

A NEW TRANSLATION OF  
THE ANCIENT EPIC

# GILGAMESH

WITH ESSAYS ON  
THE POEM, ITS PAST,  
AND ITS PASSION

SOPHUS  
HELLE

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## INTRODUCTION

“*Gilgamesh* is tremendous!” the poet Rainer Maria Rilke exclaimed in 1916. “I hold it to be the greatest thing a person can experience.”<sup>1</sup> Many modern readers have shared Rilke’s enthusiasm for the epic. *Gilgamesh* will soon celebrate the 150th anniversary of its rediscovery in 1872, and since then the epic has swept like a flood through the literary world, captivating readers across the globe. Printed in millions of copies and translated into two dozen languages, including Klingon, *Gilgamesh* is an unlikely best seller. Who would have thought that a story written three millennia ago, in the dead language of a long-forgotten culture, could appeal so powerfully to modern readers?

Imagine a novel that came out today being read and appreciated in the year 5120. Our culture will be long gone by then, our digital files corrupted, our paper books crumbled. Will there even be humans in 5120? For a book to survive that long seems almost impossible, but this is the scope of *Gilgamesh*’s triumph. Composed around the eleventh century BCE, it has survived three thousand years of history, and may well survive three thousand more.

But *Gilgamesh* also feels strangely fresh. It reads less like the poetic Methuselah it is and more like its own young, hyperactive hero. One reason why the epic has not been worn down by age is that it reentered the literary world relatively recently, compared to the Greek and Roman classics that have been known and read since they were first composed. *Gilgamesh* comes to us unburdened by reception, open to new eyes. As the poet Michael Schmidt puts it, “It has not had time to sink in.”<sup>2</sup> Impossibly ancient as it is, *Gilgamesh* can still be read as if for the first time.

The secret to *Gilgamesh*’s success lies in something else Rilke wrote about it: “It concerns me.”<sup>3</sup> The poet felt that he could relate to the epic on a deeply personal level, and, again, many readers since have shared the sentiment. After all, that is literature’s greatest trick: to tell the story of one person and make it feel like the story of everyone. It is a trick that *Gilgamesh* pulls off to perfection, leading the novelist Ali Smith to dub it “the original epic of human self-knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> *Gilgamesh* appeals to our sense

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of fundamental humanity, but it does so in the strangest way possible. The hero is anything but an average human. He is two-thirds god and eighteen feet tall, an ancient despotic tyrant who goes in search of immortality. If *Gilgamesh* tells us anything about the human condition, he does so by embodying its farthest possible extreme. He is a litmus test for us all: what he cannot do, none of us can hope to, and this makes his failure to become immortal all the more poignant.

Rilke felt that *Gilgamesh* concerned him because he shared the hero's desire for immortality, but every age and every reader finds in the epic a new aspect to connect with. It is an existential struggle against death. It is a romance between two men. It is a tale of loss and grief. It is about finding peace in one's community. To *Star Trek*'s Captain Picard, *Gilgamesh* was about finding friendship in adversity. For the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, writing about the epic was a way "to escape our age," one marked by terrible disasters for the Arab world. To the psychoanalyst Carl Jung, the epic was about incestuous desire; to the German emperor Wilhelm II, it was about power. To the classicist Andrea Deagon, *Gilgamesh* is a fellow insomniac.<sup>5</sup> In a myriad of different ways, the epic continues to concern us.

In 2019, I had the pleasure of publishing a Danish translation of the epic with my father, the poet Morten Søndergaard. It was on our book tour that I truly realized the power and breadth of the epic's appeal. During a Q&A, a young woman whose partner had recently died asked me what the epic had to say about coping with loss. The next week a member of the audience teared up as I talked about the heroes' destruction of the Cedar Forest: that was the week of the Amazon wildfires. "It's just too real," he said. As a restless young man myself, I can't deny that I also feel a connection with *Gilgamesh*. When the book tour was over, my father said that *Gilgamesh* reminded him of a punching bag. "It just hangs there. You come up to it, spar with it. You push yourself and grow stronger, wiser. But the epic just hangs there, ready for the next reader. When you're done with it, it says, 'Is that all you've got?'"

One reason for the epic's appeal is that it lures the reader in with a mix of wild energy and sober reflection. *Gilgamesh* the hero is youthful and rash, but *Gilgamesh* the epic is much more melancholic, full of meditations on death and the burden of community. The hero's exploits move the plot forward from one scene of excitement to the next, but increasingly tragic

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realizations are woven into the text. The double perspective allows the epic to both concern and captivate its audience, turning it into a work of passionate philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

*Gilgamesh* confounds many of the expectations we bring to the epic genre, in part because those expectations were shaped by the later Classical tradition, and in part because the epic itself is bent on showing how Gilgamesh falls short of the heroic ideals he sets for himself. He weeps and worries, hugs and begs, mourns and dreams far more than he fights. He never quite becomes the hyper-masculine warrior we are told to expect in the opening pages. His greatest military success, defeating the monster Humbaba, is made possible only by the intervention of his mother. In the end, the most significant event in his life is not a heroic triumph but a resounding defeat: his failure to achieve immortality.

The not-quite-epic style gives the story a playful side. It is often ironic and subversive, poking fun at its hero or critiquing his society. But the playfulness is always balanced by the gravity of its themes. The epic tackles the darkest topics without flinching: death, the loss of a loved one, qualms about committing murder, catastrophe on an apocalyptic scale. These are disturbing topics but also topics that resonate forcefully across time and bring the epic alive. For all its bleakness, the theme of death is the most vivid of the story, that which makes it feel so quintessentially human.

There is a danger in projecting onto ancient poems our modern fascination with metanarrative and stories about stories, but *Gilgamesh* seems to welcome that projection. Its climax is not a battle or a kiss but an epic within the epic: the tale of the Flood recounted by the immortal sage Utnapishti. This autobiographical account is then mimicked by Gilgamesh himself when he writes down the story of his life. As he does so, he finally finds a semblance of solace: “He came back from far roads, exhausted but at peace, as he set down all his trials on a slab of stone.”<sup>7</sup> The epic shows both the tremendous power of storytelling and the cost at which it is purchased. Through stories, the teller can achieve the next best thing to immortality: eternal life in literature. But to tell one’s story is also to stop moving, surrender one’s identity to the reader and become fixed as a character once and for all. In *Gilgamesh*, stories are both a kind of immortality and a kind of death.

