

The Epic of Gilgamesh

On the banks of the Euphrates River, not far from what is today known as the Persian Gulf, there once stood the great Sumerian city of Uruk. Its monumental defensive walls and magnificent temple of Inanna, Queen of Heaven, attested to the superlative kingship of its legendary king, Gilgamesh, whom later Sumerians believed to have reigned in 2750 BCE. Over 600 years later, during the reign of an ambitious king who identified closely with his “brother and friend” Gilgamesh, five verse narratives about Gilgamesh’s adventures, which no doubt drew on a long oral tradition, were composed, recorded on stone tablets, and deposited in royal libraries, or Tablet Houses.¹ These poems, which apparently ranged in length from 115 lines to over 300, soon became widely known and were translated from the Sumerian into Akkadian, which was now becoming the dominant language throughout Mesopotamia.

We have in the original Sumerian, which was a dead language by 1800 BCE, substantial portions of these epic poems. They establish Gilgamesh as no ordinary king. He has a divine mother, Ninsun, and a royal father, Lugalbanda. His protector gods are Enki, the wise god of the deep waters, and Utu, the sun god. All five epics include his beloved servant and steadfast comrade, Enkidu, but only one, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, mentions beloved but nameless wives and children. The stories tell of victory in a defensive war (*Gilgamesh and Akka*); of a deadly quarrel with Inanna, Queen of Heaven, that is resolved by Gilgamesh’s killing the Bull of Heaven and making flasks for her of its horns (*Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*); of Gilgamesh’s leading a perilous expedition across seven mountain ranges to cut wood in the Cedar Forest, a task which eventually entails Gilgamesh tricking into submission and Enkidu brutally slaying its monstrous but divinely placed guardian (*Gilgamesh and Huwawa*). What is most interesting about *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* in terms of later

epic is Gilgamesh's motive for undertaking the dangerous venture: the need for fame to counteract the inexorable coming of death. Because of this motivation, one ancient copyist made *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* the sequel to another of the epics, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, in which Enkidu brings back a grim report from the Netherworld after getting trapped there for seven days. Other copyists did not make this link, which leaves open the possibility that Enkidu's return to upper-world, which Gilgamesh procures through the help of Enki and Utu, is only a temporary reprieve.

The last of the five, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, conveniently sums up the dying hero's achievements, which include, first, unspecified combats, deeds of strength, words of wisdom, climbing mountains and traveling all roads, and then, more specifically, journeying to the Cedar Forest, killing its guardian Huwawa, founding many temples of the gods, reaching the impossibly distant home of the immortal survivor of the Flood, and subsequently reestablishing forgotten rituals for worshiping the gods. The gods decree that despite this accumulation of superlative achievements and despite his being part god, Gilgamesh must still undergo death, the fate of all human beings. Although they do reward him with a prestigious judgeship and make him a lesser god in the Netherworld, there are indications that he is not as fully consoled as both the gods and his counselors think he ought to be.² He does, however, rally enough to make sure that his tomb is prepared correctly, which allows the poem to end with funerary ritual and offer a concrete means (statuary) for ensuring that a man's name, at least, will survive his death.

These Sumerian stories are the literary antecedent to the epic that was created in Akkadian, or Old Babylonian, around 1700 BCE and was reworked around 1200 BCE by a scholar-scribe named Sin-leqe-unninni. His Middle Babylonian version, which we call either the Standard Version or the Eleven Tablet Version, was preserved in a Babylonian copy made around 700 BCE. Between the different copies, we now have about 60 percent of the epic's approximately 3,000 lines.³

The Old Babylonian epic was known as *Surpassing all other kings* from its first line, which in the Standard Version comes after the twenty-eight-line preamble, or proem, added by Sin-leqe-unninni. The Standard Version was known as *He who saw into the depths*, a title again taken from its first line. Although both epics include basically the same adventures, Sin-leqe-unninni appears to have contracted and expanded some scenes in addition to adding the prologue. All translators fill in lines lost from the tablets of the Standard Version by turning to fragments from the

Old Babylonian, some more than others. Some popular translations also use the Old Babylonian fragments to expand what Sin-leqe-unninni contracted. More rarely, a translator will turn to the five Sumerian epics to fill in blanks or add material, a technique that, while aiming at completeness, can undermine the tragic arc of Sin-leqe-unninni's masterpiece. I will base my discussion here on A. R. George's translation of the Standard Version, which comes as close as is possible today to revealing the story that its ancient audience knew.

The Babylonian poets kept key elements from the popular Sumerian stories. Gilgamesh is still protected by the god of deep waters (Ea) and the sun god (Shamash), and he has a difficult but enduring relationship with the Queen of Heaven (Ishtar), whose temple is at the center of his city. The roles of these Babylonian counterparts to the Sumerian Enki, Utu, and Inanna, however, are deepened and altered in ways that create new tensions. The expedition to the Cedar Forest, the slaying of Huwawa (Babylonian Humbaba), the killing of the Bull from Heaven, and Enkidu's vision of the underworld are all reworked to form a tight sequence of action rather than a simple series of adventures. Gilgamesh's journey to the ends of the earth to talk with the immortalized Flood hero, to which we have only an allusion in the extant Sumerian stories, is elaborated to include a detailed story of the great Flood itself and two tests which Gilgamesh fails. The knowledge Gilgamesh brings back from this journey, especially in Sin-leqe-unninni's version, centers not so much on restoring lost rituals as on understanding – and coming to terms with – the unbridgeable difference between man and god.

