

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Epic of Gilgamesh is best known from a version called 'He who saw the Deep', which circulated in Babylonia and Assyria in the first millennium BC. The Babylonians believed this poem to have been the responsibility of a man called Sin-liqe-unninni, a learned scholar of Uruk whom modern scholars consider to have lived some time between 1300-1000 BC. However, we now know that 'He who saw the Deep' is a revision of one or more earlier versions of the epic. The oldest surviving fragments of the epic are the work of an anonymous Babylonian poet writing more than 3700 years ago. The Babylonian epic was composed in Akkadian, but its literary origins lie in five Sumerian poems of even greater antiquity. The Sumerian texts gained their final form probably as court entertainments sung for King Shulgi of Ur of the Chaldees, who reigned in the 21st century BC.

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THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

*The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts
in Akkadian and Sumerian*

Translated with an introduction by
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PENGUIN BOOKS

Introduction

Ever since the first modern translations were published more than one hundred years ago, the Gilgamesh epic has been recognized as one of the great masterpieces of world literature. One of the early translations, by the German Assyriologist Arthur Ungnad, so inspired the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in 1916 that he became almost intoxicated with pleasure and wonder, and repeated the story to all he met. 'Gilgamesh,' he declared, 'is stupendous!' For him the epic was first and foremost 'das Epos der Todesfurcht', the epic about the fear of death. This universal theme does indeed unite the poem, for in examining the human longing for life eternal, it tells of one man's heroic struggle against death – first for immortal renown through glorious deeds, then for eternal life itself; of his despair when confronted with inevitable failure, and of his eventual realization that the only immortality he may expect is the enduring name afforded by leaving behind some lasting achievement.

The fear of death may be one of the epic's principal themes but the poem deals with so much more. As a story of one man's 'path to wisdom', of how he is formed by his successes and failures, it offers many profound insights into the human condition, into life and death and the truths that touch us all. The subject that most held the attention of the royal courts of Babylonia and Assyria was perhaps another topic that underlies much of the poem: the debate on the proper duties of kingship, what a good king should do and should not do. The epic's didactic side is also evident in the exposition of a man's responsibilities to his family. The eternal conflict of nurture and nature – articulated as the benefits of civilization over savagery – is also examined, as too are the rewards of friendship, the nobility of heroic enterprise and the immortality of fame. Artfully woven into Gilgamesh's own story are the traditional tale of the Deluge, the great

flood by which early in human history the gods sought to destroy mankind, and a long description of the gloomy realm of the dead. From all this Gilgamesh emerges as a kind of cultural hero. The wisdom he received at the ends of the earth from the survivor of the Deluge, Uta-napishti, enabled him to restore the temples of the land and their rituals to their ideal state of antediluvian perfection. In the course of his heroic adventures it seems Gilgamesh was the first to dig oases in the desert, the first to fell cedars on Mount Lebanon, the first to discover the techniques of killing wild bulls, of sailing ocean-going craft and of diving for coral.

Amid the momentous themes, the epic is full of absorbing moments, often just minor, incidental details which serve every so often to catch the imagination or to lighten the mood. The text explains in passing why temples take in orphans, how there came to be two New Year's Days in the Babylonian calendar, how the Levantine Rift Valley was riven, how dwarfs came about, why nomads live in tents, why some prostitutes eke out a living on the cruel fringes of society and others enjoy a life of attentive luxury, how it is that doves and swallows cleave to human company but ravens do not, why snakes shed their skins, and so on.

The spell of Gilgamesh has captured many since Rilke, so that over the years the story has been variously reworked into plays, novels and at least two operas. Translations have now appeared in at least sixteen languages and more appear year by year, so that the last decade has added ten to the dozens already published. Among the ten are two in English. Why so many, and why another? There are two replies that answer both these questions. First, a great masterpiece will always attract new renditions and will go on doing so while its worth is still recognized. This goes for Homer and Euripides, Virgil and Horace, Voltaire and Goethe – indeed any classic text, ancient or modern – as well as for Gilgamesh. But the difference with Gilgamesh, as also with the other works of ancient Mesopotamian literature, is that we keep finding more of it. Seventy years ago we possessed fewer than forty manuscripts from which to reconstruct the text and there were large gaps in the story. Now we have more than twice that number of manuscripts and fewer gaps. As the years pass the number of available sources will assuredly go on rising. Slowly our knowledge of the text will become better and better, so that one day the epic will again be complete, as it last was more than two thousand years ago.

Sooner or later, as new manuscripts are discovered, this translation, like all others, will be superseded. For the moment, based as it is on first-hand study of very nearly all the available sources, unpublished as well as published, the present rendering offers the epic in its most complete form yet. However, gaps still remain and many preserved lines are still fragmentary; the epic is indeed riddled with holes. In many places the reader must set aside any comparison with the more complete masterpieces of Greek and Latin literature and accept those parts of text that are still incomplete and incoherent as skeletal remains that one day will live again.

The manuscripts of Gilgamesh are cuneiform tablets – smooth, cushion-shaped rectangles of clay inscribed on both sides with wedge-shaped cuneiform writing – and they come from the ancient cities of Mesopotamia, the Levant and Anatolia. Especially in the land that is now Iraq, there are few ancient sites that have not yielded clay tablets. Cuneiform writing was invented in the city-states of lower Mesopotamia in about 3000 BC, when the administration of the great urban institutions, the palace and the temple, became too complex for the human memory to cope with. It developed, with painful slowness, from an accountant's *aide-mémoire* into a system of writing which could express not just simple words and numbers, but all the creativity of the literate mind. And because clay does not easily perish when thrown away or when buried in the ruins of buildings, archaeologists provide us with enormous quantities of clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform characters. These documents range in date across three thousand years of history and in content from the merest chit to the most sophisticated works of science and literature.

Literary compositions that tell the story of Gilgamesh come down to us from several different periods and in several different languages. Some modern renderings disregard the enormous diversity of the material, so that the reader forms a mistaken impression of the epic's contents and state of preservation. In the translations given in this book the texts are segregated according to time, place and language, allowing the reader to appreciate each body of material for itself. The texts fall into five different chapters. To summarize, Chapter 1 presents the version of the epic in the Akkadian language that was standard in the first-millennium Babylonia and Assyria, with some of its gaps filled with older material. This, if you like, is the classical Epic of Gilgamesh. It was known to the Babylonians and Assyrians as 'He

who saw the Deep'. In this book it is referred to as the standard version. Chapters 2–4 give the full text of older material in Akkadian, including earlier, more fragmentary versions of the epic, such as that known in antiquity as 'Surpassing all other kings', and isolated extracts of text on school practice tablets. Chapter 2 presents texts from the first half of the second millennium (the Old Babylonian period), Chapter 3 material from Babylonia of the second half of the second millennium (the Middle Babylonian period) and Chapter 4 texts of the same period from the ancient West – the Levant and Anatolia. Chapter 5 contains the five narrative poems in the Sumerian language, best known from copies made by Babylonian apprentice scribes in the eighteenth century BC, but certainly older. In order to understand how the different texts and fragments of Gilgamesh relate to each other it may help to place them in the context of the long history of ancient Mesopotamian literature.

Gilgamesh and ancient Mesopotamian literature

Literature was already being written down in Mesopotamia by 2600 BC, though because the script did not yet express language fully, these early tablets remain extremely difficult to read. From at least this time, and probably much earlier, lower Mesopotamia was inhabited by people who spoke two very different languages. One was Sumerian, a language without affinities with any known tongue, and this appears to be the medium of the earliest writing. The other was Akkadian, which is a member of the Semitic family of languages and thus related to Hebrew and Arabic. The two languages, Sumerian and Akkadian, had long been used side by side by the people of lower Mesopotamia, though Sumerian predominated in the urban south and Akkadian in the more provincial north. This geographical division was enshrined in the terminology of later tradition, according to which the homeland of 'the black-headed ones', as these people called themselves, comprised two regions, Sumer, the southern part of lower Mesopotamia, and Akkad, the northern part. The bilingualism of the urban civilization of lower Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC perhaps resembled the division between French and Flemish in modern-day Belgium.

Texts in Akkadian appear in quantity from about 2300 BC, when

the language became an administrative tool in the service of the first great Mesopotamian empire. This empire stretched at its height from the Gulf to Levantine Syria. It was built by Sargon and his successors, the kings of Akkade, a northern city which soon lent its name to the region round about and to the language spoken at the court of its kings. A legend describes how Sargon was a foundling like the infant Moses:

My mother, a priestess, conceived me and bore me in secret,
she put me in a basket of reeds, sealed its lid with pitch;
she cast me adrift on the river from which I could not arise,
the river bore me up and brought me to Aqqi, a drawer of water.¹

According to tradition, Sargon rose to power by winning the favour of the goddess Ishtar. For nearly a hundred years his dynasty exercised dominion over the city-states of lower Mesopotamia and much of northern Mesopotamia too. The early texts in Akkadian dating from this period include a very small body of literature. Much more, no doubt, was passed down in an oral tradition and was never written down, or only much later. Sumerian seems to have been losing ground to Akkadian as a spoken language from at least this time, but its function as the primary language of writing was bolstered by a Sumerian renaissance in the last century of the third millennium. For a short period much of Mesopotamia was again united, this time under the kings of the celebrated Third Dynasty of the southern city of Ur, most famously Shulgi (2094–2047 BC in the conventional chronology). The perfect prince was an intellectual as well as a warrior and an athlete, and among his many achievements King Shulgi was particularly proud of his literacy and cultural accomplishments. He had rosy memories of his days at the scribal school, where he boasted that he was the most skilled student in his class. In later life he was an enthusiastic patron of the arts and claims to have founded special libraries at Ur and at Nippur, further north in central Babylonia, in which scribes and minstrels could consult master copies of, as it were, the Sumerian songbook. Thus he envisaged that hymns to his glory and other literature of his day would be preserved for posterity:

For all eternity the Tablet House is never to change,
for all eternity the House of Learning is never to cease functioning.²

In this enlightened atmosphere the courts of the kings of Ur and the succeeding dynasty of Isin were witness to the composition of much literature in Sumerian. This literature we know best not from tablets written at the time, though some survive (including a fragment of a *Gilgamesh* poem), but from the scribal curriculum of the Babylonians.