However bleak, ironic, and meta-, *Gilgamesh* remains at heart a good story well told. It takes its readers through magical forests and lethal seas, dwelling on the pleasures of sex, beer, food, and friendship. The cast

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includes scorpion people, monkey mothers, a bull the size of a city, and the innkeeper of the gods. At times, the ambition of the epic almost seems encyclopedic. It works in an explanation for why snakes shed their skin, how sailing was invented, and why the city of Uruk celebrated New Year twice. The richness of detail makes the epic a source of constant fascination, but it is also a challenge for first-time readers, who can be left overwhelmed by the pure strangeness of the text.

Readers approaching *Gilgamesh* without any knowledge of the ancient Near East will find much to confuse them. The epic is written in a language that has been dead for over two thousand years, in a writing system that is richer and more complex than any alphabetic script can hope to be. Every attempt to describe the epic in a few words quickly runs into trouble. It is written in cuneiform and it is written in Akkadian—so what is the difference between them? It is a Babylonian story about a Sumerian king—or is it the other way around? Many say it is the oldest poem ever written—but is that true? (It is not.)

In the essays that follow the translation, I shall unpack the text in detail, but in this introduction, my aim is to lay out the basic knowledge necessary to understand it. Think of the introduction and the essays as need-to-know and nice-to-know, respectively. Here, I shall discuss the languages and writing system of the epic, the cultural world in which it was composed, the fragmentary state of the text, and the choices I have made in my translation.

*Gilgamesh* comes from ancient Iraq, a region often referred to as “Mesopotamia” or “the ancient Near East.”<sup>8</sup> The terms denote not a single civilization but a number of interwoven cultural systems that waxed and waned over millennia. The most significant were the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures, but they coexisted with cultures like the Hittite, Hurrian, Elamite, Eblaite, Amorite, Aramean, Kassite, Chaldean, Urartian, Ugaritic—and more. It is no coincidence that the Tower of Babel is an allusion to Babylon: ancient Iraq was always a cultural crossroad for endlessly shifting groups of peoples and languages.

What the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures all have in common is the writing system they used, cuneiform.<sup>9</sup> The cuneiform script could be employed to represent a variety of languages, just as Latin letters can be used to write anything from Portuguese to Finnish. In the ancient world, cuneiform became a medium for cross-cultural exchange, as the

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scribes who learned it, from Turkey to Bahrain and from Egypt to Iran, were introduced to the world of cuneiform culture.<sup>10</sup>

Cuneiform is the world's oldest writing system, stemming from the middle of the fourth millennium BCE. The first texts were not literature or science but chartered accountancy: writing was invented by the Sumerian-speaking people to keep track of the goods they owed and owned.<sup>11</sup> Later, cuneiform was adapted to represent an ever-greater variety of information, growing into a complex system that could be used to write receipts as well as religious doctrines. The cuneiform script changed and grew over time, falling into disuse around 100 CE, some three and a half thousand years after its invention.<sup>12</sup>

The most remarkable aspect of the cuneiform script is how many meanings each sign can carry. Each of the roughly six hundred commonly used cuneiform signs has more than one meaning.<sup>13</sup> Most signs can also be used in more than one way: as either syllabograms representing a syllable or ideograms representing a whole word. The sign <sup>𒀭</sup>, for example, can represent the sounds *ud*, *tam*, *par*, *pir*, *lah*, *lih*, and *his*, but also the words “day,” “sun,” “white,” “when,” “bright,” and “storm.” Conversely, most syllables can be written with several different signs. Scholars assign each value a number, so the sound *u*, for example, can be written with the signs *u*, *u*<sub>2</sub>, *u*<sub>3</sub>, *u*<sub>4</sub> (<sup>𒀭</sup> again), *u*<sub>5</sub>, *u*<sub>6</sub>, and so on, ranging from the most to the least used.

All this makes cuneiform a vast semiotic system of many signs and meanings, one that is certainly complex but which also offered endless possibilities for creative expression and clever interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Rather than simplifying their script, the ancient scholars relished its complexity, exploring its every crevice and connotation. While it was always possible to use cuneiform in straightforwardly prosaic ways as well, the scholars saw a wealth of meanings hidden in every sign, ready to be unpacked.

If *Gilgamesh* has survived the passing of time, this is largely because of the material on which it was written. Though cuneiform could be carved into rock, inscribed on wax, or even inked, it was mostly written by pressing a reed stylus into wet clay. The stylus leaves a wedge-shaped impression in the clay—*cunei-form* literally means “wedge-shaped”—and each sign consists of a sequence of such impressions. Cuneiform is thus a three-dimensional script, as the signs become visible only when they are brought into relief by the play of light and shadow. When light falls on a cuneiform tablet from its upper left corner, what seemed a mishmash of gray on gray

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arranges itself into row upon row of neatly written signs, often just a tenth of an inch in height.

Clay is a peculiar medium for poetry to survive on, because it combines two seemingly opposite properties: it is both durable and frail. Clay can survive the passing of time virtually unaffected. Unlike the papyrus of the Egyptians, it neither rots nor crumbles, and it cannot be eaten by vermin. As a result, archaeological excavations have yielded a cornucopia of cuneiform. Around half a million cuneiform texts have been excavated, a larger corpus than Classical Latin, though many remain unread and unpublished, as the world has only a few hundred scholars with the expertise needed to decipher them.<sup>15</sup> Even more tablets remain in the ground, awaiting excavation.

However, clay can also be shattered with frustrating ease. The vast majority of cuneiform texts have not reached us intact, but as the splinters of a tablet: the excavated sources are basically a jigsaw puzzle of gigantic dimensions. Scholars have been working to solve this puzzle since the middle of the nineteenth century, and that is the essence of the discipline known as Assyriology: studying the cultures of ancient Iraq through their numerous but fragmentary written remains.

Assyriology is closely allied to, and often overlaps with, the archaeological study of those same cultures.<sup>16</sup> Archaeologists are focused on material culture, meaning physical artefacts shaped by humans, whereas Assyriology is a philological discipline, focused on the reading and interpretation of ancient writings. Cuneiform tablets are photographed, drawn by hand or on a computer, transliterated into Latin letters, translated, annotated, and interpreted. When parts of a tablet are broken away, philologists try to reconstruct what is missing. When multiple versions of the same text exist, philologists compare their differences and merge them into a composite text.<sup>17</sup> When the text is unclear—because the signs are damaged or badly written, because the ancient scribe has made a mistake, or because the meaning is obscure—philologists debate how the signs should be identified and read. It is challenging, painstaking work, but as *Gilgamesh* shows, it can be enormously rewarding.

