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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH



A NEW TRANSLATION
ANALOGUES
CRITICISM

Translated and Edited by
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THE SUMERIAN
GILGAMESH POEMS

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GILGAMESH

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WILLIAM MORAN

The Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia†

Gilgamesh is overwhelming . . . and I consider it the greatest thing one can experience. From time to time I tell its story to this one and that one, the whole story—and every time I have the most astonished listeners. The synthesis of [G.] Burckhardt [author of a free translation of the epic] is not altogether happy; it doesn't achieve the greatness and significance [of the epic]. I feel I tell the story better. It has meaning for me. It involves me.

*(Letter of Rainer Maria Rilke
to Katherine Kippenberg, 11 December 1916)*

The Sumerian Background

According to Sumerian tradition, Gilgamesh (originally Bilgamesh)¹ was an early ruler in the city-state of Uruk (Warka, biblical Erech). The evidence, admittedly meager and indirect, puts him there around 2700 BCE, a period of intense intercity rivalries. Nothing is known of his actual achievements in this setting except perhaps what is reflected in the later tradition of Gilgamesh as heroic warrior and the builder of his city's walls. Not very long after his death, Gilgamesh appears in a god-list.

The memory of Gilgamesh lived on in the oral tradition of the Sumerians, especially at the court of Uruk, where he became the subject of heroic tales. How early these tales, and how many of them, may have been committed to writing is not known. The earliest compositions we have probably do not go back beyond the late third millennium. By that time, Gilgamesh had become a very popular figure, especially among the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur. As befits a hero, he has a distinguished parentage. His father, Lugalbanda, was another divinized ruler of Uruk, and his mother was the goddess Ninsun.

Gilgamesh is celebrated in a number of works, which in view of their length (115–450 lines) are perhaps better called lays rather than epics.² These lays contain themes and tales that would later reappear in the Babylonian epic. In one lay, Gilgamesh, accompanied by Enkidu and other retainers, in order to achieve the immortality that comes with heroic deeds, sets out to confront the monster Khuwawa in the Cedar

† From *Civilizations of The Ancient Near East*, Volume IV, pp. 2327–36. Edited by Jack M. Sasson. Reprinted by permission of The Gale Group.

1. Moran refers to a spelling in Sumerian [Editor].

2. By "lay" Moran means a simple narrative poem or ballad, less elaborate than an epic [Editor].

Forest. In another, Gilgamesh is the oppressor of Uruk, and Enkidu is trapped in, and must remain in, the underworld. In another, for reasons that are not clear, the goddess Inanna (Akkadian Ishtar) sends the Bull of Heaven against Gilgamesh. In yet another version, Gilgamesh protests against his mortality. While these are all independent compositions, they do manifest a certain unity. Death—the fear of death, everlasting fame as victory over death, life after death—is a common theme and distinctive of the late Sumerian Gilgamesh tradition. * * *

The Old Babylonian Version

Sometime early in the second millennium the various Gilgamesh traditions, Sumerian and perhaps Akkadian, oral or written, were sorted out, adapted, and profoundly transformed into either a single composition, which seems more probable, or a two-part cycle. This earlier version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has come to be known as the Old Babylonian Version. Though preserved only in fragments, it is clearly a work of great originality. Written in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian and not a mere translation from the Sumerian, it is poetry of remarkable freshness and simplicity. Its thousand or more lines, like Homer's *Odyssey*, are unified around a central character and a single pervasive theme—the hero's quest for immortality.

With occasional reliance on the later Standard Version, we can reconstruct the narrative line. After a brief hymn in praise of the hero, we are introduced to a Gilgamesh who, driven by his superhuman energies and powerful ambitions, has by his excessive and relentless demands on his people become their oppressor. In answer to the people's prayers, the gods create a match for Gilgamesh, someone of comparable strength, to refocus his energies and ambitions. This is Enkidu. They become friends, and soon Gilgamesh conceives a project that will bring him the immortality of undying fame, a battle with Khuwawa. Thus begins the journey to the Cedar Forest, the confrontation, and the victory.