After the rise to power of the city of Babylon in the eighteenth century, under its most famous ruler, King Hammurapi (1792–1750 BC), the land of Sumer and Akkad was ruled by Babylon. Though the people of Sumer and Akkad did not themselves refer to their homeland as Babylonia, which is a Greek term, it is customary to call them Babylonians from this time onwards. Sumerian had by then died out among the people as a spoken language, but it was still much in use as a written language. Mesopotamian culture was nothing if not conservative and since Sumerian had been the language of the first writing, more than a thousand years before, it remained the principal language of writing in the early second millennium. Much more was written in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, but Sumerian retained a particular prestige. Its primacy as the language of learning was enshrined in the curriculum that had to be mastered by the student scribe. In order to learn how to use the cuneiform script, even to write Akkadian, the student had to learn Sumerian, for, as the proverb said, ‘A scribe who knows no Sumerian, what sort of scribe is he?’³ None at all, for in this period the language of tuition was, at least in part, Sumerian. Falling foul of every regulation, one young student lamented,

The door monitor said, ‘Why did you go out without my say-so?’ and he beat me.

The water monitor said, ‘Why did you help yourself to water without my say-so?’ and he beat me.

The Sumerian monitor said, ‘You spoke in Akkadian!’ and he beat me.

My teacher said, ‘Your handwriting is not at all good!’ and he beat me.⁴

To prove he could write, the would-be scribe copied out, on dictation and from memory, texts in Sumerian. The most advanced Sumerian texts that he had to master were a prescribed corpus of traditional Sumerian literary compositions.

Nearly all the literature that we have in Sumerian derives from the tablets written by these young Babylonian scribal apprentices, many

of which were found in the remains of the houses of their teachers. The two largest such discoveries were made at Nippur, where the scribal quarter was abandoned at the end of the eighteenth century, and at Ur, where the houses in question are slightly older. More recently significant bodies of Sumerian literature from the same era have been discovered at Isin, a city just south of Nippur, and at Tell Haddad (ancient Mē-Turan) by the river Diyala on the periphery of north-east Babylonia, but most of these tablets remain unpublished. The private dwelling-houses of Nippur and Ur were not the royal Tablet Houses inaugurated by King Shulgi but they amply fulfilled the purpose he envisaged, the preservation of Sumerian literature for future generations. That now we are reading the songs of Shulgi again, four thousand years later, would probably have exceeded even his expectations, and it would have surprised him too that his libraries of Sumerian lived anew, as it were, in the tablet collections of Philadelphia, London, and other strange and far-away places.

The work of reconstructing the Sumerian literary corpus began before the Second World War and still continues. The pioneering task of identifying, joining and reading the thousands of fragments of clay tablets from Nippur, many of them tiny, was largely the work of the late Samuel Noah Kramer and his students at the University Museum in Philadelphia. His life was summed up by a teasing colleague as ‘all work and no play’, but there is nothing dull about being the first to read a tablet for nearly four millennia and Kramer certainly found much to be excited about. This was a completely new literature, the oldest large body of literature in human history, and its existence came as a total surprise to all but a tiny band of professional scholars. Many of these Sumerian literary texts are difficult and imperfectly understood, but it remains a serious failure of modern scholarship that their riches are not known more widely.

Among those Sumerian literary texts which have achieved some degree of publicity are the five poems of *Gilgamesh* (or *Bilgames* as he is known in older texts), translated in Chapter 5. These are not the same as the Babylonian *Gilgamesh* epic, which was written in Akkadian, but separate and individual tales without common themes. They were probably first committed to writing under the Third Dynasty of Ur, whose kings felt a special bond with *Bilgames* as a legendary hero whom they considered their predecessor and ancestor. It seems likely that much of the traditional Sumerian literary corpus goes back

to lays sung by minstrels for the entertainment of the royal court of the Third Dynasty. The Sumerian poems of Bilgames are well suited for such amusement. The texts that we have, although known almost entirely from eighteenth-century copies, are very probably directly descended from master copies placed by King Shulgi in his Tablet Houses. Even so, it is entirely possible that the poems stem ultimately from an older, oral tradition. To some extent these Sumerian poems were source material for the Babylonian epic, but they can be enjoyed for their own sake too. Reading them takes us back four millennia to the courtly life of the Sumerian 'renaissance'.

Alongside the great mass of Sumerian literary tablets from the schools of eighteenth-century Babylonia, we have also recovered a little contemporaneous literature in Akkadian. This we call Old Babylonian literature. A few Old Babylonian literary tablets derive from the same schools as the literary tablets in Sumerian and also appear to be the work of apprentice scribes. These include a few scraps of Akkadian Gilgamesh, which are among the texts translated in Chapter 2. But though it seems that some literature in Akkadian was studied in the schools of this period, literary tablets in this language are so rare among the huge quantities of Sumerian tablets that it is clear they were not part of the prescribed curriculum. What narrative poems in Akkadian that we do have from the schools may instead have been copied down by students for fun, or even composed by them *ad lib*.

Other tablets of Akkadian literary works have been recovered from this period which are of less certain provenance than the school tablets. Some of them are finely written and were evidently kept, perhaps by individual scholars, as permanent library-copies. Among these are three Old Babylonian tablets of Gilgamesh which contribute significantly to our knowledge of the story: the Pennsylvania and Yale tablets and the fragment reportedly from Sippar. These are also translated in Chapter 2. Another masterpiece of Babylonian literature known from late in the Old Babylonian period is the great poem of Atram-hasis, 'When the gods were man', which recounts the history of mankind from the Creation to the Flood.⁵ It was this text's account of the Flood that the poet of Gilgamesh used as a source for his own version of the Deluge myth. It also provided a striking model for the story of Noah's Flood in the Bible. Other Akkadian literature begins to appear at this time, such as texts expounding the Babylonian

sciences, divination by extispicy, astrology and mathematics, and incantations in both Sumerian and Akkadian whose purpose was to ward off evil by magic means. So the Old Babylonian period was an era of great literary creativity in Akkadian, but the school curriculum, at least in the centres we know best, was evidently too hidebound to reflect this development.

The Old Babylonian Gilgamesh tablets reveal that there was already, at this time, an integrated Gilgamesh epic, which, as the Pennsylvania tablet reports, bore the title *Shūtur eli sharrī*, 'Surpassing all other kings'. Works of ancient Mesopotamian literature were rarely created out of nothing and the origins of this epic probably also go back to an oral tradition. Certainly the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh tablets are far from being translations of the individual Sumerian poems of the scribal curriculum, though the two traditions hold in common several episodes and themes. The Old Babylonian texts bear witness to a wholesale revision of Gilgamesh material to form a connected story composed around the principal themes of kingship, fame and the fear of death. For this reason one suspects that the Old Babylonian epic was essentially the masterpiece of a single, anonymous poet. This epic, 'Surpassing all other kings', is only a fragment as it is now preserved, but many find the simple poetry and spare narrative of this poem and of the other Old Babylonian material more attractive than the more wordy standard version. Some stanzas of the Pennsylvania and Sippar tablets, especially, are unforgettable. To explain what is meant by the standard version of the Gilgamesh epic it is necessary to continue the story of Mesopotamian literature.

Some time after the eighteenth century BC the contents of scribal curriculum changed radically. We next have large numbers of school tablets at our disposal from the sixth century on, but the best witnesses to the nature and contents of the late scribal tradition are the several first-millennium libraries that have been excavated in Babylonia, especially at Babylon, Uruk and Sippar, and in Assyria. Assyria is the Greek name for the Land of Ashur, a small country to the north of Babylonia on the middle reaches of the river Tigris that was home in the early first millennium BC to the greatest empire the Near East had yet seen. Foremost among these late libraries is the collection of clay tablets amassed at Nineveh by the last great king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC).

Like Shulgi before him, King Ashurbanipal claimed to have been

trained in the scribal tradition and to have had a special talent for reading and writing. His education had been all-round, however, and had encouraged intellectual development and martial pursuits equally, as this summary reveals:

*The god Nabû, scribe of all the universe, bestowed on me as a gift the knowledge of his wisdom. The gods (of war and the hunt) Ninurta and Nergal endowed my physique with manly hardness and matchless strength.*⁶

This is clearly a statement of the ideal schooling for a royal prince, the same then as in Shulgi's day and as now. Though we do not certainly possess any tablet actually written by Ashurbanipal, it is clear that he was an avid collector and, by good fortune, much of his collection is still extant today. The royal libraries, housed in at least two separate buildings on the citadel of Nineveh, had at their core a small nucleus of tablets that had been written more than four hundred years earlier in the reign of King Tiglath-pileser I (1115–1077 BC). To these were added the collections of at least one distinguished Assyrian scholar and, in due course, the libraries of many Babylonian scholars that were apparently appropriated as part of the reparations that followed the bitter hostilities of the great Babylonian revolt (652–648 BC). By royal command scholars in such cities as Babylon and nearby Borsippa were set to work copying out texts from their own collections and from the libraries of the great temples. They did not risk incurring Ashurbanipal's wrath: 'We shall not neglect the king's command,' they told him. 'Day and night we shall strain and toil to execute the instruction of our lord the king!'⁷ This they did on wooden writing-boards surfaced with wax, as well as on clay tablets. The scriptorium of Nineveh was also engaged on the task of copying out texts. Some of the copyists were prisoners-of-war or political hostages and worked in chains.