Of the many languages that cuneiform was used to write, two concern us here: Sumerian and Akkadian.<sup>18</sup> The languages were brought into close contact during the third millennium BCE, but in linguistic terms they could hardly be farther apart. Akkadian is a Semitic language like Arabic and He-



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brew, while Sumerian is a linguistic isolate, meaning that it is unrelated to any other known language. Think of it as akin to a meeting between an Ethiopian and a Greenlander. But the two languages coexisted for millennia and became thoroughly intertwined, exchanging loanwords and grammatical features. Cuneiform culture was thus bilingual from the start, and *Gilgamesh* is no exception: Gilgamesh's story is found in both a Sumerian cycle and an Akkadian epic.

Sumerian died out as a spoken language sometime around 2000 BCE, but it continued to be used for the next two thousand years as the language of scholarship and religious rituals, much like Latin in Europe or Sanskrit in India.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Akkadian split into two varieties: Babylonian in the south and Assyrian in the north (the dividing line ran roughly where Baghdad lies today). Although the two languages share a basic grammar and vocabulary, they differ in pronunciation and some verbal forms. Again, *Gilgamesh* straddles the two. The Akkadian epic was composed in Babylonian, but it is best preserved in manuscripts copied by Assyrian-speaking scholars, who slipped in the occasional "Assyrianism."

In what follows, I cite Akkadian words in transcription, a system that attempts to reproduce the original sound of the word with Latin letters, however imperfectly. For example, the word *destiny* in Akkadian would be *šimtu*, to be pronounced (roughly) *sheemtu*. The other system used to write Akkadian words is transliteration, which reproduces not the sound of the words but their spelling in cuneiform: in this case, *ši-im-tu*, or *ši-im-tu<sub>2</sub>*, or *šim-tu*, or the ideographic *NAM-tu*, or any other of the many possibilities that cuneiform affords. In both systems, a number of special characters are used: *š* for *sh*, *ḫ* for *kh*, and ' for the glottal stop (think of the Cockney pronunciation of *bottle* as "bo'-le"). One set of consonants is known as emphatic—that is, a somehow "heavier" version of *k*, *s*, and *t*: their emphatic variants are written *q*, *ṣ*, and *ṭ*, respectively.<sup>20</sup> Finally, long vowels are marked with either a macron (*ī*) or a circumflex (*î*), if the vowel resulted from two vowels being contracted into one. So in Assyriology, we literally have to dot the *ṭ*'s and cross the *ī*'s.

Both Assyrian and Babylonian changed over time, and they are today divided into linguistic phases: Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian, Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian, and Late Babylonian. (There is no Late Assyrian, because Assyrian culture had disappeared by that time.) Last, Standard Babylonian, a literary version of

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Akkadian, was used to write poetry and royal inscriptions; it has a free word order, an archaizing grammar, and a rarefied vocabulary. As I return to in the essays, *Gilgamesh* existed in many different versions, which are today classified by language and findspot. There is an Old Babylonian version and a Standard Babylonian version, abbreviated OB and SB, respectively, as well as a Sumerian cycle, a version found in Ugarit, an Assyrian version, and a translation into Hittite and Hurrian.

The best-preserved of these is the Standard Babylonian version, and that is the one I translate here. (Watch out for a common confusion: it is not the Standard, Babylonian version, but the Standard-Babylonian version. The language is standard; the version is not.) But even the Standard Babylonian version has not survived in its entirety—again, cuneiform tablets are numerous but broken. When translating the epic, it is customary to fill some of the holes by inserting passages from an older version in which the scene survives. For example, Enkidu’s dream midway through the story is preserved only in the Hittite version, Gilgamesh’s gigantic measurements are found in the Ugaritic version, and much of Tablet II comes from the Old Babylonian version.

Inserting material from another version is a risky affair, however, since they are far from identical. To continue the jigsaw metaphor, it is like filling the gaps left by missing pieces with an older, slightly different edition of the same puzzle: not ideal, but perhaps better than leaving the gaps blank. In this translation, the shift from one version to another is noted in the right-hand margin.<sup>21</sup> Note also that the names of some characters changed between versions: in the Old Babylonian version, the monster Humbaba is called Huwawa, and the priestess Shamhat is called Shamkatum. For the sake of clarity, I have standardized their names, so that Shamhat is called Shamhat even in passages that have been inserted from the Old Babylonian version.

The Standard Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh* was divided into twelve Tablets. The standard citation for a line from the epic is the number of the Tablet in uppercase Roman numerals followed by the line number in Arabic figures: for example, the line “All the past has turned to clay” would be XI 119. Scholars refer to these Tablets with an uppercase *T*, to avoid a potential confusion between the sections of the text, the Tablets, and the physical medium on which the text is preserved, the tablets. *Gilgamesh* is divided into twelve Tablets, but exists on hundreds of tablets.

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Cuneiform tablets come in many shapes and sizes, but the gold standard for philologists are those found in Nineveh, modern Kuyunjik, the last capital of the great Assyrian Empire. The tablets belonged to the royal library of King Ashurbanipal (r. 669–627 BCE), who gathered literary and scholarly texts from throughout his empire, and these library tablets evince remarkable care and elegant writing.<sup>22</sup> The tablets are rectangular clay blocks with rounded edges, like pillows, often about an inch thick and the size of A5 paper (roughly 6 x 8 inches). Their front side (obverse) is flat, their back side (reverse) slightly curved. The Kuyunjik manuscripts of *Gilgamesh* are six-column tablets, arranged in a landscape format with three columns on either side, separated by vertical rulings. There is no textual formatting to speak of on cuneiform tablets, no commas or capitals, no meaning-bearing difference in color or spacing. All punctuation in the translation, including quotation, exclamation, and question marks, reflects our modern interpretation of the text.

A text consisting of multiple Tablets such as *Gilgamesh* was called a series, Akkadian *iškāru*. Tablets that belong to a series end with a catchline—the first line of the next Tablet—that strings the series together. After the catchline comes a colophon, giving various pieces of information about the tablet: its title and length, the date it was made, the scribe who copied it, and the scholar who owned it.<sup>23</sup> From these colophons we know how ancient readers referred to *Gilgamesh*: like most cuneiform compositions, the epic was known by its first few words, called the incipit of the text. For the Standard Babylonian version, the incipit was “Who saw the deep” (*ša naqba īmuru*); for the Old Babylonian version, it was “Surpassing all kings” (*šūtur eli šarri*).