Significantly, the Babylonian epics omit two of the Sumerian stories entirely: that of Gilgamesh's military victory over an attacking army and that of Gilgamesh's death, promised deification, and funerary ritual. Although they take Gilgamesh's prowess in battle for granted, neither the Old nor the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* is interested in warfare. The introductory lines of the Old Babylonian version briefly exalt a brave hero who protects his warriors and can smash through walls, but the poem then devotes twice as many lines to praising his cultural achievements: digging wells, opening mountain passes, his immense journey to the distant home of Flood survivor Utanapishtim, and his subsequent restoration of cult centers and their rituals (SV I.31–44). Although violence pervades the epic, Gilgamesh uses it to conquer “monsters,” not cities, and he never kills another human being. As for death and funerary ritual, they are displaced onto Enkidu, and the promised deification is ignored so that the poem's stark focus on mortality will not be diluted.

The proem created by Sin-leqe-unninni gives his epic an intellectual aura that it did not have in the Old Babylonian version. The first six lines, beginning with “He who saw into the depths,” that is, he who saw into the underground realm of the god Ea, mark the story as primarily one of mental achievement and align its hero, Gilgamesh, with the god of life-giving waters and wisdom, rather than, for example, with the sun god who will help him kill monsters. His immense physical achievement, the journey to Utanapishtim, is described in intellectual terms: he “saw” what had been secret, “uncovered” what was hidden, and brought back a “story” of what happened before the Flood. Not only did he bring Utanapishtim’s story back, he composed his own story, inscribing all his adventures on a tablet of stone (SV I.7–10). As readers discover later at the end of the proem (lines 25–28), the book they are holding in their hands purports to contain the actual words of Gilgamesh himself, an autobiography written in the third person.

There is no real division between brain and brawn here, however. Gilgamesh did not become wise through his ability to read a book, but through the physical stamina and strength that enabled him to complete a heroic journey to the ends of the earth. Immediately after mentioning the story that came out of this journey, Sin-leqe-unninni moves on to a material accomplishment that was made possible by Gilgamesh’s skill: he built the great wall of Uruk and, inside it, a magnificent temple of Ishtar, feats that no one has ever been able to equal. Taking readers on an imaginary tour of the wall, the poet dwells on the solidity of its fired-brick foundations, the large city, date grove and clay pit it encloses, and Ishtar’s huge temple. The wall’s foundations, he exclaims, must have been laid by the Seven Sages, mythic figures who were believed to have taught newly created humankind the arts of civilization.

Let us stop for a moment and think about the word “civilized.” It comes from the Latin word for city, *civitas*. Let us think also about city walls. What is their function? In Greek and Roman culture, they signify mainly defense against attacking enemies, and that would certainly have been their main function in ancient Sumer. It is not, however, their main function in this text. In addition to human enemies, a city wall keeps out the wild creatures of nature, just as the sheepfold, which is an important metaphor for the city in Sin-leqe-unninni’s version of the epic, keeps wolves and lions away from domesticated animals. City walls separate controlled and civilized society, which includes religion, agriculture, and artifacts, from the uncontrolled world of nature, which contains, as we will see later, beasts, tempests, and the terrifying unknown. Symbolically

speaking, the city wall demarcates the human from the bestial. It also encloses gods alongside humans, claiming them for civilization. However, as Gilgamesh will learn to his sorrow, the divine belongs to both sides of the wall.

To Sin-leqe-unninni, these two cultural achievements, the story and the walled city, are what make Gilgamesh “surpass all other kings,” as the opening words of the Old Babylonian poem assert. Gilgamesh is the supreme king because he not only protects his city, but enhances its culture. All the deeds that his story recounts are done on behalf of the city in the sense that they open up the wilderness to exploration and exploitation and bring under control the heretofore uncontrollable. Even his quest to Utanapishtim, which achieves no material gain, produces essential knowledge – of history, of unknown realms, of the nature of the gods – and adds an important story to his people’s culture.

What Gilgamesh learns from his epic journey has to do with his nature as man and his role as king. Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third human. He inherits extraordinary size, beauty, strength, and energy from his mother Ninsun (“Lady Wild Cow”), a minor goddess, and he inherits social position and mortality from his human father. The unlimited potential of the one clashes with the limitations inherent in the other, putting him and his people through much turmoil throughout the epic.

As the story begins, Gilgamesh’s superhuman energy is getting in the way of his being a good king. His energy expresses itself *physically* in appropriating the energy of the young men, probably for building projects or athletic competitions,⁴ and *sexually* in exercising the god king’s right to sleep with all virgin brides before the bridegroom. His people, exhausted and annoyed, call on the gods for help, and the gods respond by creating for him an equal upon whom he can expend his energy. This is Enkidu, and he is not only his equal in strength but also his exact opposite. If Gilgamesh is two-thirds god, Enkidu seems more than half animal with his hairy body, diet of grass and water, and alliance with wild gazelles whom he protects against human hunters. The rest of Tablets I and II describe the process whereby Enkidu becomes fully human and how, when two heroes come together, their friendship begins to humanize Gilgamesh.