Among the texts that were copied out by Ashurbanipal's scribes was the Gilgamesh epic, of which the library may have possessed as many as four complete copies on clay tablets. Whatever was inscribed on wax has perished, of course. After the sack of Nineveh by the Median and Babylonian alliance in 612 BC, Ashurbanipal's copies of the epic, like his other tablets, lay in pieces on the floors of the royal palaces, not to be disturbed for nearly 2,500 years. The royal libraries of Nineveh were the first great find of cuneiform tablets to be dis-

covered, in 1850 and 1853, and are the nucleus of the collection of clay tablets amassed in the British Museum. They are also the foundation stone upon which the discipline of Assyriology was built and for much research they remain the most important source of primary material. The first to find these tablets were the young Austen Henry Layard and his assistant, an Assyrian Christian called Hormuzd Rassam, as they tunnelled in search of Assyrian sculpture through the remains of the 'Palace without Rival', a royal residence built by Sennacherib, Ashurbanipal's grandfather. Three years later Rassam returned on behalf of the British Museum and uncovered a second trove in Ashurbanipal's own North Palace. Rassam is something of an unsung hero in Assyriology. Much later, in 1879–82, his efforts provided the British Museum with tens of thousands of Babylonian tablets from such southern sites as Babylon and Sippar. Neither Layard nor Rassam was able to read the tablets they sent back from Assyria, but of the find he made in what he called the Chamber of Records Layard wrote, 'We cannot overrate their value.' His words remain true to this day, not least for the Gilgamesh epic.

The huge importance of the royal libraries found at Nineveh by Layard and Rassam first became widely known in 1872 when, sorting through the Assyrian tablets in the British Museum, the brilliant George Smith came across what remains the most famous of Gilgamesh tablets, the best-preserved manuscript of the story of the Deluge. His reaction is described by E. A. Wallis Budge in his history of cuneiform studies, *The Rise and Progress of Assyriology*: 'Smith took the tablet and began to read over the lines which Reade [the conservator who had cleaned the tablet] had brought to light; and when he saw that they contained the portion of the legend he had hoped to find there, he said, "I am the first man to read that after two thousand years of oblivion." Setting the tablet on the table, he jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself!' One hopes the George Smith who made his discovery public was a figure more composed and fully clad, since the occasion was a formal paper delivered to the Society of Biblical Archaeology in the presence of Mr Gladstone and other notables. This must be the only occasion on which a British Prime Minister in office has attended a lecture on Babylonian literature. Assyriology had arrived, and so had Gilgamesh.

While other libraries of clay tablets from ancient Mesopotamia

seem to belong to individual scholars and often comprise the work of the scholar's family and students as part of their scribal apprenticeship, King Ashurbanipal's library, which was far bigger than any other, was the result of a deliberate programme of acquisition and copying. The purpose of this labour was to provide Ashurbanipal with the best possible expertise to govern in the manner that would please the gods. 'Send me,' he commanded, 'tablets that are beneficial for my royal administration!'⁸ With its advice for proper government the Gilgamesh epic certainly came into this category, but it is clear from the contents of the libraries of Nineveh that the phrase summed up the entire scribal tradition current at the time.

The scribal tradition then current comprised a very different body of texts from that copied by the apprentices of the Old Babylonian period. Much of the Sumerian corpus was no longer extant. Almost without exception, those few texts that survived from it had been supplied with line-by-line Akkadian translations. The Akkadian literary texts known from Old Babylonian copies had been considerably reworked and many new texts in Akkadian had been added. The written traditions of the great professions had been incorporated. Many of the treatises on divination had been enormously expanded and the incantations of the exorcists had been organized and placed in series. This work of revision, organization and expansion is known to have taken place at the hands of many different scholars between seven and four hundred years earlier, in the last centuries of the second millennium. The labour of these individual Middle Babylonian scholars resulted in the creation of standard editions of most texts, editions which remained essentially unaltered until the death of cuneiform writing a thousand years later.

The Babylonian Gilgamesh epic did not escape the attentions of a redactor. This by tradition was a learned scholar by the name of Sin-liqe-unninni, which means 'O Moon God, Accept my Prayer!' By profession he was an exorcist, which is to say that he was trained in the art of the expulsion of evil by prayer, incantation and magic ritual. This was a very important skill, whose principal applications were treating the sick, absolving sin, averting bad portents and consecrating holy ground. We know nothing else about Sin-liqe-unninni, except that he was considered their ancestor by several well-known scribal families of Uruk, in southern Babylonia, that flourished in the late first millennium. Current opinion supposes that he lived some time

in the thirteenth to eleventh centuries. He could not have been the original composer of the Babylonian epic, for a version of it already existed in the Old Babylonian period, but probably he gave it its final form and was thus responsible for the edition current in first-millennium libraries, the text that here we call the standard version. Even so, we cannot rule out the possibility that, between Sin-liqe-unninni's lifetime and the seventh century, minor changes were made in the text he established.

The long epic poem that the ancients attributed to Sin-liqe-unninni was called in antiquity *Shanagba imuru*, 'He who saw the Deep', a title taken from its first line. A glimpse of the nature of Sin-liqe-unninni's revision can be obtained by comparing the standard version of the epic and the older material, which is of course only possible where a particular episode is extant in both. The later epic often follows the Old Babylonian epic, 'Surpassing all other kings', line-for-line, sometimes with almost no changes in vocabulary and word order, sometimes with minor alterations in one or the other. Elsewhere one finds that the late text is much expanded, whether by repetition or by invention, and even that passages present in the Old Babylonian epic have been dropped and new episodes inserted.

Something of the intermediate stages in this development from 'Surpassing all other kings' to 'He who saw the Deep' can be learnt from the scraps of Babylonian Gilgamesh that survive from the era in which Sin-liqe-unninni lived. This material falls into two groups: texts that come from within Babylonia and texts that come from outside it. The first group comprises only two tablets, from Nippur and Ur, translated in Chapter 3. They closely resemble the standard version of the epic attributed to Sin-liqe-unninni, but there are differences. On grounds of content and style it is hard to say whether these tablets are witness to the text as it was immediately before Sin-liqe-unninni's editorship, or immediately after it.

The existence of the second group of tablets, from outside Babylonia, needs some explanation. In the fourteenth century, at the height of the Late Bronze Age when the eastern Mediterranean was dominated by the great powers of the Egyptian New Kingdom and the Hittite Empire, the *lingua franca* of international communications in the Near East was the Akkadian language. Kings of Assyria and Babylonia naturally wrote to Pharaoh in Akkadian, but Pharaoh replied in Akkadian too. The Hittite king and Pharaoh likewise corresponded

in Akkadian, and, when writing to their overlords, the minor rulers of the Levantine coast and Syria used the same language, though often shot through with local Canaanite and Hurrian idioms. This Akkadian was written in the traditional manner, in cuneiform script on clay tablets. In order to learn to compose their lords' letters, treaties and other documents in Akkadian, local scribes were trained in cuneiform writing, and they were trained in the time-honoured way, by rote-learning of the lists, vocabularies and literature of the Babylonian scribal tradition.

This was not the first time that the cuneiform script had made the journey to the West. The first known occasion was in the mid-third millennium, when cuneiform was exported to Ebla and elsewhere in Syria and texts in both Sumerian and Akkadian went with it as part of the skills that trainee scribes had to master in order to acquire the new technology. In the nineteenth century Akkadian had been written at Kanesh and other Assyrian trading posts in Cappadocia. In the eighteenth century it was widely used in Syria, not only in Mesopotamian Syria but also close by the Mediterranean Sea, and it even appears at Hazor in Palestine. But in the later second millennium the spread of cuneiform schooling and scholarship was wider still.

The result was that tablets inscribed with Akkadian scholarly and literary texts were copied out at Hattusa (modern Boğazköy), the Hittite capital in Anatolia, at Akhetaten (el-Amarna), the royal city of Pharaoh Akhenaten in Upper Egypt, at Ugarit (Ras Shamra), a principality on the Syrian coast, and at Emar (Tell Meskene), a provincial town on the great bend of the Euphrates – just to list the principal sites. Except for Amarna, all these sites have produced tablets of Gilgamesh, as too has Megiddo in Palestine. These texts are translated in Chapter 4. Some of the material from Hattusa, which is the oldest in this group, is very similar to the Old Babylonian epic that we know from the Pennsylvania and Yale tablets and clearly predates Sin-liqe-unninni. The texts from Emar, which are several centuries younger, are much more like his text, though again, it is impossible at present to determine whether they precede his work or not.

Other Gilgamesh texts from the West are abridgements of the Babylonian epic, or reworkings of it, and are probably local developments. Indeed, the epic fired the imagination then as it does now and

adaptations of it were composed in local languages. So far a Hittite version and a Hurrian version have come to light, both found in the archives of the Hittite capital. Though Hittite is pretty well understood, Hurrian is still barely comprehensible and our understanding of both versions of the Gilgamesh story is badly hampered by their fragmentary state of preservation. Therefore no rendering of them is given here. Not so long ago it seemed that a Gilgamesh text had also been composed in Elamite, the language of a people who occupied what became Susiana and is now Khuzistan. The tablet, discovered in Armenia, far from Elam, was published promptly and in due course translations followed. However, further study revealed that the text was, in fact, a private letter with no connection to Gilgamesh at all. This development elicited from one scholar the wry comment that the document was 'a good illustration of the fact that Elamite remains the worst-known language of the ancient Near East'. With the Akkadian language we are fortunately on much firmer ground.

The standard version of the Babylonian epic is known from a total of 73 manuscripts extant: the 35 that have survived from the libraries of King Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, 8 more tablets and fragments from three other Assyrian cities (Ashur, Kalah and Huzirina), and 30 from Babylonia, especially the cities of Babylon and Uruk. Ashurbanipal's tablets are the oldest. The latest manuscript discovered so far was written in about 130 BC by one Bel-ahhe-ušur ('O Lord, Protect the Brothers!'), a trainee temple-astrologer of Babylon. By that time this once mighty city was much diminished in power and population but, in a country whose inhabitants had long spoken not Akkadian but Aramaic and Greek, its ancient temple was the last surviving bastion of cuneiform scholarship. From the 73 surviving manuscripts it is possible to reconstruct much of Sin-liqe-unninni's epic but there are still considerable gaps. To fill these lacunae it is sometimes possible to fall back on the older material in Akkadian and for one episode it is even necessary to utilize the Hittite version. The result of this reconstruction is the text given in Chapter 1. There, in order clearly to distinguish between text of different periods, old material used to bridge lacunae in the standard version is explicitly identified in editorial notes.