The verses of the epic have no fixed rhyme, but they often use alliteration and assonance, which I have done my best to re-create in translation.<sup>24</sup> The verses are often divided into half-lines and arranged into matching couplets, as in the opening sequence:

He discovered a secret,	revealed a hidden matter,
and brought home a story	from before the Flood. <sup>25</sup>

It is unclear whether the epic follows any kind of meter, since Akkadian prosody is an unsolved problem—different systems have been proposed, but none has reached universal agreement.<sup>26</sup> As a result, it is also unclear

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how the characters' names are to be stressed. They are generally pronounced with a stress on the penultimate syllable (SHAM-hat, hum-BA-ba), with the exception of GIL-ga-mesh and EN-ki-du. In these cases, the pronunciation is a modern convention, and we are not sure how the Babylonians would have pronounced them. As first noticed by the Assyriologist Benno Landsberger, almost all Akkadian verses end in a trochee—a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one—so we may assume that names found at the end of a line were pronounced that way as well: gil-GA-mesh, en-KI-du.<sup>27</sup>

Though the epic consists of twelve Tablets, the main narrative fills just eleven. Tablet XII is a direct translation of an older Sumerian narrative, and it tells a separate story about Gilgamesh and Enkidu, unlinked to preceding events. This is simply another story, set among the same characters but impossible to reconcile with the main epic. After his tragic death in Tablet VII, Enkidu is alive again, married and a father, and he travels into the underworld to retrieve a wooden ball that Gilgamesh has lost.<sup>28</sup> The bulk of the story consists of Enkidu's report of how people fare in the underworld depending on how they lived and died on earth. Scholars have been divided on how to understand Tablet XII. Some insist that it is an extraneous addition, others that it should be read as an integral, though disjointed part of the epic. The majority view is that Tablet XII is an appendix that was rather mechanically tacked on, linked to the rest of the epic by the theme of death but separate in style and storyline.<sup>29</sup>

So far, I have been referring to *Gilgamesh* as an epic, and, indeed, that is how most readers today approach it: as an epic to be read alongside the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and the *Ramayana*. However, there is no exact definition of what can and cannot count as an "epic," and ancient Babylonian readers would not have used this term, which is a much later Greek invention (*épos* literally means "word"). In the essays that follow, I return to the topic of how *Gilgamesh* combines and toys with multiple genres, but it is worth pausing at the basic question of whether the epic is, in fact, an epic.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the lack of a precise definition, the word *epic* still summons a cluster of characteristics in the minds of modern readers, most of which are found in *Gilgamesh*. An epic is usually a narrative poem. It usually tells the story of one or more superhuman figures, either gods or humans made exceptional by their exploits. It is usually set in the distant past but directly tied to a community in the present. It is usually focused in large part, if not

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entirely, on a military conflict or a battle against a monstrous opponent. All these descriptions apply to *Gilgamesh*.

However, most definitions of epics also include the requirement that it be long, and *Gilgamesh* is quite short: in its original form, it was around 3,000 lines, slightly shorter than *Beowulf* (3,182 lines) but much shorter than Homer's *Iliad* (15,693 lines), not to mention the Persian *Shahnameh* (about 50,000 lines) or the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, which is in a league of its own (about 200,000 lines). Dwarfed as it is by these cross-cultural siblings, *Gilgamesh* is still much longer than the average lyric poem, and roughly three times as long as the second-longest Babylonian poem, *Enuma Elish* (about 1,000 lines). So *Gilgamesh* is still long enough to be an epic.

But more important for most modern readers, *Gilgamesh* has an epic *feel*. It may be difficult to define a genre, but it is virtually impossible to define a feel. All the same, when they hear the word *epic*, audiences today expect something grand, heroic, action-packed, and so pathetic as to verge on the camp: in short, an escape from the quotidian into the exceptional, the excessive, the emotional. And on all those counts, *Gilgamesh* delivers in spades. Its drama is enormous and its emotions unrestrained. To steal a word from modern slang, *Gilgamesh* is *extra* ("over the top, excessive, dramatic, inappropriate, doing more than what the situation calls for"), and this dramatic excess is what makes him, in our modern eyes, an epic character, even though Babylonian audiences would not have used any of those words about him.<sup>31</sup>

At the heart of the epic is the city of Uruk. In this, *Gilgamesh* is typical of its time: cuneiform cultures were first and foremost urban cultures. The invention of writing took place during what archaeologists call the Uruk Phenomenon, an explosive historical process that created the first major cities, the first states, and the first complex social hierarchies.<sup>32</sup> Alongside Uruk, major urban centers began to spring up across the ancient Near East, and from then on, Sumerian and Akkadian cultures would be forever tied to cities. Each city had its own local identity, its own dialect and deity, its own claim to importance. The history of ancient Iraq was always defined by its most important cities: Babylon, Ur, Uruk, Ashur, Nineveh, Nippur, Sippar, Eridu, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

In the beginning of the third millennium BCE, southern Iraq consisted of a series of independent city-states that were embroiled in a complex

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network of alliances and conflicts. The cities remained largely independent of one another until the twenty-third century BCE, when King Sargon of Akkad brought them all under a single rule and so created the world's first empire.<sup>34</sup> For the next two millennia, Mesopotamian history would consist of an alternation between large empires that united the cities into one state, and a political collapse that reverted them to local self-governance.<sup>35</sup> But even as they were subjugated by far-reaching empires, the cities retained their sense of local identity. Though king after king attempted to standardize their rule, cities like Babylon and Nippur still saw themselves as the center of the universe—ancient, unique, and not to be forgotten. This is certainly the case for Uruk in *Gilgamesh*. Our hero twice travels to the edges of the world, first east to Humbaba, then west to Uta-napishti, but he always comes back to Uruk in the end. Placed midway between two symmetrical journeys to the ends of the earth, Uruk is effectively made the center of the cosmos.

The epic opens and closes with a description of Uruk, stating that the city, orchards, and clay pits are one *šār* each, and that the Temple of Heaven is half a *šār*. A *šār* was roughly two thousand acres—epics like to use big round numbers, and the real Uruk was much smaller.<sup>36</sup> The lines strike many modern readers as odd: why bother giving us the measurements of Uruk, when it is the adventures of its king that concern us? But the lines are a key example of the importance of cities in Babylonian culture.