The process of humanizing Enkidu begins with heterosexual sex. At the request of a hunter, Gilgamesh sends a temple courtesan to entice Enkidu to bond with his own kind in the most basic biological way. Enkidu lies with the woman Shamhat for seven days, at the end of which

time he tries to rejoin his gazelle friends. They bolt away, and he, physically weakened, cannot follow. At the same time, Enkidu becomes capable of new understanding, which makes him receptive to Shamhat's invitation to come with her to Uruk the Sheepfold and to Gilgamesh. Significantly, his first response to Shamhat's description of Gilgamesh as the strongest man in Uruk is to vaunt that he will challenge him and change the order of things, much as one alpha male might challenge another in the wild. Shamhat responds that Enkidu's destined relationship with Gilgamesh, who is stronger and loved by the gods, is that of counselor and friend. She then begins the process of civilizing Enkidu by first giving him clothing and then taking him to a shepherd's encampment where she teaches him to eat bread and ale, that is, cooked and therefore specifically human food. The cloth garment, like the bread and the ale, is a product of human technology, as is the barber's tool that grooms him and the weapon Enkidu later takes up to protect the shepherds' domesticated animals from wild lions and wolves. No longer merely biologically human, Enkidu is now a civilized man, fit to enter the city.

Enkidu is motivated to leave the shepherds' camp for the city specifically to stop Gilgamesh's exercising his divine right to sleep with a new bride. Just as sex with one woman transformed Enkidu from animal to human, so being restricted from sex with *all* women is the first step in Gilgamesh's becoming more human than god. It is a step toward communality: that is, recognition of the claims of other males as a limitation on "might makes right," the law of raw nature.

The wrestling bout, then, is what marks the shift of each into humanity. For Enkidu it marks full humanity – he is now established in the city, the locus of civilized life. Gilgamesh, on the other hand, has met his near equal in strength, who has restricted his divine sexual license, and who will now be his friend, something he has never had. Friendship, in fact, seems to be the mark of the fullest humanity (as opposed to divinity and bestiality) in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Note that this friendship is male–male and specifically supplants the male–female bonding that marks basic humanity. While Enkidu was being prepared for city life, Gilgamesh had dreamed of picking up a meteor and an axe and loving each "like a woman." His mother interpreted these dreams as foreshadowing the coming of a comrade whom Gilgamesh would love "like a woman." What are the implications of this transference of male devotion from female to male? From a relationship with a woman comes renewed life of the body, of the biological species, which puts the heterosexual relationship into the category of biology, of nature. No offspring can result from a

relationship between two men. What does result, at least in this epic, is a restrained, more civilized behavior, which puts the masculine homosocial relationship firmly into the higher realm of culture.

The wrestling bout and the resultant friendship, which mark the end of what I will call the first movement of the epic, are only the beginning of Gilgamesh's becoming fully human. In the next movement, which covers the last third of Tablet II through Tablet VI, the poet depicts Gilgamesh and Enkidu asserting themselves against the forces of nature in order to overcome their own human nature, that is, in order to overcome death by achieving fame. Their partnership enables them to succeed in two great adventures, but the aftermath of these successes teaches the friends just how inexorable human nature is.

The first adventure is the expedition to the far-off Cedar Forest to conquer its protective demon Humbaba and cut down the trees for timber; the second is slaying the Bull of Heaven sent by an offended Ishtar. Both episodes are modified from their Sumerian sources to fit their new intellectual framework. The modifications to the Humbaba episode, which are far more extensive, intensify the focus on friendship and heighten the heroism of Gilgamesh's attempt to transcend human limitation.

In the Sumerian *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, when Gilgamesh conceives the idea to win fame by an expedition to cut cedars on Mount Lebanon, Enkidu does not try to dissuade him, but merely advises him to inform the Sun God and get his help. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh* sustained opposition to the expedition highlights both the extraordinary danger involved and, to borrow a later Greek concept, the possible hubris of Gilgamesh's refusal to believe that there is any challenge he cannot conquer. Enlil has made Humbaba terrifying in order to protect the cedars from men; entering the forest will mean certain death, insist both Enkidu and Uruk's elders. Gilgamesh, fearless and driven by the desire to create a name that will live after his body dies, ridicules their concerns. Although he recognizes human death, at this point he is clearly unable to identify with human fear.

After he overrides their opposition, the elders commit Gilgamesh to Enkidu, enjoining him to protect his friend and bring him back safely. Their words about Enkidu's importance to Gilgamesh (III.4–12), which are absent from *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, are reinforced in the subsequent scene with Ninsun, which is also absent from the earlier poem. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh comes to Ninsun hand in hand with Enkidu to ask for her blessing (III.19–116). After successfully imploring

Shamash to aid her son, she binds Enkidu to Gilgamesh by adopting him as Gilgamesh's brother (III.121–128). There follows a fragmentary departure scene, in which the elders repeat their earlier words committing Gilgamesh to Enkidu's care, and, after a final attempt to get Gilgamesh to turn back, Enkidu finally embraces his role as partner in the expedition. The resulting focus on the two men as essential to each other is sustained by yet another change from *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*. In the Sumerian poem, Gilgamesh conscripts fifty young men to help bring back the timber he will cut, and the poet refers to these young men several times throughout the adventure. Although in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the end of the departure scene is missing, an Old Babylonian tablet indicates that Gilgamesh makes the people happy by saying that none of them should go with him, and the two set off totally alone (Yale 279–283). Thus the poetic focus is locked on the importance of their relationship rather than on Gilgamesh's heroic leadership.⁵

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* makes it clear that a single hero could not accomplish this quest. It requires two who will help each other at times of need. Enkidu, who is closer to nature, acts as guide. He also acts as encouraging interpreter of nightmares. When they enter the forest each has moments of panic, and it takes the other to encourage and goad to action. Their nonprocreative bonding produces, instead of new bodies, "progress," – that is, wood for building and a glorious story to add to the culture.

