

# ONE POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE EARLY SUMERIAN PANTHEONON

Peeter Espak

Abū Ṣalābīkh and Fāra God Lists are long known primary sources of interpreting the earliest truly known hypothetical Sumerian pantheon or its relative structure. The latest longer analysis of the lists was conducted by Jan Lisman<sup>1</sup> who bases his analysis of mythology largely on the theories of Jan van Dijk and the existence of the so-called chthonic and cosmic motives in the early Sumerian mythology. According to van Dijk, the different traditions, possibly belonging also to different tribal groups or nations having different ways of life (farming versus cattle-breeding or desert life) might be under question as the causers of the different creation myths.<sup>2</sup> The current author has previously<sup>3</sup> argued that the two motives can be interpreted as different developmental phases inside the Sumerian religion. Heaven and Earth are often sacred divine elements for the most of the ancient mythologies and peoples. During the course of development, the younger generation of gods takes over as the active head of the divine pantheon. For example, Enki can be interpreted representing a secondary development in Sumerian religion. Alongside the mother-goddess with whom he is always paired in mythology (who hypothetically represents the secondary development of the mother-earth Ki), Enki acts just like the sky god An in Ukg. 15 myth when he impregnates the mother-goddess Ninhursag in the Enki and Ninhursag text; or is making the earth fertile in different accounts.

<sup>1</sup> Jan J. W. **Lisman**, *Cosmogony, Theogony and Anthropogeny in Sumerian Texts. Alter Orient und Altes Testament 409* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013), 83ff.

<sup>2</sup> Jan van **Dijk**, “Le motif cosmique dans la pensée sumérienne” – *Acta Orientalia* 28 (1964), 58–59.

<sup>3</sup> Peeter **Espak**, *The God Enki in Sumerian Royal Ideology and Mythology* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015), 149.

From Neo-Sumerian sources, for example, the Ur-Ninurta B hymn demonstrates no sharp distinctions between the so-called chthonic and cosmic motives (lines B, 8–12):

<sup>17</sup>i digna <sup>17</sup>buranuna ka kù-bi du<sub>8</sub>-ù nì giri<sub>17</sub>-zal si-si<sup>4</sup>  
 dungu sír-re a `é-ǰál-la šúm-mu a-gàr-ra šèǰ-šèǰ  
<sup>d</sup>é zina ab-sín-na saǰ íl-íl-i ú-šim edin-na TAR [...] x  
 pú<sup>-ieš</sup>kiri<sub>6</sub> lâl ǰeštin ki tag-ga tir-gen<sub>7</sub> sud-sud-e  
 an lugal diǰir-re-e-ne-ke<sub>4</sub> á-bi mu-e-da-a-áǰ

*The holy mouths of the Tigris and Euphrates to keep open, to fill them with joy  
 Dense clouds to give water abundantly, to rain over the fields  
 To make Ezina (grain) in his furrows to lift the head, the greenery of the steppe  
 To make gardens of syrup and vines to grow as forests  
 An, the king of the gods, has ordered (Enki) to do that*

Enki is here pictured as following the orders of An in making the earth fertile. He does not represent any specific Eridu tradition theology in opposition to Nippur theology.<sup>5</sup> It might be said that there is no traceable “rivalry” between the theologies of two gods Enlil and Enki. The gods act to achieve different goals only in the mythological narrative. In several royal hymns and myths Enki is titled “the junior or small Enlil” and having all the powers of his slightly more important brother Enlil. The sources picture Enki and Enlil both as major Sumerian gods who are responsible for the organising the world order. Enlil’s primary function is to act as the granter of political power. Enki, in turn, is seen as the productive manager of earth, caretaker of its fertility and developer of human civilisation. Several conflicting opinions of Enlil and Enki in – for example in the Flood Stories – seem to be mythological motives of an ancient “action story” and they seem not to represent any rivalry between different theological schools.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Esther **Flückiger-Hawker**, *Urnamma of Ur in Sumerian Literary Tradition. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 166 (Freiburg: University Fribourg Switzerland; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 183–203.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Peeter **Espak**, “Was Eridu The First City in Sumerian Mythology?” – *Studia Orientalia Tartuensia*. Tartu: Tartu University Press, 53–70.

<sup>6</sup> See: Espak, *The God Enki*, 200f.

Also the earlier god lists can be analysed in terms of not “different schools / layers of mythology” but in their actual possible situation. The SF 23 list from Fāra lists seven divine pairs headed by Enki and Ninki. Enlil and Ninlil are given as the second pair and then follow five en and nin pairs. Similar order is followed in the Abū Ṣalābikh list with slight variations – a pair en-an and nin-an is added<sup>7</sup>:

SF 23:<sup>8</sup> 1–22

en-ki	nin-ki
en-líl	nin-KID
en-U...	nin-U...
en-bùlug	nin-bùlug
en-du <sub>6</sub> -udua <sub>x</sub>	nin-du <sub>6</sub> -udua <sub>x</sub>
en-gukkal	nin-gukkal
en-á	nin-á