The city is the natural frame of the epic, the logical beginning and end of the story. When the epic lifts its gaze from the individual travails of its hero, what it sees is the city.<sup>37</sup> Within the walls of the city, one could find all the comforts and conveniences of life: the temple was Uruk's crowning glory, the orchards were its economic lifeblood, while the clay pits provided building material for the houses and writing material for the scribes. The measurements that enclose the epic show us a city bustling with activity—planting, building, worshipping, and writing—in short, a living city.

The description of Uruk also reveals how closely the identity of the city was tied to its temple. In the religious world of cuneiform cultures, each god was connected to a city. Though the gods could be worshipped anywhere by anyone, they retained a special connection to the city (or sometimes cities) in which their main temple stood. The sun god, Shamash, had a special

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connection to Sippar and Larsa, the moon god, Sîn, to Ur, the wise god Ea to Eridu, and so on. Uruk had two local deities: Anu, lord of the skies and grandfather of the gods, and Ishtar, the most complex and unpredictable deity in the Babylonian pantheon, patron goddess of sex, destruction, paradox, and transformation.<sup>38</sup>

Ishtar is a central character in Babylonian poetry, and with good reason—her poetic potential is endless. Some hymns portray her as a naive young girl smitten with the shepherd boy Dumuzi, others as a savage warrior devouring the corpses of her enemies. She is always changeable and always changing everything around her, turning mountains into valleys, men into women, and weaklings into warriors. She does nothing that ought to be done and everything that should not be.<sup>39</sup> Given the link between gods and cities, her character in turn reflected on Uruk, which was associated with frequent festivals and the ritual performance of activities that were otherwise taboo.<sup>40</sup>

The link between gods and cities also meant that when the political balance between cities shifted, so did that between gods. When Babylon rose to political prominence during the second millennium BCE, its previously minor god Marduk became the king of the universe, ousting the former ruler Enlil. The shift had already taken place when the Standard Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh* was composed, but the epic retained the older theology, with Enlil as the ruler of the gods and Marduk all but absent.<sup>41</sup>

The Babylonian pantheon was a motley and messy affair, and nowhere is that clearer than in *Gilgamesh*. The gods were not expected to act in unison, a fact that the epic employs to great dramatic effect. The gods in *Gilgamesh* furiously disagree with one another, repeatedly change their minds, and make any number of shortsighted decisions. They are selfish, spiteful, trigger-happy, and vain. But the epic is not universally critical of the divine order, though readers could easily be left with that impression. In the end, it seems to favor one god in particular: as noted by the Assyriologist Martin Worthington, the god Ea plays an intriguingly central role in the epic, even when he hides at the margins of the story.<sup>42</sup>

Ea, god of wisdom and city god of Eridu, is a trickster figure, a sly and calculating character who in Babylonian poetry is often called upon to resolve the problems caused by others, or to protect the humans against his fellow gods.<sup>43</sup> Ea lives in the Apsû, a mythical underground lake from which

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rose the groundwater that nourished the fertile land of ancient Iraq. Gilgamesh descends to the Apsû at the end of the epic, and it is implied that he gains great wisdom by the mere proximity to Ea.<sup>44</sup>

Hints about Ea's importance are strewn throughout the epic. The second word of the text, *naqbu*, can mean "totality" or "depth," recalling Gilgamesh's journey into the Apsû, but it was also one of Ea's many names.<sup>45</sup> Another hint at Ea's importance is the repeated mention of the fraction "two-thirds" (for example, the name of the character Ur-shanabi means "servant of two-thirds").<sup>46</sup> Each god in Babylonian mythology was assigned a number: the Moon God was thirty, Ishtar was fifteen, Shamash was twenty, and Anu was sixty. The Babylonian number system was base sixty (as opposed to the current Western system, base ten), and two-thirds of sixty is forty: the number of Ea.<sup>47</sup>

Despite his importance, Ea evades the spotlight of the epic, appearing very rarely outside Uta-napishti's story in Tablet XI. Gilgamesh never talks to him in person, as he does with Ishtar and Shamash. Instead, Ea enters the story as a muffled whisper through the cracks of a wall, warning Uta-napishti to flee the coming Flood. Ea's words are retold to Gilgamesh centuries later by the now immortal Uta-napishti. Nested in Gilgamesh's story, the words have defied all odds in reaching our ears as well. They have been passed from scribe to scribe for centuries, buried for millennia, unearthed and pieced together by philologists, so that we too can hear the echo of a divine whisper telling us to listen.

The story of the Flood and of Ea's whispered words is one of the most important myths in Babylonian culture.<sup>48</sup> The background of the story is only hinted at in *Gilgamesh*, but we may safely assume that all Babylonian scribes would have known it from countless retellings. Today it is best preserved in an older epic, *Atra-hasis*, in which it goes as follows:<sup>49</sup> Thousands of years ago, humans had grown so numerous that the gods could not sleep for their noise, and Enlil, ruler of the gods, was furious. He tried to cull the human population with famines and plagues, but each time Ea (who is there called Enki) broke ranks and showed the humans a way out of their predicament. In the end, Enlil decided on a truly catastrophic solution: he would unleash the Flood and exterminate all humans. The gods swore an oath not to warn the humans of the coming destruction—this time, there would be no help.



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Enter Uta-napishti. His name literally means “He Found Life,” but this seems to be an honorific he earned after achieving immortality: he was first called Atra-hasis, “He Is Very Wise.”<sup>50</sup> In the eponymous epic *Atra-hasis*, we are told that he had a special bond with Ea: he could speak to his god and his god would speak back. Sensing that something was afoot, Atra-hasis asked Ea for advice—but of course, Ea had been bound not to reveal the gods’ plans. However, Ea managed to circumvent the oath of silence by communicating with him indirectly, through a coded speech passed on through the wall of his house. Ea’s speech, especially as reported in *Gilgamesh*, is a masterpiece of misdirection and ambiguity.<sup>51</sup> Luckily, Atra-hasis understood Ea’s coded words and built a ship on which to escape the Flood.<sup>52</sup> After the cataclysm, the gods realized the true extent of their mistake: without the humans to feed them with regular offerings, they starved, swarming like flies to Atra-hasis’s sacrifice.