Let us return to the scene with Ninsun, which, as mentioned above, was absent from the Sumerian poem. This scene, which was apparently added in the final shaping of the epic, not only cements the brotherhood of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, but also invokes Gilgamesh's human mortality in the most moving way possible: through the eyes of a grieving mother. The immortal mother plaintively asks Shamash, "Will Gilgamesh not share the sky with you and the Moon God, will he not grow wise with Ea, will he not rule in Uruk with Ishtar, will he not live in the high court of the Netherworld?" (III.100–106).⁶ Ninsun, fearful that her son will be killed by Humbaba, is asking for a long life for her son that will be crowned by deification in the Netherworld, a reward granted by the gods in the Sumerian *The Death of Gilgamesh* in acknowledgment of his having brought back the cedar, his building projects, and his bringing back rites from the Flood survivor. It could also be interpreted as Ninsun's vain wish that her son might be as immortal as his mother, a wish explicitly considered by the gods and denied in *The Death of Gilgamesh* (Mê-Turan, 78–79). In either interpretation, the poignant fear of the immortal

mother for her mortal son heightens the reader's sense of risk and brings Gilgamesh's mortality to the fore in a way that neither Enkidu nor the elders can.

The scene with Ninsun also contributes to a theme specific to the Babylonian versions of the epic: the tension between nature and culture. Ninsun lays at Shamash's door Gilgamesh's desire to confront Humbaba, and rid the world of the "evil thing you hate" (III.45–54). If Humbaba is the agent of Enlil, the great god who rules the earth and its inhabitants, how can he be evil? Why would the Sun God hate Humbaba and want him removed from the Cedar Forest? This is an important question because Shamash is also the god of Justice. The answer lies in how Justice is conceived.

Shamash's light penetrates everywhere on earth so that no one and no deed can escape his notice. Justice is what brings the facts to light. For the same reason, the Greeks considered their sun god, Apollo, to be the god of truth. A virgin forest, however, lets in almost no light, and Humbaba's purpose is to keep it that way, untouched and uncontrolled. Furthermore, Justice and Law, which Shamash represents, pertain to human interaction, but Humbaba keeps human beings out of the forest. Shamash reveals his lack of power in the depths of the forest later when he urges Gilgamesh to attack Humbaba before he makes it deep into the forest where his seven auras are (IV.199–203). "Evil" therefore appears to be a cultural valuation based solely on human aspirations and Shamash's apparent desire to have no area closed to him. To Shamash, whatever keeps humans from using natural resources and transforming natural areas into social places where humans can interact under his watchful eye is evil.

This valuation is not, however, uncontested. After Gilgamesh has overpowered Humbaba with the help of thirteen powerful winds sent by Shamash, the poet gives him a pivotal choice. When Humbaba offers to serve him if he will spare his life, Gilgamesh must choose either to collaborate with the forest's guardian in securing supplies of wood or, as Enkidu advises, to win the eternal fame of totally eradicating his power. Despite Shamash's obvious desire for the latter, this is not a choice that has an unequivocally right answer. As Enkidu warns, if Gilgamesh doesn't kill quickly, supremely powerful Enlil and other important gods will find out, become angry, and stop them (V.185–189 = 241–245). Enlil clearly does not consider Humbaba evil, and, as we find out later, neither does Anu, father of the Babylonian pantheon and coresident with Ishtar in the temple of Uruk. Though Shamash will continue to defend Gilgamesh

and Enkidu, the other gods will exact a high price for their action in the forest.

After Gilgamesh cuts off Humbaba's head, the two heroes immediately begin cutting down trees, and Enkidu boasts that he will turn a particularly lofty cedar into a huge door for Enlil's temple in the city of Nippur. This magnificent product of nature transformed into art may be meant as atonement for killing Enlil's appointed guardian, but if so it does not work.

Much later, when Enkidu curses this door on his deathbed, the poet invites his readers to think about the killing of Humbaba in terms of a conflict in which neither side will be victorious without serious cost. He offers a double vision: both the rewards of conquering nature and also the costs.

Gilgamesh continues his violent response to the challenges of nature in the next episode, in which he rejects the goddess of procreation and kills the Bull of Heaven she sends in retaliation. Ishtar, Queen of Heaven, is the goddess of life and death, of natural cycles. One of the ancient ways for a community to gain control over nature was for the king to celebrate a Sacred Marriage with Ishtar in her holy temple. Ishtar, filled with the king's seed, would ensure overflowing fields and barns. As many myths about Ishtar and her consorts indicate, however, there was danger involved for the king, who, if asked, would have to surrender his life force completely to the goddess, losing his identity as individual actor in the human world, and undergoing the equivalent of death. When Ishtar propositions Gilgamesh in this way, Gilgamesh resists sacrificing himself. As he will soon prove, he has other ways of overcoming the uncertainties of nature.