The characterization of Enkidu here is new, but the Khuwawa adventure, with Enkidu a participant, is based on an earlier, Sumerian tradition. The Old Babylonian Version then goes its own, original way. Enkidu dies, undoubtedly as divine punishment for his part in the slaying of Khuwawa. This is one innovation, and another follows. Gilgamesh, confronted now with death in the person of a beloved friend, becomes consumed with grief and is suddenly riven with fear. Faced with the reality of death, he will now be content only with true immortality, the immortality reserved to the gods. Thus begins another journey, this one to the end of the world to find the lone exception to human mortality—Ut-napishtim (Old Babylonian Uta-napishtim, Su-

merian Ziusudra), the Babylonian Noah, the one survivor, along with his family, of the Flood.

After a long journey full of harrowing experiences, Gilgamesh finally reaches Ut-napishtim, at which point the reconstruction of the narrative becomes only partial at best. We still do not know exactly how the Old Babylonian Version ended. Certainly Gilgamesh failed in his quest for divine immortality and learned that his death was inevitable. But how did he react to this discovery? Did he return to Uruk, frustrated and embittered, a broken and tragic figure? Or did he, as in the later Standard Version (see below), recover some sense of purpose, of human goals, and of the satisfaction of human achievements? At present, these are questions for which there are no sure answers.

This long narrative seems to pivot on three seven-day periods, each of which is associated with a profound transformation, first of the nonhuman into the human, then of the human into the nonhuman, and finally of the nonhuman back into the human. These transformations are associated with corresponding rites of passage, especially those of cleansing and clothing. The underlying theme of evolution is evidently germane to a work that studies someone trying to come to terms with his humanity.

The first transformation is that of Enkidu. The Old Babylonian Enkidu is utterly different from the Sumerian Enkidu. As created by the gods, he is a savage, hairy wild man who lives on the steppe with the animals and acts as their friend. As described, he may ultimately reflect the myth and representations, dating as far back as the early third millennium, of the Bull-Man who fights the Naked Hero. More immediately, however, Enkidu is modeled on a concept of antiprimitivism found elsewhere in Sumerian, Babylonian, and classical sources. According to this notion, the beginning of human existence was neither a golden age nor a period of pristine simplicity. On the contrary, life was savage, and man differed little, if at all, from other animals. Primal man was a beast, and the Babylonian Enkidu was primal man *redivivus*,³ a figure who introduced into the epic a sharp nature-culture contrast that became a recurrent theme.

The humanization of Enkidu begins with seven days of uninterrupted lovemaking with a harlot sent into the steppe to seduce him. In one of the most amusing and lighthearted passages in Babylonian literature, the humanization proceeds as Enkidu is bathed, anointed, clothed, and then introduced to human fare—bread and beer. He drinks seven kegs of beer and breaks into song. At this point, he is introduced to shepherds, transitional figures who are, by definition, at

3. Moran uses here a Christian Latin term that means "who lives again," normally referring to Jesus, but used here in the sense of "revived" or "brought to life again" [Editor].

the outer edge of human society and urban life. Enkidu's humanization is complete when, having entered Uruk, he finally kneels in submission before Gilgamesh and acknowledges his kingship, the institution that in the Mesopotamian worldview was the sole guarantee of the guided, the ordered, the fully human life. Now fully human, Enkidu can become the friend of Gilgamesh, and the story can move into what we may call its heroic phase.

The second transformation occurs when, for seven days and seven nights, Gilgamesh grieves over the body of his dead friend, "until a maggot dropped from his nose." His friend gone, Gilgamesh refuses to end his grief or to put away the signs of grief. He does not wash; he puts on no fresh clothes. He will not be reintegrated into human society. Instead, his body covered with grime and wrapped in animal skins, he departs into the steppe. The transformation is radical. He who once voiced so eloquently the heroic ideal—declaring his contempt for death and chiding Enkidu for fearing it as long as there was the prospect of dying gloriously and unforgettably—now utterly rejects that ideal and all the values associated with it. Gilgamesh the hero is dead. Gilgamesh, the anti-man, the would-be god, appears.

The last seven-day period and last transformation, is reconstructed from the Standard Version. In view of the evidence for other, smaller periods of transformation in the Old Babylonian Version, however, it seems virtually certain that the Standard Version reflects the earlier tradition. To prove to Gilgamesh that he does not have the stuff of immortality, Ut-napishtim challenges him to stay awake for seven days. Gilgamesh accepts the challenge and immediately falls asleep—for seven days. Awakened and confronted with the facts, he finally yields, and in evidence of his inner transformation and of his at least grudging acceptance of his mortality, he allows himself to be bathed. His animal skins are cast off and carried away by the sea, and with a new cloak to cover him, Gilgamesh accepts his humanity.