The story of the Flood gives the mythical background for two central elements of Babylonian culture: omens and offerings. Without offerings, the gods would go hungry, meaning that they were dependent on humans. Conversely, the humans were dependent on the gods’ every whim, however ill-considered, and their only way of deducing those whims was through omens. In *Atra-hasis* it seems that before the Flood gods and humans had been able to communicate directly, but after the oath of silence, the gods would rely on the subterfuges devised by Ea, speaking through dreams and objects, like the wall through which Ea whispers to Atra-hasis: the first omen. One possible (if not fully certain) reading of the Flood myth is thus as an etiology of omens, explaining why the gods began to speak in codes.<sup>53</sup>

In ancient Iraq, omens were everywhere. Omens could be found in the path of planets, the entrails of sacrificed sheep, the movement of oil in water, malformed births, and bizarre events, but also in seemingly everyday occurrences. The series *Shumma Alu*, “If a City,” collected omens relating to city life: cats of various colors crossing the street, ants crawling on a wall, pigs dancing in the city square, and the number of thieves, scholars, idiots, tall men, short men, deaf men, and blind men who lived in the city. (Too many scholars was a bad omen.) Even human behavior could be an omen: there were omens to be found in the way a person looked, spoke, walked, woke up, built a house, got divorced, and had sex.<sup>54</sup>

The post-Flood system of human-divine communication involved a sequence of offerings and omens.<sup>55</sup> A person would give an offering to the

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gods—such as a white lamb if the donor were rich, or sesame oil if poor—and pose a question. The gods would consume the offering and give their answer in the liver of the sheep, or the pattern formed by the oil as it was poured into a bowl of water, or in any of the other divinatory media. If the answer was negative, revealing that the gods were ill-disposed, the humans could attempt to change their minds with yet more offerings, accompanied by prayers and incantations designed to glorify the gods' power and pacify their angry hearts. New omens would then be taken to see if the attempt had been successful—and the process was repeated until the result came out positive.

The characters in *Gilgamesh* are no different. Throughout the epic, the heroes are constantly making sacrifices to the gods: they pour out sacred flour and fresh water, they offer trophies after their victories in battle. In return, they seem not to sleep a single night without receiving an ominous dream.<sup>56</sup> The dreams are among the most vivid scenes in the epic, but as with all omens, their meaning is far from straightforward, and the interpretations given by Enkidu and by Gilgamesh's mother are anything but intuitive. The system of communication instituted by Ea relied on ambiguity and interpretation: dreams and omens were like knots to be untied. The Akkadian word for "interpret," *pašāru*, literally means "to unknot."<sup>57</sup>

The logic of indirect communication also shaped ancient medicine. Diseases were thought to be caused by divine displeasure, so Babylonian physicians had to both allay the patient's symptoms and identify their underlying cause: which god was angry and why.<sup>58</sup> We see this logic at work in Tablet VII. The gods announce their decision that Enkidu must die through an ominous dream, and he immediately falls ill. Gilgamesh says that he will pray and sacrifice to the gods in order to change their minds, as per the usual system. But here the normal order is interrupted, since Enkidu explains that Enlil's stubborn mind will not be swayed, and that there is no escape from him. Enlil's verdict was the ancient equivalent of a terminal disease.

For Babylonian and Assyrian citizens, the back-and-forth between gods and humans was an all-important part of life. Omens, offerings, prayers, and incantations were a mainstay of the ancient world, and the vast majority of texts held in ancient libraries were related to this system of communication.<sup>59</sup> Cuneiform scholarship consisted of enormous omen collections, ritual incantations, hymns and prayers, instructions for the performance of

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offerings, lists of symptoms and their diagnoses—all texts that were meant to deduce and then sway the will of the gods.

The system allowed humans to claim just a sliver of influence on the wild cosmic forces that ruled their lives. The Flood story that appears in *Gilgamesh* is told in no small part to explain this order of things, linking gods and humans through ciphers and sacrifices, and so demonstrating the full extent of their mutual dependency. It also reminds us of the importance of being on the lookout for omens: our every dream could hold a warning of the next Flood.

The story of the Flood is remarkably well preserved, but all the epic's Tablets are incomplete: *Gilgamesh* comes to us as a broken echo. The ancient song was silenced long ago, and today it survives only as the fragment of a transcript. There is not one, complete manuscript of *Gilgamesh*, as there is of *Beowulf* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In translation the epic appears to be a coherent text, but in fact it is a tapestry of broken pieces, overlaid to fill one another's holes. When Andrew George completed his magisterial edition of *Gilgamesh* in 2003, there were a total of 184 fragments of the Standard Babylonian version.<sup>60</sup> From that heap of shards, philologists forge a single text.

However, the multitude of manuscripts is not distributed equally across the epic. Some parts have more copies than others, and, conversely, there are many sections for which not a single copy survives. These holes in the text are called lacunae, literally "little lakes": they are the missing sections we cannot reconstruct. In 2003, George assessed the epic's preservation:

The grand total for the eleven-tablet epic, leaving aside the appended Tablet XII, yields a survival rate of almost 2,400 lines out of an original line-count that fell just short of 3,000. On these figures, 20 per cent of the poem is still completely missing; taking into account the fact that many lines counted as present are damaged to some degree, it is probably fair to write that so far we have about two-thirds of the poem at our disposal. As new manuscripts are found this fraction will steadily grow. Several centuries hence there will surely come a day when the text is once again complete.<sup>61</sup>

George's hope is already being fulfilled. Since 2003, several new sections have come to light. The largest discovery came in 2014, when George and

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Farouk al-Rawi published a new manuscript that added a long section to Tablet V. The publication of new pieces from older versions of the epic has also added to our understanding of *Gilgamesh* as a whole, and our knowledge of its literary history grows with every passing year.<sup>62</sup>

A project titled Electronic Babylonian Literature (eBL), headed by Enrique Jiménez, is assembling an online repository of literary manuscripts that will make the jigsaw puzzle of Assyriology much easier to solve by using digital tools to identify even the tiniest fragments: these can be less than half an inch in height and contain no more than four signs.<sup>63</sup> Minute as they are, these pieces can be used to fill in holes that still remain in *Gilgamesh* and other works of Babylonian literature, one sign at a time. In 2021, the database will be made freely available, accompanied by translations in English and Arabic, so that anyone with Wi-Fi can follow the latest discoveries of *Gilgamesh*.