Gilgamesh not only refuses Ishtar, he insults her egregiously. His long list of insults, which include comparing her to a malfunctioning door, an ill-fitting shoe, and limestone that weakens a wall (VI.33–43), represent the goddess as spoiling human artifacts that are specifically constructed to give humans more control over nature. His last charge, that of fickleness, is perhaps most telling: Ishtar, goddess of natural cycles, represents change from happiness to unhappiness and, more generally, impermanence. Impermanence is Gilgamesh's prime enemy throughout the epic.

Gilgamesh's refusal prompts a murderous revenge in the form of the Bull of Heaven. Anu's insistence that Ishtar prepare her people with seven-year's worth of grain before he will give her the Bull, taken together with its effect on the land (VI.104–111, 117–122), indicates that the

Bull embodies a seven-year drought. Gilgamesh's joining forces with Enkidu's to battle the Bull from Heaven represents an attempt to conquer the problems of nature with masculine strength and intelligence, that is, through the homosocial bond rather than the heterosexual act. Once the two men succeed, they go off hand in hand to celebrate Gilgamesh's status as "the best, most glorious of men" (VI.167–175).

Gilgamesh and Enkidu divide up the slain Bull in a culturally significant way. There are three parts: heart, haunch, horns. The Bull's heart is offered to the male sun god Shamash (VI.148–150). Enkidu insults Ishtar (who has cursed Gilgamesh) by flinging the haunch at her. Some scholars say that since the haunch is the god's portion of the sacrifice, the act represents simple hubris. Other scholars view the haunch as a euphemism for genitals, which makes the insult worse because Enkidu flings organs of generation into the goddess of generation's face. In any case, while Ishtar and her female votaries mourn over the haunch, which represents a fleshly, ephemeral part of the Bull, Gilgamesh decorates the durable horns with precious stone, making them into oil flasks for his protector god Lugalbanda, and displays them as an artifact in the house.

The poet has made several significant changes from the Sumerian *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*. In the earlier poem, Gilgamesh's mother warns that accepting gifts from Ishtar will weaken his warrior strength; Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar includes no insults, just a statement that he would prefer to fill her sheepfolds and bull pens by hunting; his mother and sisters aid Gilgamesh through ritual prayer; and in the disposition of the slain Bull, the parts are less starkly symbolic: Gilgamesh himself cuts and throws the Bull's haunch at Inanna, casts the corpse and innards into street, gives the meat to orphans, takes the skin to a tanner, and has the horns made into oil flasks for *Inanna*, not Lugalbanda. The last line of the poem concludes with praise of the goddess after first celebrating slaying the Bull. Although the Sumerian poem's message is essentially the same – Gilgamesh is capable of using nature for the benefit of his people without sacrificing himself to the goddess – his arrogance is much less than it is in the revised Babylonian story. The later version makes starker the opposition between male-identified culture and female-identified nature and, by depicting Gilgamesh as utterly scornful of the latter, heightens the reader's sense of hubris and motivates the retribution to come.

Victory over the Bull is the last happy moment the two friends have. The third movement of the poem, in which nature asserts its ultimate power, begins on the very night after Gilgamesh and Enkidu celebrate

their triumph. Tablet VII opens with Enkidu relating to Gilgamesh a dream vision, in which he hears Anu decree that either Gilgamesh or Enkidu must die because they killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Enlil chooses Enkidu, which is logical since he is fully human while Gilgamesh is part divine. Shamash clashes with Enlil, insisting that Enkidu is innocent of wrongdoing, but since Anu and Enlil are more powerful, Enkidu is doomed.⁷

As he lies dying, Enkidu curses the huge cedar door he had built for Enlil's temple. He curses the hunter who first brought him to the attention of Gilgamesh. Last and at greatest length he curses Shamhat, the woman who made him a civilized human being. At this point, however, Shamash intervenes and reminds him of the benefits he acquired through her: haute cuisine, haute couture, a beloved friend who will mourn him, and elaborate funeral ritual. Enkidu, persuaded that these cultural benefits are worth the cost, grows calm and blesses her. Soon, however, he is disturbed by a dream of the Netherworld, a place of darkness and dust whose inhabitants eat clay and wear feathers. Unfortunately forty lines of this vision have been lost, but we have enough to know that there is nothing desirable there.

Enkidu takes twelve days to die, and Gilgamesh the monster slayer can do nothing to save him.

Gilgamesh's first response to Enkidu's death is to tell his story in a long lament, thus creating a memorial in words. Second he creates a magnificent statue, that is, a permanent image. Third he puts on a state funeral with splendid gifts for Enkidu to take to the underworld gods. We are missing the last thirty lines of this funeral, but we know from what he later says that he is reluctant to end it: he sits by his friend's corpse for six days and only buries him after a maggot drops from his nostril (X.58–60, 135–137, 235–237). The sight of the disintegrating body being eaten by worms brings home to Gilgamesh the full horror of death and impels him to begin his greatest quest: a journey beyond the confines of the human world to wrest the secret of physical immortality from Flood survivor Utanapishtim ("He Who Saw Life"). This quest for physical immortality, punctuated by the constant refrain: "My friend has died. Will I not die also and be like that?" (IX.3, X.69–71, 146–148, 246–248) will take up the rest of the epic.