OIP 99:<sup>9</sup> 82, v. i 1–24

<sup>d</sup> en-ki	<sup>d</sup> nin-ki
<sup>d</sup> en-líl	<sup>d</sup> nin-KID
<sup>d</sup> en-U...	<sup>d</sup> nin-U...
<sup>d</sup> en-bùlug	<sup>d</sup> nin-bùlug
<sup>d</sup> en-udua <sub>x</sub>	<sup>d</sup> nin-udua <sub>x</sub>
<sup>d</sup> en-gukkal	<sup>d</sup> n[in]- <sup>-</sup> gukkal <sup>2</sup>
<sup>d</sup> -en-á <sup>2</sup>	<sup>d</sup> nin- <sup>-</sup> á <sup>2</sup>
<sup>d</sup> en-an	[ <sup>d</sup> ]nin-an

tùr

gírid

NI.NA

<sup>-</sup>LA<sup>2</sup>.TIM

SAL.KID

MEN

AN.inanna

<sup>d</sup>nin-šubur<sup>d</sup>lugal-<sup>-</sup>BU.NUN-gána-x<sup>2</sup><sup>d</sup>NÁM.K[<sup>IŠ</sup>]<sup>d</sup>MÛŠ x PA<sup>d</sup>lugal-<sup>ieš</sup>asal<sub>x</sub> (TU.GAB.LIŠ)<sup>d</sup>amar-utu

AN.nisaba

<sup>7</sup> Peeter **Espak**. “Some Early Developments in Sumerian God-Lists and Pantheon” – *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 390(1) (2011). Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 47–58.

<sup>8</sup> Pietro **Mander**. *Il pantheon di Abu Ṣalābikh. Contributo allo studio del pantheon sumerico arcaico*. Istituto Universitario Orientale, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, Series Minor 26. (Napoli, 1986), 109.

<sup>9</sup> Mander, *Il pantheon di Abu Ṣalābikh*, 9–10, 66–67 and Amedo **Alberti**, *Reconstruction of the Abū Ṣalābikh God-Lists. – Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico* 2 (1985), 12–13.

In both of the lists, the later known major gods of Sumer are listed after the en and nin pairs. The first divine figure after the primordial en/nin gods seems to be the mother-goddess. The Abū Šalābikh list adds <sup>d</sup>en-an and <sup>d</sup>nin-an to the seven pairs mentioned in the Fāra list. It might be a sort of a theological speculation for adjusting the system of the list with the mythology according to which the world was created as a result of the intercourse of An and Ki – heaven and earth.<sup>10</sup> When the cult or a “picture” of the mother-goddess earth Ki and the great sky-god An had already been overshadowed by later mythology, the scribes try to explain the <sup>d</sup>en-ki – <sup>d</sup>nin-ki and <sup>d</sup>en-an – <sup>d</sup>nin-an (when to read them as Lords of Heaven / Ladies of Heaven) as primordial divine powers manifested and contained in the images of earth and sky.

However other texts usually<sup>11</sup> do not mention the en-an / nin-an pair and if such a combination of beings ever was meant is therefore doubtful. The Mari god list, for example, only mentions en and nin of “the holy mound” and the parents of Enlil (lines 17–20): <sup>d</sup>en-du<sub>6</sub>-kù-ga dnin-du<sub>6</sub>-kù-ga / <sup>d</sup>en ama a-a <sup>d</sup>en-líl-lá <sup>d</sup>nin ama a-a <sup>d</sup>en-líl-lá / <sup>d</sup>en-me-šár-ra <sup>d</sup>nin-me-šár-ra.<sup>12</sup>

At least when to use imaginative speculation, one way of interpreting the Abu Salabikh list would be the following. The primeval universe before the separation of An and Ki was seen as an embryonic entity containing all kinds of different divine creatures manifested symbolized in the male-female pairs en-ki / nin-ki and en-an / nin-an – all primeval creatures present in both later female earth and male sky. In this universe “before time” also several other divine powers or “ideas” existed – including the god Enlil and his spouse. Adding Enlil and Ninlil as the second pair of the list testifies that both the lists are certainly stemming from the mythology already seeing Enlil as the main granter of kingship and the most important

<sup>10</sup> For the newest treatments, see Gonzalo **Rubio**. “Time before Time: Primeval Narratives in Early Mesopotamian Literature” – *Time and History in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the 56th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Barcelona 26–30 July*. Lluís Feliu, Jaume Llop, A. Millet Albà, Joaquin Sanmartín, eds. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 5ff.

<sup>11</sup> See: den-an-na and dnin-an-na in TCL 15 as the 14<sup>th</sup> pair in Jan van Dijk. *Le motif cosmique dans la pensée sumérienne*, fig. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Wilfred G. **Lambert**, “A List of Gods’ Names Found at Mari” – *Miscellanea Babylonica, Mélanges Offerts à Maurice Birot.* Jean Marie Durand, Jean Robert Kupper, eds. (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1985), 182.

god in that sense. Are the theories considering Enlil a “newcomer” to the Sumerian pantheon correct and Enki the “original head of the pantheon” is of course unknown.<sup>13</sup> At least the ordering of Abu Salabikh list does not differ much from the myths of Ukg. 15 or the Barton Cylinder, if to consider the interpretation of the divine named “Lord/Lady Heaven”<sup>14</sup> correct.

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Xianhua **Wang**, *The Metamorphosis of Enlil in Early Mesopotamia*. *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 385 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag), 16–19; Espak, *The God Enki*, 189ff.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Rubio, “Time before Time”, 6; Mander, *Il pantheon di Abu Sālabikh*, 60; Espak, *The God Enki*, 147–148.