Add to this the ongoing archaeological discovery of new tablets, and the text of *Gilgamesh* is likely to remain in flux for the foreseeable future. New pieces can be expected to appear with regular frequency over the next decades. This is another feature that makes *Gilgamesh* unique in the literary canon: no other ancient classic is so frequently updated. While we cannot hold out hope for a new passage from the *Odyssey*, a new scene of *Gilgamesh* appeared as recently as 2018.

About that scene. It was a small fragment that made George rearrange the beginning of Tablet II.<sup>64</sup> We can now follow Enkidu's transformation from beast to man in more detail, tracking the stages that led him to humanity: despite being no more than two inches high, the fragment shed new light on what it meant to become human in ancient Babylonia. It also showed that Enkidu's marathon of sex with Shamhat lasted twice as long as previously thought, and this was the aspect that the media latched on to: the *Times* reported the discovery under the headline, "Ancient Sex Saga Now Twice as Epic."<sup>65</sup>

At the time, I was working on the Danish translation of *Gilgamesh* with my father. When the new fragment came to light, we had to go back and change our translation to reflect the latest philological developments. Likewise, a tiny piece of Tablet III was published just two weeks before I submitted the final manuscript for the present book, including a lovely line where Gilgamesh's mother asks the Sun God to "open the road and ready the mountains" for her son.<sup>66</sup> This is a bizarre experience for a translator—

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to see the text you are working on, especially one as ancient as *Gilgamesh*, change shape before your eyes. It is like trying to paint a model who refuses to sit still.<sup>67</sup>

With the steady trickle of new texts, perhaps the epic will one day be complete. I feel both optimistic and wistful about the prospect. I think I will miss the blanks when they are gone. In one sense it is obviously preferable to have a complete story: many readers find the breaks frustrating, and every addition brings new and exciting perspectives to the epic. All the same, I cannot escape the feeling that the fragments are beautiful in their own way. The scatter of words sometimes reads like a modernist poem: "... gods ... made ... gift ... throw ... his heart ... provide ... humanity."<sup>68</sup> There are also moments when the breaks feel like deliberate reticence. The last section of Tablet VII is missing, as if to spare us the pain of witnessing Enkidu's death, or perhaps to give him a last moment of privacy—like a nurse pulling the curtain to hide a dying man.

In the blank spaces, readers can get a sense of the epic as it really is. They show the seams of a story that has been stitched together from multiple manuscripts, none of which holds the entire text. The blanks remind us of the ultimate inaccessibility of ancient poetry. The story as it was experienced by a Babylonian audience has disappeared once and for all, leaving us only with fragmentary remains. We cannot possess the ancient text, we cannot grasp it and make it ours, since the original form that was sung in ancient Uruk will forever escape us. The missing sections show the unsurmountable distance that remains between us and the epic, and that distance can be engaging. "I don't know if it would be as intriguing," the playwright Yusef Komunyakaa says about *Gilgamesh*, "if there weren't a hundred ellipses. There are these great silences in the piece. So we can negotiate within those silent spaces. We can imagine within those spaces."<sup>69</sup>

There is also another, grimmer reason why the discovery of new fragments should not always be met with celebration. Some new discoveries are made through legitimate means: scientific excavations or the study of overlooked tablets in museum archives. But sometimes, as with the large fragment of Tablet V published in 2014, texts come to light because they were dug up through illegal looting and bought on the black market.

Looting is calamitous for archaeology.<sup>70</sup> It destroys the structure of an archaeological site, depriving us of vital information about the original context of ancient artefacts. Often the looters are desperate Iraqi citizens,

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impoverished by the many waves of war and disaster that have rolled over their country for decades. But the black market's chain of supply is naturally difficult to divine, and some middlemen probably have ties to terrorist organizations. When a new discovery of a cuneiform tablet is widely advertised and celebrated, it raises the stakes for the looters, who now have more incentive to find new pieces. More archaeological sites are disturbed and more cash injected into a shadowy, potentially dangerous economy. That cash often comes from private collectors in the West, who have no scruples about the pedigree of the artefacts they acquire. When it is done right, the discovery of new cuneiform tablets can be serendipitous, adding new lines to ancient literature, even shedding new light on what it meant to be human in Uruk. (And yes, doubling already impressive sex marathons.) But when it is done wrong, the consequences can be disastrous.

Whether or not *Gilgamesh* will ever be reconstructed in its entirety, for now we must read it as it is: broken. While some translators fill in the gaps with their best guesses, most prefer to leave them blank. The usual way of indicating a break is with ellipses enclosed in square brackets: [. . .]. I find this convention unbearably ugly. The bulky, sharp-cornered brackets are like barbed wire in my eyes. So when making the Danish translation, my father and I were determined to find a new way of representing fragments. The designer Åse Eg and the team at Wrong Studio came up with what I think is a brilliant solution: a raised dot. Like so:

The mountain ·	· the skies ·	·
The beasts of the wild ·	· your crimson sheen. <sup>71</sup>	

I have used this method to indicate missing sections in the translation below. When more than one line is missing, I have left the corresponding number of lines blank, so if philologists estimate that the text had twenty lines that are no longer there, you will find twenty empty lines in my translation. The raised dots are still a bit of an experiment—I hope you like them.

Faced with a medley of fragmentary manuscripts, each of which poses its own problems and often deviates from the others, readers would be at a complete loss on how to approach the text were it not for philologists, who turn those messy manuscripts into a readable text edition. Luckily, *Gilgamesh* has been graced with an exceptionally good edition, that by Andrew

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George.<sup>72</sup> George's book is a master class in philological precision and ingenuity, giving a transliteration of the original Akkadian and a faithful translation into English, as well as a series of illuminating essays on the epic's history and meaning. It is a benchmark not just for the study of *Gilgamesh* but for philology as such.

My translation of *Gilgamesh*, like many others, is thoroughly indebted to George's reconstruction and interpretation of the Akkadian text. George also published a slightly freer translation with Penguin in 1999, and it was soon joined by Benjamin Foster's translation of the epic in 2001 and his updated version in 2019.<sup>73</sup> George and Foster take similar approaches to the text: they stay close to the original and seek to re-create the archaizing quality of the text. When the Standard Babylonian version was composed, a little more than three thousand years ago, it was already meant to sound old, and George and Foster reproduce this *altmodisch* effect in their translations. But the translations remain first and foremost scholarly endeavors, whose primary aim is philological faithfulness.