The irrevocable loss of a loved one, one loved as dearly as himself, is what teaches Gilgamesh the reality and the *fear* of death. This fear sends him away from the city and its lifestyle, turning him into, as it were, an animal: he "wanders the wilderness" wearing lion pelts instead of woven

clothing, with hair long and matted, sleeping in the open, and exposing his skin to sunburn and frost (X.44–45, XI.251–254). Shamash tries to return him to the city, saying that he will never find what he seeks, but to no avail. Gilgamesh persists, at one point outracing the Sun God through the Twin Peaks where he rises and sets, that is, to and past the limit of Shamash's influence on the living world.

Gilgamesh's journey qualifies as a descent to the underworld, which is a common motif in quest epics and a mark of the greatest of heroes. First he must pass the Scorpion Guardians to make an unprecedented and terrifying twenty-four-hour journey through the utter darkness of the Twin Peaks, (IX.80–170). When he emerges, Gilgamesh is in an earthly paradise whose jewel flowers signify imperishable but dead beauty (IX.171–190). Last, he must cross the Waters of Death, over which no mortal has ever been able to go (X.79–80).

Gilgamesh is pointed the way to the Waters of Death by Shiduri, the tavern keeper. In the Standard Version of the epic Shiduri's role is kept to a bare minimum, but in the Old Babylonian epic she speaks to Gilgamesh at length, advising him to stop his hopeless quest and live out his ephemeral human life enjoying the daily pleasures of dining, dancing, dressing, and making love. Many translators of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* include Shiduri's *carpe diem* advice in their versions of Tablet X, and thus it may be profitable to compare it to the message Utanapishtim later conveys to Gilgamesh and also to Shamhat's previous education of Enkidu. Utanapishtim will tell Gilgamesh many of the same things Shiduri does: the gods set a limit on human life, but there is no point in anticipating it; one should dress well and eat well. Utanapishtim, however, paints a picture of human life that is essentially tragic and he stresses not pleasure, but responsibility: Gilgamesh, he says, is a king and should act like one (X.267–322). As we see with both Shamhat and Shiduri, a woman is important to a man's achieving basic humanity, but it takes a male counselor to move to move him to a higher socioreligious plane.⁸

Shiduri helps Gilgamesh cross the Waters of Death to Utanapishtim by telling him about the boatman Urshanabi, who is currently on this side of the Waters. Two things are important about Gilgamesh's interaction with Urshanabi. First, he approaches the boatman hostilely, and when Urshanabi and his companions, the mysterious Stone Ones, defend themselves, he smashes the Stone Ones to bits. Second, because the Stone Ones turn out to be what make crossing possible – being stone, they are impervious to the Waters of Death – technology must substitute

for their natural ability: under Urshanabi's direction, Gilgamesh makes and uses 120 poles to punt boat across, and then creates a sail out of the lion's skin he was wearing to carry them the rest of the way. Gilgamesh has brought it about unwittingly this time, but once again he is associated with a cultural process that ensues when a natural process has been forcefully destroyed.

Gilgamesh asks Utanapishtim for the secret of eternal life, but Utanapishtim's only response is that there is *nothing* eternal in human affairs and that Gilgamesh should go back to Uruk and be a good king. Utanapishtim's wisdom induces Gilgamesh to abandon the violence he had been prepared to use to wrest his secret from him (XI.5–6). Instead of fighting him, Gilgamesh asks for and gets the story of how Utanapishtim became immortal. There follows the famous story of the Flood (XI.11–206).

Utanapishtim's version of the Flood is most interesting in what it reveals about the gods, who, at the instigation of Enlil, decide to send it for no explicit reason. One Old Babylonian version tells that the cause is a bothersome racket caused by overpopulation, but in any case, the cause is not human wickedness as it is in the Hebrew and, later, Latin versions.⁹ Utanapishtim is saved because he is a protégé of Ea, who wants to preserve the human species and the animal and plant life it depends on. The flood is so terrible that all the gods except Enlil are horrified and weep at the destruction. When it is over, Enlil is furious to find that anyone has escaped, but Ea chides him, saying that he could have found another less destructive way to reduce the population, and in the end Enlil blesses Utanapishtim and his wife, changes them into gods, and sets them to dwell far away at the source of flowing waters. Since Enlil, the most powerful god in the Babylonian pantheon, acts irrationally, inconsistently, and without forethought both here and throughout the epic, the opposition and then the reconciliation between him and Ea invite the moral interpretation that Wisdom should always temper Power. Furthermore, since in this story Ea represents specifically human-oriented intelligence, their interaction becomes exemplary of the interplay between nature and culture that we have been tracing. Humans as individuals and as a species can ameliorate by shaping, but can never fully control, the overwhelming forces of nature.