Diffusion, Expansion, and Establishment of the Text

In the centuries that followed, knowledge of the epic spread into Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine. Fragments of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* both in the Babylonian language and in Hittite and Hurrian adaptations have been found, and they date to the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE. They establish the existence of a text that followed the Old Babylonian story at least in broad outline, but they also include what was probably material unknown to the earlier version, most notably Ishtar's sexual advances to Gilgamesh and the slaying of the Bull of Heaven. In other words, almost the entire narrative of the later Standard Version seems to be in place. At times, the language of the text is quite close to that of the older version; at others, it is closer to the language of the

Standard Version; at still others, it goes its own way. A stable story and a fluid text exist well into the late second millennium.

The Standard Version

Late in the second millennium Babylonian literature took on more or less stable forms. The text of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* seems to have been established around this time. Tradition credits this edition to a poet-editor by the name of Sin-leqe-unninni. * * * The text is known mainly from copies of the seventh century in the Nineveh library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, but substantial parts have also been found at other sites—Sultantepe, Nimrud (modern Kalkhu), Asshur (modern Qalat Sharqat), Babylon, Uruk—and in copies as late as the first century BCE. Known as the Standard Version—the existence of competing versions is doubtful—it was originally a work of about three thousand lines, traditionally distributed over eleven tablets; a twelfth tablet, a kind of appendix, was a later addition. At present, we possess about three-fifths of the original.

PROLOGUE

The Standard Version begins by repeating and expanding the prologue of the Old Babylonian Version. Line 27 (in the Kovacs translation quoted herein)⁴ has been identified as the first line of the latter; thus, lines 1–26 are a later addition, probably from the hand of Sin-leqe-unninni, and are meant to guide our understanding of the narrative that follows.

The earlier prologue, which perhaps contains later additions but certainly nothing dissonant, is a hymn to the unique strength, dignity, and kingship of Gilgamesh. He is first presented as a giant: "He was bigger than (all other) kings, in stature most renowned." (In the Hittite version, he was eleven cubits tall.) The text then goes on, for twenty lines, presenting origins that make him partly divine, his leadership, and his distant journeys. He is mighty, and his deeds are mighty.

How different the Gilgamesh of lines 1–26. In sharp contrast with the earlier hymn, this Gilgamesh suffers and is worn out: "He came back from a long journey and was weary." The feats celebrated in the hymn all become simply "wearying toil," and lest we forget this, just as we are about to begin the celebratory hymn, we are reminded that "Gilgamesh every hardship bore." This is another Gilgamesh, a more human Gilgamesh, a Gilgamesh who, however great his strength and however splendid his achievements, had to pay the price. Behind this expression of admiration are values different from those inspiring the ancient hymn.

4. Maureen Gallery Kovacs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989) [Editor].

Even more than the hero's sufferings, these opening lines stress his vast experience, knowledge, and wisdom. The very first words introduce Gilgamesh as "The one who saw all." Moreover, he was "possessed (?) of wisdom" and

Secret things he saw, hidden ones revealed.
Knowledge brought of days before the Flood.
(1.5-6)

Here again the later poet-editor complements and refocuses the hymn that follows. The earlier hero's long journeys are seen simply as feats of strength. Here they become sources of knowledge. Here, too, the hero is not only strong but wise, possessed of a quality of mind in the experiential and practical order that is a guide to action in all its manifold forms. This Gilgamesh not only has *emūqān*, physical strength, but *nēmēqu*, wisdom. In short, he is a complete king, something the earlier text did not make clear.

To prove his point and to illustrate this *nēmēqu*, the poet-editor addresses his reader. (It is important to note that the prologue addresses a second participant. The author is not a singer or a reciter but a writer, and his audience is not a group listening to him, but individuals, readers with tablet in hand.) The reader's attention is directed to one of Gilgamesh's most famous achievements, the great walls of Uruk and its renowned temple of the goddess Ishtar, "the like of which no king, no man, will ever build":

Go up on the walls and walk about.
Examine the terrace and study the brickwork,
If its brickwork be not all of baked bricks,
Its foundations not laid by the Seven Sages.
One *sar* city, one *sar* orchards, one *sar* pasture and
pond--and the fallow fields of Ishtar's house--
Three *sar* and fallow fields--Uruk you will see [?].
(1.17-22)

Here is a work of Gilgamesh's *nēmēqu*, conspicuous and resplendent, begun indeed with the assistance of the great and most ancient Seven Sages.

