

# The Epic of Gilgamesh: Introduction

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

Translated with an introduction by ANDREW GEORGE



## Introduction [Excerpts]

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, Utnapishti, 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.

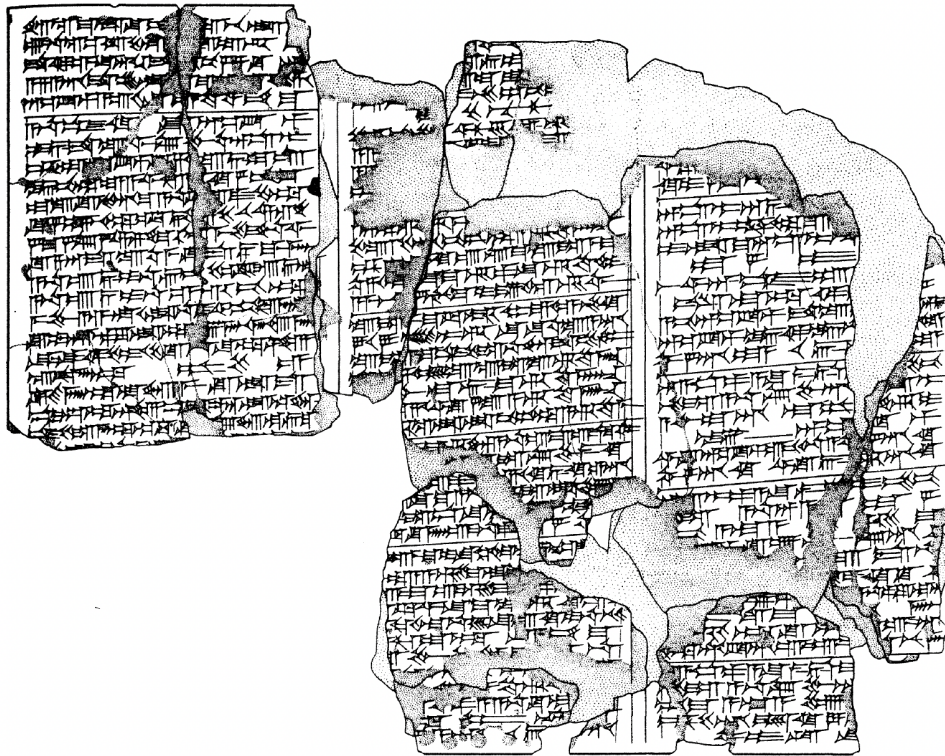
The spell of Gilgamesh has captured many since Rilke, so that over the years the story has been variously reworked into plays, novels and at least two operas. Translations have now appeared in at least sixteen languages and more appear year by year, so that the last decade has added ten to the dozens 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 wedged-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 BCE, 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-memoire 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.

[...]



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

## 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 BCE, 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, Sin, 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.

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### *Dramatis personae*

An acute accent marks the vowel of a stressed syllable. Where such a vowel falls in an open syllable it will often be long (e.g., Humbaaba). In some names the position of the stress is conjectural.

Gilgámesh, king of the city-state of Uruk

Nlnsun, a goddess, his mother

Enkídu, his friend and companion

Shámhat, a prostitute of Uruk

Shámash, the Sun God

Humbába, the guardian of the Forest of Cedar

Íshtar, the principal goddess of Uruk

Shidúri, a minor goddess of wisdom

Ur-shanábi, the ferryman of Uta-napishti

Úta-napíshti, survivor of the Flood

## 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:

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|----------------------|---|
| [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. |
| <i>Gilgamesh</i>     | Italics are used to indicate insecure decipherments and uncertain renderings of words in the extant text.   |
| [ <i>Gilgamesh</i> ] | 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.
- \*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.