The standard version of the epic is divided by Babylonian tradition

into sections. The definition of a section is that it is the text customarily contained on an individual clay tablet, and so the sections are called, in accordance with Babylonian custom, 'tablets'. The epic is told over eleven such sections, Tablets I–XI. The organizing of Babylonian literature in the latter part of the second millennium resulted in much of it being arranged in standard sequences of tablets, sequences that were known as 'series'. The 'series of Gilgamesh', in fact, comprises twelve tablets, not just the eleven of the epic. Tablet XII, the last, is a line-by-line translation of the latter half of one of the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems. Somehow this partial translation survived into the first millennium while the original Sumerian text, like the other Sumerian poems of Gilgamesh, did not. Though some have tried to show that Tablet XII had a real place in the epic, most scholars would agree that it does not belong to that text but was attached to it because it was plainly related material. The principle of bringing together related material was one of the criteria by which the scholars of Babylonia organized different texts into the same series.

The eleven tablets of the epic vary in length from 183 to 326 lines of poetry, so that the whole composition would originally have been about 3,000 lines long. As the text now stands, only Tablets I, VI, X and XI are more or less complete. Leaving aside lines that are lost but can be restored from parallel passages, overall about 575 lines are still completely missing, that is, they are not represented by so much as a single word. Many more are too badly damaged to be useful, so that considerably less than the four-fifths of the epic that is extant yields a consecutive text. In the translation offered here the damaged state of the text is all too evident, pock-marked as it is by the clutter of brackets and ellipses.

While there is a temptation for a modern editor to ignore the gaps, to gloss them over or to join up disconnected fragments of text, I believe that no adult reader is well served by such a procedure. The gaps are themselves important in number and size, for they remind us how much is still to be learned of the text. They prevent us from assuming that we have Gilgamesh entire. Whatever we say about the epic is provisional, for new discoveries of text may change our interpretation of whole passages. Nevertheless, the epic we have now is considerably fuller than that which fired the imagination of Rilke. Approach what lies ahead not as you might the poems of Homer but



1 A damaged masterpiece: the front side of one of the better preserved tablets of the Gilgamesh epic

as a book part-eaten by termites or a scroll half-consumed by fire. Accept it for what it is, a damaged masterpiece.

In time, the holes that pepper the standard version of the epic will undoubtedly be filled by further discoveries of tablets in the ruin-mounds of Mesopotamia and in the museums of the world – for such is the lack of professional Assyriologists everywhere that we have yet to study properly many thousands of tablets that have long been in museum collections. The correct identification and accurate placement of what are often only small fragments make for difficult and painstaking work. Not even a genius like George Smith always came up with the right identification. The *Daily Telegraph* was so impressed with his famous lecture on the Deluge story from the

Gilgamesh epic that in 1873, in the hope of recovering the missing portions of text, they provided the splendid sum of one thousand guineas (£1,050) to enable him to reopen for the British Museum the old excavations at Nineveh. In comparison with those who had dug there before him, Smith brought home only a very small number of tablets – the ‘DT’ collection – from this, his first expedition, but there among them was indeed a fragment of the Flood, one that even filled an important gap in the narrative. This was a most impressive fulfilment of the *Daily Telegraph*’s expectations, but the expedition was a victim of its own success. The desired fragment so exactly met the newspaper’s requirements that the news of its discovery led to the expedition’s early recall.

In fact, we now know that this particular fragment of the Deluge story is part of a late version of the poem of Atram-hasis and not a piece of Gilgamesh at all. Smith had no way of knowing that at the time. His identification was the best that could then be expected, and went unchallenged for many years. Employed by the British Museum in 1867 to assist Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, one of the grand pioneers of cuneiform decipherment, George Smith was more than the discoverer of Gilgamesh and the epic’s first translator. He was among the first in a long line of scholars who have sifted through the libraries of Ashurbanipal and, by sorting, joining and identifying thousands of pieces of Assyrian clay tablets, have over a period of 130 years steadily increased our knowledge of the literature of the Babylonians. It is in this continuing work of discovery and identification of manuscripts, from Nineveh and elsewhere, in the field as well as in museums, that the Gilgamesh epic (along with most other literary texts written in cuneiform on clay tablets) differs from fragmentary texts in Greek and Latin. The eventual recovery of this literature is assured by the durability of the writing medium. It is only a matter of time – providing, of course, that the society in which we live continues to place value on such things and to support the scholars who study them.

The setting of the epic

The central setting of the epic is the ancient city-state of Uruk in the land of Sumer. Uruk, the greatest city of its day, was ruled by the tyrannical Gilgamesh, semi-divine by virtue of his mother, the goddess Ninsun, but none the less mortal. He was one of the great figures of legend. His enduring achievement was to rebuild the wall of Uruk on its antediluvian foundations, and his military prowess ended the hegemony of the northern city-state of Kish. He appears as a god in early lists of deities and in the later third millennium he benefited from a cult. Later tradition made it his function, as explained in one of the Sumerian poems, to govern the shades of the dead in the Netherworld. Because we have actual records from kings whom the ancients held to be his contemporaries, it is possible that, as perhaps there was once a real King Arthur, so there was once an actual King Gilgamesh. Certainly the native historical tradition held this to be the case, for Gilgamesh appears in the list of Sumerian kings as the fifth ruler of the First Dynasty of Uruk. He would thus have flourished about 2750 BC, though some would place him a century or so earlier. His reign, which the list of kings holds to have lasted a mythical 126 years, falls in the shadowy period at the edge of Mesopotamian history, when, as in the Homeric epics, the gods took a personal interest in the affairs of men and often communicated with them directly.

Foremost among the gods was the supreme triad, which comprised the Sky God Anu, remote in his celestial palace, the more important Enlil, who presided over the affairs of gods and men from his temple on earth, and the clever Ea, who lived in his freshwater ocean beneath the earth (the Ocean Below) and sent the Seven Sages to civilize mankind. Then there were the kindly Mother Goddess, Lady of the Gods, who first created men with Ea’s help, the violent Adad, god of the storm, and the Moon God, Sîn, the majestic son of Enlil. The Moon’s children were Shamash, the Sun God, the patron of travellers and Gilgamesh’s special protector, and the Babylonian Venus, the impetuous Ishtar, whose responsibilities were sexual love and war, and whose appetite for both was inexhaustible. Beneath Ea’s watery domain, deep in the Netherworld, the gloomy realm of the dead, lived its queen, the bitter Ereshkigal. There she lay prostrate in perpetual mourning, attended by her minister, the gruesome Namtar, and the rest of her fell household.

Men lived in cities and cultivated the land. Where irrigation could not reach, the farmland gave way to rougher country in which shepherds grazed their flocks, ever on the look-out for wolves and lions. And further off still was the 'wild', the empty country prowled by hunters, outlaws and bandits, where legend had it there once roamed a strange wild man whom the gazelles brought up as their own. Enkidu was his name. Several months' journey across this wilderness, over many ranges of mountains, there was a sacred Forest of Cedar, where some said the gods dwelt. It was guarded for the gods by a fearsome ogre, the terrible Humbaba, cloaked for his protection in seven numinous auras, radiant and deadly. Somewhere at the edge of the world, patrolled by monstrous sentries who were half man and half scorpion, were the twin mountains of Mashu where the sun rose and set. Further still, at the other end of the Path of the Sun, was a fabulous Garden of Jewels, and nearby, in a tavern by the great impassable ocean that surrounded the earth, lived the mysterious goddess Shiduri, who dispensed wisdom from behind her veils. Across the ocean were the lethal Waters of Death, and beyond them, on a remote island where the rivers Euphrates and Tigris welled up again from the deep, far outside the ken of men and visited only by his ferryman Ur-shanabi, dwelt Uta-napishti the Distant, a primeval king who survived the great Deluge sent by Enlil early in human history and as a consequence was spared the doom of mortals. Many other powers populated the Babylonian cosmos – deities, demons and demigods of legend – but these are the principal characters of the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic.

The epic in its context: myth, religion and wisdom

The Gilgamesh epic is one of the very few works of Babylonian literature which can be read and enjoyed without special knowledge of the civilization from which it sprang. The names of the characters may be unfamiliar and the places strange, but some of the poet's themes are so universal in human experience that the reader has no difficulty in understanding what drives the epic's hero and can easily identify with his aspirations, his grief and his despair. The Assyriologist William L. Moran has recently expounded Gilgamesh's story as a tale of the human world, characterized by an 'insistence on human values'

and an 'acceptance of human limitations'. This observation led him to describe the epic as 'a document of ancient humanism',⁹ and indeed, even for the ancients, the story of Gilgamesh was more about what it is to be a man than what it is to serve the gods. As the beginning and end of the epic make clear, Gilgamesh is celebrated more for his human achievement than for his relationship with the divine.

Though the story of Gilgamesh is certainly fiction, Moran's diagnosis is also a warning not to read the epic as myth. There is little consensus as to what myth is and what it is not, and ancient Mesopotamian mythological texts show considerable variety. Some of them, particularly the older ones, contain just one myth. Others put together two or more myths. Two features are particularly characteristic of these mythological compositions: on the one hand, the story centres on the deeds of a god or gods, and, on the other, its purpose is to explain the origin of some feature of the natural or social world.