Before turning to the walls of Uruk, the poet-editor tells us two more important things about Gilgamesh. The first is that he is not just weary; he is "weary but at peace." This is a Gilgamesh who contrasts vividly with the Gilgamesh of the older narrative following. The earlier figure is totally unfamiliar with peace. His energies consume him, and he drives everyone around him to exhaustion. His heart is ascribed the wildness of a storm-demon, and even his mother complains of her son's "restless heart." All his projects, whether in Uruk or on his long cam-

paigns and journeys, bespeak anything but peace. Whence, then, this peaceful if weary man?

We are also told that Gilgamesh left a record of his labors: "From a far journey he returned, was weary but at peace. On stone chiseled each wearying toil." The walls having been celebrated, we--still readers, still alone--are told this (some uncertainty attaches to the translation of the beginning of some of these lines):

Find the copper chest.
Remove the locks of bronze.
Open the cover to the treasure there.
Take up and read diligently the tablet of lapis lazuli,
How he, Gilgamesh, every hardship bore.
(1.22-26)

There can be little doubt that the inscription chiseled on stone must be identified with the lapis lazuli tablet we are now instructed to read so diligently. In context, it does not seem likely that the two are distinct. Moreover, there is other evidence that kings were supposed to leave records of their labors and deposit them in chests (see below). Note, too, how strongly *kalū mānaḥṭi*, "each wearying toil," is echoed in sound and sense by what we are now told to read about on the tablet, *kalū marṣāti*, "every hardship" borne by Gilgamesh.

The object on which Gilgamesh writes is called a *narû*, often a "stela," freestanding and on public display, like the Code of Hammurabi stela.⁵ * * * But if the *narû* here is identical with the tablet, it is not a stela. Moreover, it lies in a chest, probably in the room of some temple (see below). By implying that the source for the following narrative--and certainly this is implied--was the text inscribed by Gilgamesh himself and by inviting the reader to a comparison with the original, the poet-editor undoubtedly wishes to authenticate his tale. But the text implies more. It implies a particular approach to, and understanding of, the epic.

Babylonian literature possessed a genre known as "pseudo-autobiography," which is characterized by its didacticism. The best-preserved example is very instructive for the interpretation of the prologue. It is called *The Legend of Naram-Sin*, and it is attested in both an Old Babylonian and a later form. * * * In the latter, we find Naram-Sin, the famous king of Akkad, in the broken first line advising the reader to "read diligently the *narû*." It is, moreover, now virtually certain that the break should be restored to read "open the chest." The text that follows is badly broken. Speaking in the first person, Naram-Sin tells about some fabulous bird-men, and the narrative concludes with his

5. Moran refers to stone monuments set up by Mesopotamian kings to commemorate their deeds [Editor].

reporting an oracle he says he received from Ishtar. The king then addresses the reader:

Whosoever you may be, whether governor or prince or anyone else,
Whom the gods shall call to rule over a kingdom,
I have made for you a chest and inscribed for you a *narû*,
And in the city of Cuthah, in the temple Emeslam,
In the chamber of the god Nergal, deposited it for you.
Find this *narû* and listen to what this *narû* says, and then . . .
(1.147-152)

There follows a long exhortation that reflects the oracle of Ishtar just reported.

The parallels to the prologue are obvious: the address to the reader, the chest, the *narû* within, the command to read it diligently. The parallels from a kind of didactic literature fit perfectly with the Gilgamesh we are first introduced to, the man of *nēmēqu*.⁶ Moreover, as most modern interpreters of the epic have stressed, the epic is a kind of bildungsroman,⁷ the story of Gilgamesh's education and progress to maturity. It is, in its way, a lesson. In alluding to Gilgamesh's autobiography as his source, the author has thus given us final and formal guidance on how we are to read what follows. We are to read, tablet in hand, quietly, reflectively, intent on learning what the life of Gilgamesh has to teach us. What follows is *narû*-epic, epic in a new key, epic in "the key of wisdom."