At the end of Utanapishtim's story, it is clear that his and his wife's achievement of eternal life is unique. To prove his point that Gilgamesh is mortal like all other human beings, Utanapishtim sets Gilgamesh a test: to stay awake for six days and seven nights. Gilgamesh, of course, falls asleep, and to mark the time he is asleep, Utanapishtim has his wife bake

a loaf of bread and set it by Gilgamesh's head every day. By the time he awakes, there are seven loaves in various stages of freshness and decay (XI.207–241). We may compare this use of bread near the end of the epic to how it was used at the beginning with Enkidu. There it was a mark of human technology, of civilization; here what is stressed about this archetypal human food is that it is perishable.

Gilgamesh laments the loss of his hopes, seeing nothing but death all around him. Utanapishtim says nothing to him, but turns to Urshanabi, whom he now banishes and puts in charge of getting Gilgamesh home in a civilized manner (XI.247–261). Banishing the boatman cuts Utanapishtim off completely from the human world and means that no other hero will be able to repeat Gilgamesh's journey. Gilgamesh's journey is unique, and his story will be unique. This moment marks the beginning of the last, short movement of the epic.

Gilgamesh's return to civilization begins when he obeys Utanapishtim's order to bathe, put on clean royal clothes, and cover his head with a cloth. That is, he discards signs of mourning and accepts the reality of life. He goes back home as if new born – and as a king again. No longer solitary, he has Urshanabi as companion all the way back. Urshanabi isn't given anything to say, but he is present to allow Gilgamesh to communicate in his own voice, first to express glee when in one last heroic feat he acquires the plant of rejuvenation, then to weep and berate himself when through carelessness he loses it to a snake, and finally, to describe with pride the city walls that mark his successful return to Uruk and the human world.¹⁰

The last words of the hero and of the epic circle back to the admiration of Uruk expressed in Sin-leqe-unninni's proem. As Gilgamesh approaches his city, the man who has been totally focused on death and disintegration seems newly aware of his own human achievement. Here may be some compensation for the sorrow, fear, and disillusionment that Gilgamesh has learned are inseparable from the human condition. Gilgamesh's mood at the end of the epic has been variously interpreted as obedient to the gods' will, defiantly self-reliant, accepting his kingly responsibility, profoundly happy in his newfound wisdom, and resigned to his mortal status. All interpretations are available, but all must be nuanced by what was foretold at the beginning, that Gilgamesh would return weary but at "peace" (I.9). As he points out the wonders of his city to Urshanabi and his readers, it is easy to imagine the next day when, enfolded by the enduring wall of Uruk, Gilgamesh will begin to compose the still more enduring story we have just read.

Further Reading

Translations

There now exist many excellent translations of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Assyrian scholars Andrew George (Penguin, 1999, 2003) and Benjamin R. Foster (Norton, 2001) have each produced recent ones that append useful translations of fragments from the Sumerian epic cycle and from the Old Babylonian version of the epic. Both translations are careful to indicate gaps in the text and places where conjecture takes the place of actual translation; George's introduction and his appendix on the difficulties of translating from the cuneiform are superb. These two translations, which include material not available to earlier translators, now supersede all other scholarly translations, including excellent ones by Maureen Gallery Kovacs (Stanford University Press, 1989) and John Gardner and John Maier (Random House, 1984); both clearly indicate when they interpolate material from the Old Babylonian version, and they provide running commentary and useful notes. Stephen Mitchell (Free Press, 1984) and David Ferry (Noonday Press, 1993) offer engaging poetic translations; Mitchell's contains a long interpretive essay and extensive notes that offer literary and historical background and carefully explain translations of particular passages. Danny P. Jackson's rhymed verse (Bolchazy-Carducci, 1982) is interestingly illustrated by Thom Kapheim. For those who prefer a prose translation, N.K. Sandars' *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Penguin, 1960) is still in print; readers should be aware that Sandars freely combines the Standard and the Old Babylonian versions. Herbert Mason's *Gilgamesh* (Mentor, 1972) is a very free adaptation rather than a translation.

For literal translations of the Sumerian epics on the Internet, go to The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature at <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/catalogue/catalogue1.htm>.

Important Mesopotamian stories relevant to *the Epic of Gilgamesh* have been conveniently collected and translated by Stephanie Dalley in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford, 1998) and by Benjamin R. Foster in *From Distant Days. Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1995). In order to read *Atrahasis*, or *The Flood*, in its oldest Babylonian version without later supplements from later versions, see Foster's translations in *Before the Muses, An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* vol. 1 (Bethesda, MD, 1993).

Analysis

The introduction and appendix to Andrew George's translation in *The Epic of Gilgamesh. The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (Penguin Books, 1999), provide analysis as well as excellent historical, textual, and cultural background to the poem.

Two major articles by Tzvi Abusch are worth tracking down. "Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of the "The Gilgamesh Epic," Tablet 6, Lines 1–19." *History of Religions* 26, 2 (November 1986), 143–187, analyzes Ishtar's proposal of marriage as a deceptive offer for Gilgamesh to become her consort in the Netherworld, where he would become a source of life for others but lose his own human identity. The Bull represents "the old order" and seasonal cycles which now must "give way to assertions of will" (178). The second article, "The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, 4 (2001), 614–622, analyzes changes in meaning from the Old Babylonian (1700 BCE) to the eleven tablet Standard Version (1500–1000 BCE) to what he believes is a meaningful Twelve-Tablet version. The kernel of all three is the conflict between Gilgamesh's heroic identity and his social, political and religious identities as human being, king, and god; the main change is the emphasis on man in the first, king in the second, and god in the third. Most scholars do not accept his argument that the Twelfth Tablet is more than an appendix, but Abusch makes the strongest case possible.