More of the characters of the Epic of Gilgamesh are divine than not, but set beside the protagonist they are insignificant. The gods even attract unfavourable similes: in Tablet XI the poet compares them to dogs and flies, as if the rulers of the universe were parasitical scavengers. In the main the function of the poem is not to explain origins. It is more interested in examining the human condition as it is. On these grounds the epic is not myth. It certainly contains myths – the myth of the snake which shed its skin in Tablet XI being the purest example, the Flood story the most famous – and it makes many allusions to the mythology of the day, particularly in the episode of Gilgamesh's repudiation of the goddess Ishtar in Tablet VI. But most such myths are incidental to the story and the epic is certainly much more than the sum of its mythological parts – unlike, for example, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Nevertheless, the text of Gilgamesh is often studied alongside compositions which are truly mythological. Indeed, no book on the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia can resist it. The reason for this can best be explained by quoting the words of G. S. Kirk, who dealt at length with Gilgamesh in his important study of myth: 'Above all [the epic] retains, in spite of its long and literate history, an unmistakable aura of the mythical – of that kind of emotional exploration of the permanent meaning of life, by the release of fantasy about the distant past, that Greek myths, at least as we experience them, so often fail to exemplify in their own right.'¹⁰

If not truly mythological, in the sense defined above, what is this

poem? Moran's phrase, 'a document of ancient humanism', is again a useful one, for it highlights the fact that the epic is not a religious poem either, at least not in the same way as, for example, John Henry Newman's 'Dream of Gerontius'. Both poems wrestle with the fear of death and comparing them is instructive. Sensing on his deathbed the dreadful approach of the Angel of Death, Gerontius laments,

A visitant

Is knocking his dire summons at my door,
The like of whom, to scare me and to daunt,
Has never, never come to me before.

These are words that could also have been placed in Gilgamesh's mouth. Gerontius in his anguish puts himself in the hands of his God, and in religious poetry this is the proper recourse of the pious afflicted. There is plenty of Babylonian poetry in which a sufferer, often sick and feeling himself near to death, throws himself on the mercy of one or other of the inscrutable gods and asks for forgiveness and reconciliation. Gilgamesh, however, in his terror and misery spurns the help of his gods – specifically rejecting the good advice of Shamash, the god who protects him – and, even at the last, turns for solace to his own achievements rather than to his creator. The poem concludes with Gilgamesh proudly showing his companion the monument for which he became famous:

O Ur-shanabi, climb Uruk's wall and walk back and forth!

Survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!

Were its bricks not fired in an oven?

Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?

For it was Gilgamesh who in Babylonian tradition rebuilt his city's wall on its primordial foundations, and it was the fame won him by this enduring monument that would be his comfort.

The late Thorkild Jacobsen, a renowned Sumerologist who wrote on ancient Mesopotamian religion with considerable vision, once described the epic as a 'story of learning to face reality, a story of "growing up"'.¹¹ Gilgamesh begins as an immature youth, capable of anything and accepting no check; eventually he comes to accept the power and reality of Death, and thus he reaches reflective maturity.

But there is more to the epic than that. In charting the hero's progress, the poet reflects profoundly on youth and age, on triumph and despair, on men and gods, on life and death. It is significant that his concern is not just Gilgamesh's glorious deeds but also the suffering and misery that beset his hero as he pursues his hopeless quest. 'Read out', the poet enjoins us in the prologue, 'the travails of Gilgamesh, all that he went through!' As a poem which explores the truth of the human condition the epic bears a message for future generations, then as now. Maturity is gained as much through failure as success. Life, of necessity, is hard, but one is the wiser for it.

There is in fact a formal indication that the epic is a work from which one is expected to learn. In the prologue the poet asks the reader to believe that his poem was set down on stone by Gilgamesh himself for all to read. In other words, we are to imagine that the epic is an autobiography of the great hero himself, written in the third person. These are the words of King Gilgamesh for the benefit of future generations! The epic accordingly bears some relation to the well-established literary genre of 'royal counsel'. Kings, by virtue of their many counsellors and the special trappings and rituals of kingship, were expected to be wise and sagacious. Many ancient Near Eastern collections of proverbial sayings purport to be the teachings of a king or other notable to his son or successor. The biblical Proverbs are the 'wisdom of King Solomon' addressed to his son, and the wise author of the book of Ecclesiastes introduces himself as 'the son of David, king over Israel in Jerusalem'. Several such compositions survive from ancient Egypt, the best known perhaps being the 'Instructions of Amen-em-Opet'. In ancient Mesopotamia the genre is represented by the 'Instructions of Shuruppak', a Sumerian composition that is among the very oldest extant works of literature, appearing first in copies from about the twenty-sixth century BC. In this text the wise old Shuruppak, son of Ubar-Tutu, counsels his son Ziusudra. It is this same Ziusudra who was known to the Babylonians by the twin names of Atram-hasis and Uta-napishti, and who survived the Deluge and dispensed sage counsel to Gilgamesh at the ends of the earth.

More particularly the epic can be compared with a small group of Babylonian texts that have been described as 'fictional royal autobiography'. Another example of such a text is the composition we know as the 'Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn', in which an Old Babylonian

poet adopts the identity of this famous third-millennium king of Akkade and warns future rulers of the dire consequences that attend failure to rule in the manner prescribed by the gods. Naram-Sin's lapse was to go into battle without their consent. The following injunction from his 'autobiography' bears close comparison with the prologue of Gilgamesh:

Whoever you may be, governor, prince or anyone else,
whom the gods may choose to exercise kingship,
I have made you a tablet-box and written a stone tablet.
I have deposited them for you in Cutha,
in the cella of Nergal in the temple E-meslam.
Behold this stone tablet,
give ear to what this stone tablet says!¹²

The lesson for the future rulers who were the target of the text about Naram-Sin is one of patience: wait for the gods, do nothing without their say-so. The message of the Gilgamesh epic is the vanity of the hero's quest: pursuit of immortality is folly, the proper duty of man is to accept the mortal life that is his lot and enjoy it to the full. 'Do your duty in the embrace of your woman!' enjoins the poet of Naram-Sin's 'autobiography', just as in the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh epic Shiduri famously tells the hero:

But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
Make merry each day,
dance and play day and night!

Let your clothes be clean,
let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!

So too advises the author of Ecclesiastes: 'Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart . . . Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of thy life.' The themes of the vanity of human endeavour and of taking one's pleasure in

one's family are typical of 'wisdom' literature of the kind found elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

In the ancient world religion permeated intellectual activity in a way that it does not now. Read as 'wisdom', ultimately the epic bears a message of serious religious content. Its views on the proper duties of men and kings are strictly in line with the gods' requirements and conform to the religious ideology of ancient Mesopotamia: do the will of the gods, fulfil your function as they intended. So while the epic can be enjoyed for its own sake without further inquiry, some knowledge of the mythology which expressed the relationship between gods, kings and men, of how the Babylonians understood their universe, and of their religion and how their beliefs conditioned the Babylonians' approach to the divine, will give us greater insight into this masterpiece.

We know from many ancient Mesopotamian sources, in Sumerian and in Akkadian, that the Babylonians believed the purpose of the human race to be the service of the gods. Before mankind's creation, the myth tells us, the cities of lower Mesopotamia were inhabited by the gods alone and they had to feed and clothe themselves by their own efforts. Under the supervision of Enlil, the lord of the earth, the lesser deities grew and harvested the gods' food, tilled the soil and, most exhaustingly, dug the rivers and waterways that irrigated the fields.¹³ Even the rivers Tigris and Euphrates were their work. Eventually the labour became too much for them and they mutinied. The resourceful god Ea (called Enki in the poem of Atram-hasis) devised first the technology to produce a substitute worker from raw clay and then the means by which this new being could reproduce itself. The first humans were duly born from the womb of the Mother Goddess and allotted their destiny, 'to carry the yoke, the task imposed by Enlil, to bear the soil-basket of the gods'. This act of creation could be repeated as necessary. So when, as related in Tablet I of the Gilgamesh epic, the need arises to make a match for Gilgamesh, which plainly could not be done by human reproduction,

The goddess Aruru, she washed her hands,
took a pinch of clay, threw it down in the wild.
In the wild she created Enkidu, the hero,
offspring of silence, knit strong by Ninurta.

Enkidu is thus a replica of the first man, born without a mother's cries of pain.

In the poem of Atram-hasis the yoke and soil-basket, the means of carrying earth from the diggings, symbolize the burden imposed on mankind by the god Enlil. This burden was much more than earth-moving, however; it was all the work that went into looking after the gods in their temples on earth, from irrigating their fields, raising their crops and pasturing their livestock to baking their bread, butchering their meat and clothing their statues. And so it was in reality. The principal deities of the Babylonian pantheon lived, embodied in anthropomorphic statues, in palatial houses, surrounded by their divine families, courtiers and servants. The ideology was that soon after the sundering of heaven from earth the rulers of gods had divided up the land between the major deities of the pantheon, allocating to each a city and its surrounding territory. Though many cities possessed more than one temple – Babylon traditionally had forty-three – the notion remained that the city and its hinterland belonged in principle to its patron deity, the god to whom they had been given in the original partition of the land, and that they were his to exploit.

Accordingly, the patron deity occupied a large complex in the centre of town. This, the chief temple of the city, functioned as his house or, better, his palace, for the domestic arrangements of the great gods were in all essentials modelled on those of the king. Here in his palace the god (or goddess) was looked after by means of elaborate rituals. He was seated on a throne, fed regular meals, clothed in expensive garments woven with gems, and entertained with music, dance and song. In the case of a god, his wife occupied a suite of rooms close by his own, where a suitably outsize marriage bed was ready for their conjugal bliss. Other members of the family, especially the first-born son, might also be provided with a suite of rooms. The god also needed on hand his court, especially his vizier or minister, the lesser deity who did his bidding, and his domestic servants, who likewise were minor gods and goddesses.