TABLETS 1.52-2: GILGAMESH AND ENKIDU

Where preserved, the text follows the Old Babylonian narrative rather closely, but with considerable amplification: Gilgamesh the oppressor; the creation and humanization of Enkidu; his confrontation with Gilgamesh in Uruk; their friendship; Gilgamesh's proposal to fight Khumbaba, now called Khumbaba.

TABLETS 3-4: THE KUMBABA ADVENTURE

In broad outline, but again with expansions, some now of folkloristic origin, the text follows the old story. The role assigned to Shamash is an innovation, but probably not of the late edition. Counselor and protector in the Old Babylonian Version, he is presented in the Standard Version as the instigator of the whole enterprise. Ninsun charges him with having "touched" her son and set him on his way to Khumbaba, and Khumbaba himself holds Shamash as ultimately responsible

6. Akkadian word for "wisdom" [Editor].

7. This is a literary term that refers to a novel that shows how a character develops and matures [Editor].

for his plight. Later, too, at least according to the Hittite version, when it is decided by the gods that the slaying of Khumbaba and the Bull of Heaven may not go unpunished, Shamash protests, though in vain, that Gilgamesh and Enkidu have only acted on his orders. What may lie behind this apparent conflict between Shamash and the other gods is not clear; a mythic dimension of the text eludes us here.

The Standard Version also enlarges and elevates the purpose of the journey; "Until he [Gilgamesh] slays the fierce Khumbaba. / And makes perish from the land every evil that you [Shamash] hate." No longer is the sole consideration that lasting glory of Gilgamesh. Shamash has his own motive, be it to destroy all moral evil or everything baneful. It seems a loftier view of the whole enterprise and one quite consonant with the didacticism of the late edition. The alleged Old Babylonian parallel is quite uncertain.

Also new and shocking is the manifest hubris of the two companions. As they face Khumbaba, Enkidu speaks of having to contend with the anger of the gods for what they are about to do, but he does not hesitate to urge Gilgamesh to kill. They seem to think that making a great cedar door and bringing it back to Nippur (Nuffar) will placate the gods. As the two heroes head back in apparent triumph, the fifth tablet finishes with a very strong sense of foreboding that the Khumbaba story is not over. The foreboding is only reinforced by the next series of events.

TABLET 6: ISHTAR AND THE BULL OF HEAVEN

Back in Uruk, bathed and decked out in all his finery, Gilgamesh catches the eye of Ishtar, who, smitten by his charms, offers to take him in marriage. Gilgamesh not only rejects her offer but pours out on her a stream of insults. Scorned and enraged, the goddess persuades her father, Anu, to unleash against Gilgamesh the Bull of Heaven only to have Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaughter the Bull, empty its innards, and lay them before Shamash. Ascending the city wall to look down on the scene below, Ishtar "took a stance of mourning, uttered a loud wail, / 'Woe to Gilgamesh, who has insulted me, killed the Bull of Heaven.' " On hearing her, Enkidu tears off the Bull's haunch and hurls it at her as he screams, "Oh that I could reach you and make you just like him."

Whether Tablet 6 serves as a polemic against the ancient institution of the sacred marriage, king and priestess uniting symbolically as god and goddess, remains uncertain, but the context of the Gilgamesh narrative certainly establishes hubris as a quality that makes divine retribution inevitable. There is something undeniably terrifying about the figure of the great goddess standing high on the wall over her city and crying "Woe to Gilgamesh." The gods are not mocked.

TABLETS 7-8: THE DEATH OF ENKIDU

That very night, after a great banquet in celebration of the heroes' return, Enkidu has a dream wherein he learns (here we are briefly dependent on the Hittite version) that the gods have decided he must die while Gilgamesh is to be spared. His resentment is deep and bitter, and he is full of curses for the great door, for the trapper who brought the harlot to him, and for the harlot herself, all of them responsible in some way for his imminent death. Reproached by Shamash for forgetting the blessings of civilized life and the friendship of Gilgamesh that the harlot had led him to, Enkidu relents and blesses her. Thus does the epic celebrate once more culture over nature. Enkidu also has a terrifying dream about life in the underworld. Finally, he falls sick, lingers on for twelve days, and dies. Stricken with grief, Gilgamesh recalls at length their many adventures together, buries his friend after a week of mourning, erects a statue in his honor—and is transformed.

