



Little Door to the Nineteenth of December

The Creation of Humans in Sumerian Mythology

The Sumerians have fascinated me for a long time now and it is always exciting to learn about these ancient people! I hope to spark your curiosity too with this long excerpt:

*The gods were dredging the rivers,
were piling up their silt
on projecting bends--
and the gods lugging the clay
began complaining (Jacobsen, Harps 154)*

Nammu, who is either the sea or the goddess of the riverbed, goes to her son Enki, who is asleep in the deep (the Apsu) and entreats him to rise from his bed and "fashion servants of the gods" (Kramer, History Begins 109). Enki, who after all is the god of wisdom, thinks of the germinating powers of the clay and water of the abyss, and he tells Nammu to have some womb-goddesses pinch off this clay and have some "princely fashioners" thicken it, so she can mold it or give birth to it:

*Mix the heart of the clay that is over the abyss,
The good and princely fashioners will thicken
the clay,
You, [Nammu] do you bring the limbs into ex-
istence;
Ninmah [earth-mother or birth goddess] will
work above you,
The goddesses [of birth] . . . will stand by you
at your fashioning;
O my mother, decree its [the newborn's] fate,
Ninmah will bind upon it the image (?) of the
gods,
It is man (Kramer, History Begins 109)*

Jacobsen translates these apparently difficult to decipher lines somewhat differently, seeing a "birth chair" where Kramer sees the "image" of the gods. Jacobsen's translation also

stresses that the fashioning of the newborn imitates in some way the growth of a fetus in the womb. Jacobsen translates the moment of birth like this (words and letters in brackets represent gaps in the original text):

*[Without] the sperm
of a ma[le]
she gave [birth]
to offspri[ng.],
to the [em]bryo
of mankind. (Harps 157)*

Thus man was created to relieve the gods of their work. The gods then decide to have a feast to celebrate their new creation, and Enki and Ninmah begin to drink beer and start "to feel good inside."

There's also a cool part where Enki finds a place in society for even the most handicapped people.