All these deities, from the greatest to the smallest, were resident in the temple and received some kind of cult there: ritual offerings of meat and incense, ritual worship with prayer and song. The larger Babylonian temples contained several different cult-chambers and a large number of small shrines – more than a hundred in the case of Marduk's temple at Babylon – which were settings for carefully

prescribed ritual activity. The ideology was that the god was served by his divine court. The reality was that his needs were cared for by a body of human personnel specially inducted into temple service. We call these men priests, but not all of them are properly so described. For the great temples were centres of economic activity, too. In line with the belief that the land was divided among the gods in remotest history, many of these temples possessed huge holdings of arable land let out to tenant farmers. They also owned vast herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats. Some temples were also involved in manufacturing, scribal training and other social and commercial activities. Such temples employed a considerable workforce, comprising more or less independent persons, as it were sub-contractors, and dependent persons such as those dedicated to temple service. Among the latter were those who had no other means of support, widows, orphans and foundlings, who wore a symbol of some kind that disclosed their status. As Gilgamesh's mother declares when she adopts Enkidu for her son, orphans brought up by the temples were considered the latter-day counterparts of Enkidu, the foundling *par excellence*:

'O mighty Enkidu, you are not sprung from my womb,
but henceforth your brood will belong with the votaries of Gilgamesh,
the priestesses, the hierodules and the women of the temple.'
She put the symbols on Enkidu's neck.

The administration of the temple's estates, workshops and personnel was in the hands of the temple managers, just as they had responsibility for servicing the cult. This was right and proper, for the purpose of all mankind, as Ea created him, was to till the land, tend the flocks and engage in every other activity that was conducive to the comfort, satisfaction and best advantage of his divine lords. The long life of this ideology, from at least the third millennium BC until the coming of Islam, long after the demise of Babylonian civilization, is confirmed by Sura 51 of the Koran, which makes a particular point of rejecting the old belief: 'I have not created genii (jinn) and men for any other end than that they should serve me. I require not sustenance from them; neither will I that they feed me.'

There was a flaw built into Ea's creation of man, a flaw that explains how it was that something made by the gods for their own purposes was nevertheless a very imperfect tool. The clay that Ea

gave to the Mother Goddess as the raw material from which she bore mankind was animated – given spirit – by mixing it with the blood of a god:

Let one god be slaughtered
and the gods be thereby cleansed.
With his flesh and his blood
let the Lady of the Gods mix some clay,
so that god and man
are mixed together in the clay.
In future time let us hear the drumming of the heartbeat,
from the flesh of a god let the spirit be produced.¹⁴

The divine element in mankind's creation explains why, in obvious distinction from the animals, the human race has selfconsciousness and reason. It also explains why, in Babylonian belief, men live on after death as spirits or shades in the Netherworld – as famously reported in Enkidu's dream of the Netherworld in Tablet VII and in the Sumerian poem of Bilgames and the Netherworld. But the trouble was that the god who was executed to provide the blood was not the best material. In one tradition, at least, he was the leader of the rebels, who had instigated a mutiny. Small wonder, then, that mankind could be wayward. Uta-napishti tells his wife in Tablet XI, 'Man is deceitful, he will deceive you', and Gilgamesh duly confirms this unpalatable aspect of human nature by lying to him.

The innately rebellious and unruly nature of man encapsulated in this myth of his creation also informs one tradition about early human history, first found in several Sumerian literary compositions, that in the beginning the human race roamed the land like the beasts of the field, naked but hairy, and for sustenance grazing on grass. According to Berossus, a Babylonian scholar of the fourth century BC who wrote in Greek, at this stage men 'lived without laws just as wild animals',¹⁵ that is, without government, cities or social institutions. The creation of Enkidu in Tablet I of the Gilgamesh epic also alludes to this tradition:

He knows not a people, nor even a country.
Coated in hair like the god of the animals,
with the gazelles he grazes on grasses.

The myth of man's early barbarism is at odds with the tradition in which the human race is created to take up the tools of the city-dwelling gods; but the mythology of many civilizations is oral and diverse in origin, so that different traditions of how things came to be tend to coexist without difficulty. As is well known, the first two chapters of Genesis preserve two quite different accounts of God's creation of man. The civilization of mankind, according to Babylonian mythology, was the work of the gods, who sent kingship from heaven, and especially of the god Ea, who despatched the Seven Sages to Eridu and other early cities, and with them all the arts and crafts of city life. These were the beings who, according to the epic's prologue, founded Uruk with its wall: 'Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?' Foremost among these Sages was the fish-man Oannes-Adapa, who rose from the sea. Government, society and work were thus imposed on men.

The tradition that the first men roamed free and lawless and were not subject to kings helped to give rise to a myth that kings were created as distinct beings, significantly different from other mortals in appearance, capabilities and duties. The text that tells us most in this regard is known from a single tablet from Babylon written in the middle or late first millennium BC, but coronation prayers from seventh-century Assyria quote part of it and the text itself may be older. In it, the god Ea and the Mother Goddess between them create man from clay, as in the poem of Atram-hasis and other mythological texts. Then they create a superior being and give him the tools for ruling:

Ea opened his mouth to speak, saying a word to the Lady of the Gods:
'You are Belet-ili, the sister of the great gods,
you have created man the human,
fashion now the king, the counsellor-man!
Gird the whole of his figure sweet,
make perfect his countenance and well formed his body!
The Lady of the Gods fashioned the king, the counsellor-man!
They gave to the king the task of doing battle for the [great] gods.
Anu gave him his crown, Enlil gave him his throne,
Nergal gave him his weapons, Ninurta gave him his corona of
splendour;
The Lady of the Gods gave him his features (of majesty),
Nuska commissioned counsellors, stood them before him.¹⁶

This image, of the king as a man of perfect beauty, ready for battle but guided by divinely inspired counsel, is one that informs the Gilgamesh epic. The hero is shaped by the gods, of perfect looks and majestic stature, as the poet tells us in Tablet I:

It was the Lady of the Gods drew the form of his figure,
while his build was perfected by divine Nudimmud . . .
When he grew tall his beauty was consummate,
by earthly standards he was most handsome.

Not only this, but as king he exhibits an instinctive longing for trustworthy counsel, and at the end of the same tablet he looks forward with enthusiasm to the predicted arrival of Enkidu:

Let me acquire a friend to counsel me,
a friend to counsel me I will acquire!

Aside from fighting the gods' battles for them – maintaining law and order in the land by repelling the advance of the enemy and subduing internal revolt – the principal duty of the Babylonian king was to oversee the repair and maintenance of the gods' cult-centres and to ensure that they were stocked with foodstuffs and treasure. In another myth, which forms the prologue of a prayer to be said during the elaborate rituals that attended the building and rebuilding of Babylonian temples, the god Ea organizes the world to ensure the gods' comfort in their houses. In doing so, 'he created the king for the task of provisioning, he created men to be the workforce'.¹⁷ It is with this in mind that one should understand the second part of Uta-napishti's counsel to Gilgamesh in Tablet X (ll. 28off.). This passage is much broken, but the gist of it seems to be that, just as the moon and constellations ('the gods of the night') mark out the regular progression of month and year, so the king must ensure the delivery of the regular offerings required by the gods' temples.

In the epic Uta-napishti fills the role of the quintessential wise man who knows the secrets of the cosmos – as it were, the meaning of life. He and his knowledge, ancient and unique among men, are the end of Gilgamesh's long and arduous quest. Uta-napishti's counsel and story form the climax of the epic and it is here, in Tablets X and XI, that we should expect the poet's message to come through most

strongly. Apart from the observation on the duties of kings regarding the provisioning of temples, what does the old sage say?

First Uta-napishti contrasts the lot of kings with the lot of fools. By fools are meant simpletons, halfwits and village idiots, those who occupied the position in human society furthest from kings. Kings are enthroned in splendour, clad in finery, nourished with the best-quality foodstuffs. Fools make do with the opposite. One implication seems to be that Gilgamesh, who has been wandering alone clad in ragged skins and eating raw meat, is behaving not as a king but as a fool. His quest is the quest of an idiot. This is a matter of reproach, for one born to be king should act as one. Another implication is that it was the duty of kings to help those who could not help themselves. The second part of Uta-napishti's counsel, as already explained, outlines the gods' expectations of the king. This is what Gilgamesh should have been doing instead of wandering the wild: looking after the gods, his masters, and the people, his subjects. The third part of Uta-Napishti's counsel – and certainly the most important – is his discourse on life and death and on the futility of Gilgamesh's search for immortality. In the Old Babylonian epic Gilgamesh received a similar, but much shorter, lecture from Shiduri:

The life that you seek you never will find:
when the gods created mankind,
death they dispensed to mankind,
life they kept for themselves.

These lines, and the advice that follows, do not appear in the episode of the late epic where Gilgamesh talks with Shiduri. It seems that the poet of the standard version wanted to keep the wisdom for the climax and intentionally held it in reserve for Uta-napishti. The dispensing of death and life took place, as Uta-napishti tells us, in an assembly of the gods. This is another reference to the mythology of early human history. Newly created man, as we have seen, was flawed by virtue of his innate rebelliousness. Being innate this flaw could not be corrected. But the human race had another defect: it bred with great ease and rapidly became too numerous. As the poem of Atram-hasis relates, three times, at intervals of 1,200 years, the god Enlil tired of the relentless hubbub of the new creation, which kept him awake in his chamber. Each time he resolved to reduce the human population,

first by plague, then by drought and finally by famine. Each time he was successful at first, so that the numbers of man were considerably diminished. But inevitably he was thwarted by the god Ea, who each time communicated the method of man's salvation to Atram-hasis (another name for Uta-napishti), king of the city Shuruppak. Eventually the exasperated Enlil came up with the final solution, which all the gods, including Ea, swore to keep secret: he would send the Deluge to wipe out mankind. By subterfuge, however, Ea managed to warn Atram-hasis in advance, and Atram-hasis built his curious ark, ostensibly so that he could sail down to Ea's cosmic domain, the Ocean Below. The Deluge came but Atram-hasis survived, safe aboard the ark with his family, his treasure and representatives of each craft and species of animal. But the gods were stricken with hunger and thirst. Their temples were flooded. The human servants who fed and watered them were dead. Enlil's final solution was exposed as fatally flawed. The gods were about to die of want.