TABLETS 9-10: THE GREAT JOURNEY

The journey to Ut-napishtim leads Gilgamesh through a strange and awesome world. He meets the Scorpion-Man and his wife, who try to dissuade him from going on; but on he goes, on and on under the earth, surrounded by darkness, emerging into a garden of trees loaded with jewels. He has left all that is human, all that is of this world. He reaches a tavern keeper named Siduri, who tries to dissuade him, but eventually she directs him to Urshanabi, Ut-napishtim's boatman, who can bring him across the Waters of Death to his master.

The Ut-napishtim whom he reaches is for Gilgamesh a bitter disappointment. Unlike the superman he had imagined. Ut-napishtim is quite ordinary. But he is also a sage and he chides Gilgamesh with the question "What have you gained?" He is full of brief sayings on the frailty of man "snapped off like a reed," on the transitory nature of whatever man does, and above all, on death—invisible, faceless, silent, certain. And finally he explains that, after the Flood,

After Ellil had pronounced my blessing [of immortality],
The Anunnaki gods being assembled,
Mammetum, creatress of destiny, with them decreed the destinies.
They established death and life.
The days of death they did not define.

(10.305-309)

In this meeting, for the first time, the gods made death part of the established order of things. Later—originally, probably in the next line—Ut-napishtim asks rhetorically. "Now who is going to assemble the gods for you?" Obviously, no one. Gilgamesh has journeyed in vain.

TABLET 11: THE FLOOD STORY: CONVERSION AND JOURNEY HOME

It is generally conceded that the Flood was not part of the original epic, which may have referred to it, but only briefly. The long account in Tablet 11 seems to be told for its own sake. It seriously interrupts not only the flow of dialogue between Ut-napishtim and Gilgamesh but the otherwise smooth and natural transition from the end of Tablet 10, where Ut-napishtim tells Gilgamesh about the assembly of the gods after the Flood, to Ut-napishtim's rhetorical question. Finally, the story as told here is not an independent account; it draws on an identifiable source, the myth of Atrahasis.⁸

It is also generally conceded that the one who added the story was the poet-editor of the prologue. He has a manifest interest in, and esteem for, "the knowledge of days before the Flood" that Gilgamesh brought back. He also speaks in the prologue of the secret things revealed by Gilgamesh but with only two formally identified, one of them the Flood Story. If the poet-editor was not the one who added the story, he certainly directs his reader to it and implies its importance.

In the learned world of Sin-leqe-unninni, the Flood Story is certainly important in that it is knowledge that, were it not for Gilgamesh, would have been lost. And it is not just any knowledge. It is knowledge about the most terrible event in human history. It is knowledge about a terrible truth: the gods can destroy and one may never know why. A wise man, Gilgamesh, should know this.

Another essential truth is revealed in the episode of the Plant of Rejuvenation. Convinced finally by his week-long sleep that he must die, Gilgamesh, as already noted, yields, accepts his mortality, and allows himself to be bathed and clothed in fresh garments. He is ready to return to Uruk. Before he is gone for good, Ut-napishtim and his wife, wishing to give him some reward for his labors, tell him of the Plant of Rejuvenation. It can make him young again, and its existence is identified as the second matter of secret knowledge. Gilgamesh secures the plant, but, returning to Uruk accompanied by Urshanabi, he sets it down as he plunges into the cool waters of a pool, only to watch helplessly as a serpent makes off with it, sloughing off its skin as it goes.

Here Gilgamesh is betrayed simply by his humanity, its frailty and its limitations. Weeping, he delivers his final judgment on his journey across the Waters of Death to the end of the world. He says quite simply, "I should have turned back." He sees now the radical improbability of the whole enterprise: one should attempt neither to escape death nor even to cheat it. A wise man, Gilgamesh, should know this too.

