiment of the original watery chaos of the universe. She was a gigantic dragonlike creature who personified the saltwater (the ocean) or the "saltwater abyss" at the beginning of time. As the primeval mother, she also represented the forces of disorder and chaos in the universe.

The best-known version of the *Enuma Elish* was written on seven clay tablets in cuneiform (a writing system that used wedge-shaped characters) in the 12th century BCE. The tablets were found in the middle of the 19th century in the ruins of the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (reigned 668–627 BCE) in Nineveh—the capital of ancient Assyria (in modern northern Iraq)—and were published soon after.

The first tablet of the *Enuma Elish* introduced the various deities of the pre-creation universe, which was watery and chaotic. Apsu was the god of fresh (sweet) water, and Tiamat was the goddess of salt water. As god of fresh water, Apsu represented the life-giving power of moisture. Tiamat, on the other hand, represented the destructive power of salt water, which kills land plants and provides no refreshment for the thirsty. Everything in the primordial darkness was swirling, but Apsu was regarded as being more controlled, like rain or riverwater, while Tiamat was chaotic and unpredictable, like the ocean.

The first gods come forth

The two waters joined and produced Anshar and Kishar, gods of the horizon. Anshar and Kishar produced Anu, god of sky, who in turn fathered Ea (also known as Enki) by the mother goddess Nammu. Ea married Damkina, who was probably another version of the mother goddess.

While Apsu and Tiamat together represented rest and inertia, the new gods stood for energy and activity. They were too noisy for Apsu, and were disrespectful, too. He planned to destroy all his descendants but was preempted by Ea, who killed his great-grandfather. Ea and Damkina then built their home on Apsu's body—just in time for Damkina to give birth to Marduk.

Marduk, patron god of the city of Babylon, was the god of spring. He was symbolized both by sunlight and lightning. As god of lightning, he was connected with the other storm gods such as Baal. Instead of the chaos and violence of wind and rain, however, Marduk came to represent peace and order.

Tiamat is enraged

Meanwhile, Tiamat had become disturbed by the waves created by the new gods. Although she had counseled Apsu not to kill their offspring, she was enraged at the murder of her husband. She had not

helped Apsu when Ea killed him, and was now being reproached for this by the other old gods. Vowing to have revenge, she created 11 monsters—serpents and dragons. Tiamat then took a new husband, Kingu, firstborn of the monsters, and put him in charge of her newly assembled army.

Just as Ea had detected the plans of Apsu, he now realized that Tiamat was preparing to do battle against the young gods. Anshar, god of the horizon, commanded Ea to do something about the planned attack. Ea tried to stop the goddess before she unleashed on the other gods the destructive forces she had assembled, but he was not successful. Anu also attempted to persuade Tiamat not to fight, but failed. The gods concluded that none of them could get close to Tiamat and escape with his life—none, that is, except Marduk.

Ea told his son that it was his destiny to overthrow Tiamat. Marduk replied that he would be happy to overthrow the apparently unstoppable monster, provided his conditions were met. These were that he would become ruler of all the gods and head of the pantheon over Anu.

The council of the gods tested Marduk's powers by asking him to conjure up a garment, destroy it, and then bring it back. After he passed the test, the council enthroned Marduk as high king and supreme commander. In addition, they gave him powerful magical weapons: a club, a net, bow and arrows, and seven destructive storm winds. These winds were the evil wind, whirlwind, dust storm, four wind, seven wind, cyclone, and irresistible wind.

Marduk's battle with Tiamat

When they first saw Tiamat, Marduk and his helpers were awestruck and afraid. Marduk recovered quickly, however, and raised a fierce storm. After entangling Tiamat in a net, he unleashed the evil wind. When she opened her mouth to devour him, the evil wind inflated Tiamat and she was rendered helpless. While his opponent was incapacitated, Marduk killed her with an arrow, splitting her belly. He captured the other gods and monsters who were her allies, and took the tablets of fate (destiny) that Kingu had held and gave them to Anu.



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The Tigris River, one of two great rivers marking the borders of the ancient kingdom of Mesopotamia, was said to flow from Tiamat's eye.

After smashing Tiamat's head with a club, Marduk split her dead body in half. He made one half into the

sky and the other into the earth. Marduk arranged the stars and other heavenly bodies and then turned his attention to the land. Using some dust created by his grandfather, Anu, he proceeded to mold the landscape of the earth. Tiamat's head became a mountain, with two streams of water running from her eyes. These streams were the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which gave Mesopotamia its name in Roman times—"Land between the rivers." The goddess's nostrils became lakes and her breasts were hills. Marduk tied her dragon's tail in a knot and used it as a plug to keep the waters of Apsu from flooding the world. Although the waters of the abyss needed to be controlled, some moisture was required on the earth, so Marduk created rain for the earth from the spittle of Tiamat.

The Creation of the Heavens

Marduk built dwelling places for the other gods in the heavens. As they took their places, they established the days and months and seasons of the year. The homes of the gods were the constellations, especially those of the zodiac. These 12 signs made up the 12 months of the year. The phases of the moon determined the cycles of the months, creating the calendar that we still use today.

The sky also had barriers to keep back the waters of chaos. Marduk measured Apsu, the watery world where he was born, and created the Esharra, an area in the sky of equal size. This would become the dwelling place of Anu, Ea, and the other gods.

The gods punished Kingu by tying him up and slashing his arteries. From the blood of Kingu, mixed with dust from the earth, the gods created humans, who were intended to work for the gods. Thus, according to the Babylonian myth, a little bit of Tiamat, monster of the saltwater abyss, flows through the veins of all humans.

A Babylonian protagonist

Like the Assyrians before them, the Babylonians ruled a vast empire in southwestern Asia. Both the Assyrian and Babylonian cultures absorbed many elements, particularly religion and mythology, from the older Sumerian civilization (Sumeria was located in the southern part of what is today Iraq). The Sumerian myths and gods were integrated with the pantheons of the various groups that followed, including the Akkadians, Assyrians, and Babylonians. Tiamat, however, appears only in the Babylonian version of the creation stories.

See also: BAAL; CALENDARS; CREATION MYTHS; ENKI; ENLIL; MARDUK; MESOPOTAMIA.

Further reading

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