In the meantime the flood had abated and the ark had grounded on a high mountain peak. Then, as incense rose from where Atram-hasis offered thanks for his survival, the sweet smell of food wafted up to heaven and the gods all rushed down to feed. Enlil remonstrated with the gods for the failure of his plan and fingers were pointed at Ea. Ea, clever as always, responded by exposing the unwisdom of the Deluge. In the story as adapted for the Gilgamesh epic, Ea then asks the gods in assembly to determine what to do with the survivor. Enlil gives Uta-napishti and his wife life 'like the gods' – they will live for ever – and removes them to the ends of the earth. In the poem of Atram-hasis a bigger task is undertaken, in line with the theme of that composition. The problem of human noise has not been resolved. Ea's solution to it constitutes the climax of the poem. He has the Mother Goddess redesign man slightly so that the human race does not reproduce so effectively. Women are to be barren as well as fertile. Stillbirth and infant mortality are introduced. Certain classes of women are to be chaste as a religious requirement, like nuns. In this way fewer babies will be conceived, not all will be born alive and not all will survive to adulthood. But the biggest change, one that will have the greatest effect on the numbers of men, is that the gods establish an end to the natural lifespan. This development is not yet found in the text itself, which is broken at the crucial point, but it is suspected by force of

argument. What must happen is that Enki commands the Mother Goddess to make death an inevitable fact of life:

[You,] O mother goddess, maker of destiny,
[assign death] to the people!¹⁸

The implication is that before this reform men could die, as indeed gods could, from acts of violence, from disease and otherwise at the will of the gods, but not naturally from old age. From the time of the Deluge onwards, death is to follow life as a matter of course. This crucial moment in human history is the mythological background to the conclusion of Uta-napishti's discourse on life and death in the epic of Gilgamesh:

The Anunnaki, the great gods, held an assembly,
Mammitum, maker of destiny, fixed fates with them:
both Death and Life they have established,
but the day of Death they do not disclose.

In fact, the context of this momentous change in man's destiny is now confirmed by the newly available text of the Death of Bilgames, in the words of the god Enki to his partners, An and Enlil:

After the assembly had made the Deluge sweep over . . .
Ziusudra, one of mankind, still lived! . . .
From that time we swore that mankind should not have life eternal.

The sole exception to the new doom of mankind is the survivor of the Flood, who is made immortal. And how this came about, the story of the Deluge, is the subject of the continuation of Uta-napishti's teaching to Gilgamesh. But, as he himself explains, Uta-napishti's elevation to immortal status was an isolated event born of a particular set of circumstances never to be repeated. Gilgamesh may acquire the 'secret of the gods', the knowledge of how Uta-napishti 'found life' in the company of the gods, but he cannot follow in his footsteps. To underline his message of the futility of Gilgamesh's quest Uta-napishti challenges his visitor to defeat Sleep, the younger brother of Death, knowing that he will fail. Then he arranges that Gilgamesh should find the 'plant of

rejuvenation', knowing that he will lose it by his own hand. Only the snake is destined to benefit from it. 'Had I only turned back, and left the boat by the shore!' With these words Gilgamesh laments that he would have been better off had he not made the journey to Uta-napishti at all, when all it has brought him is the cruel realization of his own mortal inadequacy. And aware at last of his own capabilities he becomes reconciled to his lot, and wise. In the words of the prologue, to which we return: 'He came a far road, was weary, found peace.' The story of Gilgamesh's 'growing up' is, in fact, the story of a hero who grows wise, wise in the sense of learning his place in the divinely ordained scheme of things. In fact, it is the tale of one whose extraordinary experiences make him extraordinarily wise. The poet makes it clear right at the beginning that we should expect this:

He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation,
[who] knew . . . , was wise in all matters . . .
and [*learnt*] of everything the sum of wisdom.

The change wrought in Gilgamesh occurs only after a long history of heroic misdemeanours. At first he does everything wrong. He is king but he does not behave like a king. In Babylonian ideology, as throughout the ancient Near East, the king should be to his people as a shepherd to his sheep, guiding them, protecting them and ruling them with a just and equitable hand. Far from that, Gilgamesh is a cruel tyrant, whose brutality calls forth the complaint of his people. The contrast between the ideal and the actual is implicit in their lament:

Yet he is the shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
Gilgamesh, [*the guide of the*] teeming [*people*.]
. . . he is their shepherd and *their* [*protector*,]
powerful, pre-eminent, expert [*and mighty*.]

The nature of Gilgamesh's tyranny is not explained by the poet, for it is not necessary to know more than that he is a tyrant. All that is certain is that his demands mean that filial and conjugal duties are displaced. Daughters have no time to help their mothers nor sons their fathers, and wives are unable to tend the needs of their husbands. Some commentators have inferred that Gilgamesh's abuse is sexual. It is certainly true that in the Old Babylonian version of the epic the

Babylonian audience, like Enkidu, would have reacted with horror to the 'the right of first night' (*ius primae noctis*) which the wedding-guest reports as customary in Gilgamesh's Uruk:

Gilgamesh will couple with the wife-to-be,
he first of all, the bridegroom after.

Such things did not happen in Babylonia in the historical period. However, according to the text this activity was divinely sanctioned, and therefore could not have been an abuse in the context:

By divine consent it is so ordained;
when his navel-cord was cut, for him she was destined.

Others suppose that Gilgamesh's tyranny is related to his reputation as the builder of Uruk's wall. Like new irrigation projects and other grand municipal building works, city walls in ancient Mesopotamia were constructed by public labour. The workforce was conscripted from the citizenry. From the references that we have to mutinies of labour-gangs – as in the myth of the gods' revolt in the poem of Atram-hasis – it seems that the regime of such organized labour could be harsh to the point of brutality.

A third suggestion turns for inspiration to the Sumerian poem of Bilgames and the Netherworld, in which the young men of Uruk are required to share Bilgames's inexhaustible appetite for what appears to be a game of great physical demands, and the city's women spend all day attending to the needs of their exhausted menfolk. This is probably nearest the mark. In the Babylonian epic the line, 'He has no equal when his weapons are brandished,' suggests that in the Akkadian tradition the games, if that is what they were, have become more martial than they are in the Sumerian. At all events, in contrast to his splendidly regal appearance Gilgamesh's behaviour, here at the beginning of the epic, is far from the royal ideal.

The arrival of Enkidu brings relief to the people of Uruk but does nothing to make Gilgamesh wise. Full of youthful bravado he turns down sage counsel and makes the perilous journey to the Cedar Forest. There he and Enkidu kill the ogre Humbaba, in the full knowledge that the god Enlil, the greatest power on earth, had given Humbaba the job of guarding the cedar. There, too, Gilgamesh does not hold

back from desecrating the sacred groves of the gods. A similar disregard for the divine powers characterizes the next episode, in which Gilgamesh repudiates the goddess Ishtar with gratuitous insults and then fights and kills the celestial bull she hopes will avenge her. The gods, driven to act by the repeated violation of their order, doom Enkidu to die young and without a family, in fulfilment of Humbaba's dying curse. At this point Gilgamesh abandons all the responsibilities of his position for personal ends. He takes to the wild. Still unwise, he continues to reject sound advice wherever he meets it. Still he acts before he thinks. When, at the edge of the ocean that surrounds the world, he encounters the wise Shiduri in her tavern, he threatens her with violence so that she tells him how to continue on his road. Following her instructions to seek out Ur-shanabi, the ferryman of Uta-napishti, he comes across Ur-shanabi's crew, the mysterious Stone Ones, and smashes them. In doing so he only makes his journey more perilous. It is only when he reaches the realm of the Flood hero beyond the cosmic ocean that Gilgamesh begins to lose his unthinking instinct for violence. Even then, he admits that his intention had been to win Uta-napishti's secret by force of arms:

I was fully intent on making you fight,
but now in your presence my hand is stayed.

Uta-napishti's realm is in some ways an enchanted place, a kind of Prospero's isle, for it seems that on arriving there Gilgamesh begins to mend his ways. At the old man's feet he learns the lessons that make him wise. As a sign of the change wrought in Gilgamesh Uta-napishti sends him home in a magic garment that cannot become dirty. The new raiment symbolizes his new state of mind. 'Let your clothes be clean!' counselled Shiduri. 'Let thy garments be always white!' enjoins Ecclesiastes.

In the epic the explicit wisdom that Gilgamesh gained at the end of the world is knowledge of himself and the story of the Deluge. In Babylonian tradition he also gained another kind of wisdom. The prologue of the epic fêtes the hero as one

who reached through sheer force Uta-napishti the Distant;
who restored the cult-centres destroyed by the Deluge,
and set in place for the people the rites of the cosmos.

There is mythology to be explained here too, relating to the post-diluvian history of mankind. The ancient historical tradition, as reported in the king lists, is that after the Deluge human kingship had to be re-established by the gods: 'after the Flood had swept over, then, kingship being sent down from heaven, kingship was in the city of Kish'.¹⁹ The dynasty of Kish was followed by that of Uruk, of which Gilgamesh (or Bilgames) was the fifth king. The implication is that, when kings began to reign again, the antediluvian civilization was restored, that is, the order ordained by the gods came back into operation. This was important, for the traditional belief was that the gods had supplied all that was needed for human beings to flourish – cities, agriculture, the arts of civilization – at the outset of human history, in the antediluvian age. Nothing more was to be discovered; the antediluvian model was how human society should be run.