The story does not end here. Gilgamesh and the boatman push on

8. A Babylonian poem about the creation of the human race and the coming of the flood; see Muses, pp. 160-85 [Editor].

to Uruk, and the language echoes the earlier journey to the Cedar Forest. We are being drawn back to the memory of earlier events. And, finally, on their arrival Gilgamesh addresses the boatman:

Go up on the walls and walk about.
Examine the terrace and study the brickwork,
If its brickwork be not all of baked bricks,
Its foundations not laid by the Seven Sages.
One *sar* city, one *sar* orchards, one *sar* pasture and pond—
and fallow fields of Ishtar's house—
Three *sar* and fallow fields . . .

(11.314-319)

These are the last words of the epic, and we have come full circle. We hear again the words of the prologue that were addressed to the reader, and we have a sense of finality and completeness. We began in Uruk, and we end there. In this new context, however, after all that has gone before, the solid, material nature of it all—walls and measurements and topography—tells us, and tells us forcibly, that Gilgamesh is back from a world of jeweled trees and monsters and regions not meant for man. He returns to a definable, measurable, human world, a world indeed made by man. And Gilgamesh, pointing to this man-made world of Uruk, suggests an intuitive if inarticulate perception that the work proper to man and his destiny is to build, to create a world of his own, as well as to die. This perception gives meaning to life and makes whole the wisdom of Gilgamesh: "From a far journey he returned, was weary but at peace."

TABLET 12: APPENDIX

Tablet 12 is a literal translation of part of the Sumerian composition *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, and it is certainly a later but not an altogether happy addition, destroying the narrative symmetry of the earlier eleven-tablet work. Nor are the motives for the addition clear. Since Enkidu instructs Gilgamesh on the life of various classes of people in the netherworld, it has been suggested that merely by questioning Enkidu, Gilgamesh implies his readiness to accept his role in the next life as god and king of the netherworld. And there have been other proposals, none convincing.

With the end of cuneiform civilization,⁹ Gilgamesh was not completely forgotten. At Qumran, site of the discovery of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, in the apocryphal literature associated with the biblical patriarch Enoch, he appears as one of the giants along with the monster Khumbaba, who is also found in the Manichaean *Book of the Giants*.

9. Moran means the civilization that used cuneiform writing (writing composed of wedge-shaped characters), hence, "Mesopotamian" [Editor].

Later, in his *On the Characteristics of Animals*, Aelian (circa 175-230 CE) recounts a curious tale about a Gilgamesh who became king of Babylon. In the seventh century CE, the scholiast Theodore bar Konai, writing in Syriac, mentions among ancient kings a certain Gmignos (Gmengos, Glingos) as a contemporary of Abraham.

Whether (and if so, to what extent) the epic itself may have survived in various transformations remains a matter of discussion. The arguments for influence on works such as the *Alexander Romance*, originally a Greek composition of the fourth century CE, and on the journeys of Buluqiya in the *Arabian Nights* seem the most plausible.

THORKILD JACOBSEN

"And Death the Journey's End": The Gilgamesh Epic†

* * *

Gilgamesh, as far as one can judge, was a historical figure, the ruler of the city of Uruk (the biblical Erekh) around 2600 B.C. It stands to reason that stories about him would have been current long after his death, but they only become graspable to us around 2100 B.C. when they were taken up by the court poets of the Third Dynasty of Ur. The kings of that dynasty counted Gilgamesh as their ancestor. We possess a number of short epical compositions in Sumerian, the originals of which must date to that revival of interest, but the Gilgamesh Epic proper, with which we are here concerned, dates from around 1600 B.C., at the end of the Old Babylonian period, and was composed in Akkadian. Strictly speaking, we should perhaps not say the "epic" but the "contours of the epic," since what we have of Old Babylonian date are fragments, and may represent only separate songs of a loosely-connected Gilgamesh cycle. These fragments do, however, cover all the essential—largely internally dependent—episodes that make up the tale in its later version. This version, made probably toward the end of the second millennium by one Sin-liqi-unninni, is preserved for the most part in copies from around 600 B.C. from the famous library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh.¹ It contains much that is extraneous to the tale, and it lacks the freshness and vigor of the Old Babylonian fragments. In our retelling of the story here we shall therefore quote the older fragments whenever possible.

† From *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, pp. 195-219. Yale University Press, 1976. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. All but one of the author's notes have been omitted.

1. Ashurbanipal was an Assyrian king of the seventh century B.C.E. who caused many Mesopotamian literary and scholarly works to be collected and copied for his library [Editor].