Still worth reading is Thorkild Jacobsen's *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). This volume contains a chapter on Gilgamesh ("'And Death the Journey's End': The Gilgamesh Epic," pp. 195–215) that is noteworthy for its analysis of Gilgamesh as holding on to boyhood through his attachment to Enkidu. See also his "The Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic vision," in T. Abusch, J. Huehnergard and P. Steinkeller, eds., *Lingering Over Words, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 231–249. Brilliant for its day, Jacobsen's analysis is now superseded by those who have more text to interpret.

George F. Held offers a different take on the effects of Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu, arguing that they are analogous to the effects of love on the philosopher in Plato's *Symposium* in "Parallels between the

Gilgamesh Epic and Plato's Symposium," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 42 (1983) 133–141. Reprinted in W. R. Dynes and S. Donaldson, eds. *Homosexuality in the Ancient World* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1992) 199–241.

David Damrosch's *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (Henry Holt & Co, 2007) gives a cultural and archeological history of the epic and offers a stimulating interpretation of the text(s).

Mesopotamian Literature and Culture

A Companion to Ancient Epic, John Miles Foley, ed. (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), contains two essays of particular interest by Jack M. Sasson ("Comparative Observations on the Near Eastern Epic Traditions," pp. 215–232), and Scott B. Noegel ("Mesopotamian Epic," pp. 233–245).

Jack M. Sasson has edited the multivolume *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (Peabody MA, 2001), which includes essays on the art, economics, history, literature, and religion of Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon.

Modern Adaptations:

Joan London has written an award-winning novel whose Australian heroine is inspired by stories of Gilgamesh: *Gilgamesh, A Novel* (London, 2001; New York, 2003). Philip Roth uses the epic hero (one of his protagonists is a baseball player named Gil Gamesh) to satirize McCarthyite cold-war America in the 1950's–60's in *The Great American Novel* (New York, 1973).

Pulitzer prize-winning Yusef Komunyakaa has collaborated with Chad Garcia to turn the *Epic of Gilgamesh* into the lyric *Gilgamesh: A Verse Play* (Middletown CT, 2006).

Notes

- 1 The ambitious king was Shulgi, a ruler who celebrated intellectual achievement as much as martial achievement. The quotation comes from "A praise song for Shulgi" by Shulgi C, 105–106, which can be found in The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr24203.htm>.

- 2 The main indication that he is not consoled is that the Counselors of Uruk continue to ask “what is the cause of your tears?” after he tells them his dream (quoted from Andrew George’s *The Epic of Gilgamesh. The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* [London and New York, 1999], 205, N.vi.6.) All translations are by George.
- 3 Twenty percent of the lines are entirely missing, and many of the lines that we do have are fragmentary. A twelfth tablet found with the eleven discovered at Nineveh contains a translation into Akkadian of the second half of one of the Sumerian epics, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. Most scholars believe that this tablet was stored with the other eleven because it contained a related story, but that it is not part of the unified *Epic of Gilgamesh*.
- 4 The Sumerian poem *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* contains a scene in which Gilgamesh insists that the young men play an exhausting game with him for days on end. Their mothers and sisters, who have to bring them bread and water constantly, cry out for help to the gods, who respond by causing the gaming tools to fall into the Netherworld.
- 5 Textual citations refer to George’s translation; line numbers will be slightly different in other translations. Roman numerals I–XI refer to the tablets found at Nineveh; “Yale” refers to the Old Babylonian Tablet III in the Yale collection, which George labels Y; Mè- Turan refers to manuscripts found at Tell Haddad, which George labels M.
- 6 Paraphrase of III.100–106. The Old Babylonian version represents Gilgamesh as praying to Shamash at the point where the Standard Version makes him go with Enkidu to get Ninsun’s blessing (Yale tablet 214–221, George, pp.112–113).
- 7 After the first line of Tablet VII, 35 lines are lost. Their content is reconstructed from a fragmentary Hittite prose paraphrase of the Old Babylonian epic.
- 8 Shiduri’s advice is found in Sippur Tablet III.2–15. George feels that the author of the Standard Version shortened Shiduri’s part in order to “keep the wisdom for the climax” (xliii).
The lines which deliver Utanapishtim’s advice about the responsibilities of kingship are fragmentary, but the gist is apparent. One of them indicates that the reason Gilgamesh is presently behaving like a fool is that he has no counselors (X.276–277).
- 9 Some scholars have recently suggested that the “racket” that disturbs the gods’ sleep is metaphoric for wickedness (Lawrence T. Geraty, “Theology of the Flood,” GRI Faith and Science Conference, August 18, 2003, p. 5. <http://www.grisda.org/2003-FSC-open/Geraty-TheologyOfFlood.doc>).
- 10 The snake’s theft of the plant of rejuvenation, which denies humankind its restorative benefits, has a parallel in Greek and other mythologies. Such stories illustrate the fact that old age as well as mortality are part of the human condition. See M. L. West’s *East Face of Helicon* (Oxford, 1999) p. 118 for the Greek parallel.