According to one ancient view, most fully reported by Berossus in his *Babyloniaca*, civilization was restored by those who had accompanied Ziusudra (the Sumerian name of Uta-napishti) on board the ark and thus survived the Deluge. This tradition is implicit in the Flood story preserved in Tablet XI of Gilgamesh and in the poem of Atram-hasis, where the mention of the craftsmen and animals taken aboard the ark explains how it was that the skills of artisans and herdsmen (and the animal kingdom in general) survived the catastrophe. But there was also a tradition, local to the town of Lagash in the early second millennium, that the gods withheld kingship for a time. During this time they did not require mankind to look after their needs by irrigating and tilling the land, and no agriculture took place:

After the Flood had swept over . . .
when the gods An and Enlil . . .
had not sent down from heaven (once more)
kingship, crown and even city,
and for all the overthrown people had not established (once more)
mattock, spade, earth-basket and plough,
the things which ensure the life of the land,
then a man spent one hundred years as a boy, free of duties,
another hundred years he spent, after he grew up,
(but still) he performed no task of work.²⁰

In this feckless, idle state the human race went hungry and failed to flourish. The tablet is broken at this point but there must have followed a description of the re-establishment of kingship and ordered life, for when the text is again legible the gods are re-introducing the people to the arts of agriculture.

The implication of the prologue of the epic is that Gilgamesh played a key role in restoring the antediluvian order after the Flood, particularly in restoring the cults of the gods to their proper glory. The new discovery of text of the Sumerian poem we know as the Death of Bilgames confirms this inference. On his deathbed Bilgames has a dream, in which the gods relate to him his heroic achievements:

You reached Ziusudra in his abode!
The rites of Sumer, forgotten there since distant days of old . . .
[after the] Deluge it was you made known all the tasks of the land.

Here also is a connection between Gilgamesh's journey to the survivor of the Flood and the restoration of cultic life. So the wisdom he brought back from his journey was more than personal knowledge. It did not suit the poet's needs to include more than allusions to it, but evidently Gilgamesh was responsible for re-civilizing his country. In this he was the tool of the god Ea, like the Seven Sages, for as Ninsun predicted in Tablet III, Gilgamesh grew 'wise with Ea of the Ocean Below'. The epic's opening words make the same connection: he 'saw the Deep, the country's foundation'. The Deep signifies Ea's cosmic domain, especially as the fount of wisdom. From this source Gilgamesh learnt the profound truths that underpinned human society and government.

In a poem whose hero becomes obsessed with the avoidance of death, it is to be expected that the poet will be much interested in the Netherworld. Conditions there are the subject of a large section of Tablet VII, in which Enkidu on his deathbed dreams of being dragged down to the Netherworld by the Angel of Death. The funeral and wake of Enkidu, described in the latter part of Tablet VIII, can be understood as the ideal model for the mortuary rites that preceded the burial of a Babylonian noble. The appended Tablet XII tells more of the fate of the shades. The relevance of this is more than a question of theme, however. The ultimate destiny of Gilgamesh would be known to every Babylonian: after death he became the deified ruler

and judge of the shades of the dead. In the Sumerian poem of the Death of Bilgames this position is given to him by the gods on account of his mother's divinity:

Bilgames, in the form of his ghost, dead in the underworld,
shall be [the governor of the Netherworld,] chief of the shades!
[He will pass judgement,] he will render verdicts,
[what he says will be as weighty as the word of] Ningishzida and
Dumuzi.

Gilgamesh's fate as one of the gods of the Netherworld is a matter which is understood in the epic. His posthumous place in the pantheon is not revealed to him, but his mother has foreknowledge of it, as she reminds Shamash in Tablet III:

Will he not rule with Irnina the black-headed people?
Will he not dwell with Ningishzida in the Land-of-No-Return?

It is a neat irony, surely appreciated by every educated Babylonian, that the hero who failed to become a god in life became one in death.

Notes

1. For the full text of the composition from which these lines are quoted see Benjamin R. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1995), pp. 165–6: Birth Legend of Sargon. This quotation and other passages from Sumerian and Akkadian literature given in this Introduction are my own translations.
2. Shulgi Hymn B 314–15. For the whole composition see G. R. Castellino, *Two Šulgi Hymns (bc)*. Studi semitici 42 (Rome: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, 1972).
3. Proverb Collection 2, no. 49; see Edmund I. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1959), p. 206.
4. Schooldays, ll. 38–41. The composition was last edited by Samuel N. Kramer, *Schooldays: A Sumerian Composition Relating to the Education of a Scribe* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1949), but it is now better understood. For the passage quoted see Konrad Volk, 'Methoden altmesopotamischer Erziehung nach Quellen der altbabylonischen Zeit', *Saeculum* 47 (Freiburg and Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 1996), p. 200.

5. For this composition see Foster, *From Distant Days*, pp. 52–77: Story of the Flood.
6. Ashurbanipal Tablet L⁴, ll. 11–12. For the whole text see Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), pp. 378–82.
7. The tablet from which these words are quoted is still unpublished. See for the moment A. R. George, 'Assyria and the Western World', in S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (eds.), *Assyria 1995. Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Symposium* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), pp. 71–2.
8. There is no modern English translation of the famous document that contains this instruction, R. Campbell Thompson, *Late Babylonian Letters* (London: Luzac, 1906), no. 1.
9. William L. Moran, 'The Epic of Gilgamesh: a document of ancient humanism', *Bulletin, Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 22 (Toronto, 1991), pp. 15–22.
10. G. S. Kirk, *Myth: its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), Chapter IV.
11. Thorkild Jacobsen, 'The Gilgamesh epic: romantic and tragic vision', in Tzvi Abusch, John Huehnergard and Piotr Steinkeller (eds.), *Lingering over Words. Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, Harvard Semitic Studies 37 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 231–49.
12. Cuthean Legend, ll. 147–53. For a translation of the whole text see Foster, *From Distant Days*, pp. 171–7.
13. This myth is most fully retold in the first part of the poem of Atram-hasis, 'When the gods were man': this is the text referred to in note 5 above.
14. Atram-hasis, I, 208–17.
15. Stanley Mayer Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1978).
16. The only edition of this recently discovered text is by Werner R. Mayer, 'Ein Mythos von der Erschaffung des Menschen und des Königs', *Orientalia* 56 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1987), pp. 55–68.
17. The most recent English translation of this text is by A. Sachs in James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd edition, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 341–2.
18. Atram-hasis, III, vi, 47–8, as restored by W. G. Lambert, 'The theology of death', in B. Alster (ed.), *Death in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia 8* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), pp. 53–66.
19. The Sumerian King List, known in antiquity as 'Kingship being sent down from heaven', edited by T. Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List. Assyriological Studies* 11 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).
20. The Sumerian text which tells this myth was edited by E. Sollberger, 'The rulers of Lagaš', *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21 (Cambridge, Mass.: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1969), pp. 279–91.

A Note on the Translation

The essential unit of poetry in Akkadian is the poetic line or verse, which usually forms a unit of sense complete in itself. There is therefore a pause at the end of each line. The verse is easily identified, for on cuneiform tablets the beginning and end of a verse coincide with the beginning and end of a line on the tablet (though not in Syria and elsewhere in the ancient West). In older poetry a single verse may occupy two or even three lines on the tablet. In the first millennium one verse usually occupies one line, though sometimes two verses are doubled up on to a single line of tablet. Extra-long lines occur occasionally; sometimes these have been arranged as two lines in the translation. (One or other of these points explains those occasions in the translation where the line-count in the margin seems to disagree with the numbers of lines of text.) In Gilgamesh the verse is the only poetic unit explicitly identifiable on the ancient manuscripts. However, more complex patterns can be detected. Usually two verses are complementary, parallel or otherwise paired by meaning or by the development of the narrative, and form a distich or couplet. A couplet is followed by a longer pause, more often than not one that in modern punctuation would be marked by a full stop (there was no punctuation in cuneiform writing). In some Babylonian poetry the division into couplets is rigorous. This is generally true of the earlier Gilgamesh poems, especially the old version of the epic represented by the Pennsylvania and Yale tablets. In the later, standard version the couplet system is not so strictly applied and one can often detect three-line combinations, or triplets. In the older texts, especially, one may also observe that two couplets usually hold together and that the poetry therefore progresses in a sequence of four-line stanzas, or quatrains.

In contrast with other renderings of the epic, some of which, it is true, do manage to observe the division into couplets, the present

translation attempts to highlight the existence of longer poetic units. To this end the second line of a couplet is indented and the stanzas are separated in the conventional modern way, by introducing space between them. Where the stanzas are consistently of two couplets, the division into quatrains is confirmed by the regularity of the poetry. In the standard version of the epic, where the system of couplets was not so consistently applied, the division into stanzas is more arbitrary and the punctuation less secure. As a working hypothesis I have assumed that in the standard version stanzas will normally comprise four lines but may on occasion consist of two, three, five or even six lines. Other translators will have other ideas.

The plot summaries that in this translation introduce each Tablet of the standard version, the line-numbers, the editorial notes which link disconnected fragments of text, and other material in small type are, like the punctuation, modern additions.

Some explanation is needed of the conventions that mark damaged text:

- [Gilgamesh] Square brackets enclose words that are restored in passages where the tablet is broken. Small breaks can often be restored with certainty from context and longer breaks can sometimes be filled securely from parallel passages.
- Gilgamesh* Italics are used to indicate insecure decipherments and uncertain renderings of words in the extant text.
- [*Gilgamesh*] Within square brackets, italics signal restorations that are not certain or material that is simply conjectural, i.e. supplied by the translator to fill in the context.
- ... An ellipsis marks a small gap that occurs where writing is missing through damage or where the signs are present but cannot be deciphered. Each ellipsis represents up to one quarter of a verse.
- Where a full line is missing or undeciphered the lacuna is marked by a sequence of four ellipses.
- * * * Where a lacuna of more than one line is not signalled by an editorial note it is marked by a succession of three asterisks.

Note in addition the following convention:

- *Humbaba In old material that has been interpolated into the standard version of the epic some proper nouns are preceded by an asterisk. This is to signify that for consistency's sake the name in question (e.g. Huwawa) has been altered to its later form.