Based on these and other translations, poets across the world have retold the epic—to convey its beauty, like David Ferry and Jenny Lewis, or to bring out its immediacy and clarity, like Nancy Sandars and Stephen Mitchell.<sup>74</sup> These retellings have much to commend them, but they are not based on the Akkadian original—they are translations of translations. Here, I stake out a middle way, engaging with the text in its original form but also trying to stay true to the poetic power and extraordinary vividness of the epic, which often leads me to depart from philological exactitude.

The translations by Foster and George indicate words that are missing but which have been reconstructed by enclosing them in square brackets, and words that are only implied in the Akkadian by setting them in parentheses. George also indicates words that are problematic or somehow obscure by setting them in italics. I do none of this. Words that are ambiguous, implicit, emended, or reconstructed appear in regular typeface, giving my best guess at what the text once said (mostly following George's edition). The reader who would like to know exactly what is in the original manuscripts and what modern philologists have emended should consult George's edition or go to the eBL website.

I stick as close as I can to the original structure of the text, by letting most verses be self-standing phrases, but occasionally I break up overly long lines by turning each half-verse into its own verse. A major challenge

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in translating Akkadian poetry is to render how wonderfully succinct it is. In a line like “he smeared himself in oil and turned into a man,” English needs ten words where Akkadian has four (*šamnan iptasšas-ma awiliš īwe*).<sup>75</sup> Instead of the archaisms highlighted by George and Foster, I focus on alliterations and aural patterning, another important quality of the text. Lines that appear unimpressive in a literal translation often hide a vivid verbal game in Akkadian. For example, the dull-looking sentence “If your hand can reach this plant” does no justice to the amazing and alliterative verse *šumma šamma šášu / ikáššadá qatáka*.<sup>76</sup> So in my translation, I echo the alliteration, however faintly, by letting Gilgamesh’s hand not just reach but “pluck this plant.” While I cannot always match verbal games in the Akkadian with an English counterpart in the same line, I have done my best to re-create the sinuous and sonorous pleasure of the poem.

Like all translations, this approach has its pros and cons. Consider the following literal translation of the epic’s opening passage:

Who saw the depth (or: the totality), the foundations of the land,  
who knew the ways, understanding everything:  
Gilgamesh, who saw the depth (or: the totality), the foundations of the land,  
who knew the ways, understanding everything.  
He examined each of the (or: the matching) throne-daises,  
and grasped the sum of knowledge about everything.  
He saw the secret and opened the covered,  
he brought back a report from before the Flood,  
he came a distant road and so was exhausted, but (or: and) given peace,  
all (his) hardships being set on a stele.  
He built the wall of Uruk, the sheepfold,  
of holy Eana, the pure storehouse.  
See its wall, which is like a thread of tufted wool (or: like the shining of copper?),  
look at its parapet, which no one will equal.  
Take the threshold (or: stairway), which is of former times,  
and draw near to Eana, Ishtar’s dwelling,  
which no future king whatsoever will equal.<sup>77</sup>  
Go up on top of the wall of Uruk and walk around,  
examine the foundation base, inspect the brickwork,  
(check) if its brickwork is not oven-baked bricks,



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and if the seven sages did not lay its foundation.

One *šār* is city, one *šār* is orchard, one *šār* is clay-pits, half a *šār* is Ishtar's temple:

Three and a half *šār* is Uruk, (its) measurements.

Even a faithful translation like this obscures more problems than it reveals. What looks like one text is in fact a composite of six different manuscripts (named B, F, d, o, h, and g), which have been woven together in George's edition.<sup>78</sup> They differ from each other in relatively minor ways: manuscripts from the first millennium BCE are notoriously flippant about case endings, so in line 6, the word "everything" is variously rendered *kalāmu*, *kalāmi*, and *kalāma*, but the sense is the same. In line 9, one manuscript has "he comes" in the present tense while the other has a past tense, "he came" (*illakam* and *illikam*, respectively); the latter is more appropriate in the context.<sup>79</sup> In George's edition, the first five lines were highly fragmentary; they were restored later thanks to the discovery of a Middle Babylonian manuscript from Ugarit, which, however, deviates from the Standard Babylonian text in all sorts of other ways.<sup>80</sup>

Having established what the text says, we come to the question of what it means. The prologue is far from the most problematic passage in the epic, but it does have its difficulties—starting with the second word of the epic, *naqbu*, which can mean either "depth" or "totality."<sup>81</sup> Most translators opt for the former, which is more evocative, but that leads to the question of what depth is meant: might it be the Apsû, the underground lake that Gilgamesh visits in Tablet XI, or perhaps a more metaphorical profundity? In line 13, we come to a particularly tricky phrase, which has bedeviled philologists since 1933: *kīma qê nips[u]*, or, perhaps, *kīma qê nibt[i]*.<sup>82</sup> The two current proposals are to read "like a thread of tufted wool" or "like the shining of copper." The word choice of the former is strange, the grammar of the latter is unusual, and the meaning of both is obscure. How is a wall like a thread, and how is it like copper? In my translation, I assume that it was "white as wool," but other options are equally possible. Such problems are found throughout the text.

Then we have the question of how to render words whose meaning may be obvious to philologists but not to anyone else. This is the case with Eana in the passage above. Eana is Ishtar's temple in Uruk, but since it is metaphorically called a pure storehouse, the modern reader could easily

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be confused: does Ishtar live in a clean storage room? In my translation, I follow the original Sumerian meaning of Eana, which is literally “house of heaven,” turning it into “Temple of Heaven” and so allaying doubt.

By that same principle—making the text as clear and easily accessible as I can—I have clarified phrases whose meaning would be knotty in a literal translation. In the phrase “all (his) hardships being set on a stele,” the Akkadian text does not include the word “his,” but it is clearly implied, so it is common practice to restore it. Such implied words are often given in parentheses, but I feel that this would clutter the text, so in my translation the phrase becomes “he set down all his trials on a slab of stone.”<sup>83</sup> I likewise transform the phrase “he examined each of the throne-daises” into “he sought out rulers everywhere,” because the “throne-dais” is here used as a metonym for the ruler who sat on it—referring, I believe, to Gilgamesh’s visits to the two rulers at either end of the earth, Humbaba and Uta-napishti.<sup>84</sup>

Finally, we come to the end of the passage, the list of Uruk’s measurements. This couplet is extremely compressed in Akkadian: it is literally just “šār city, šār orchard, šār clay-pit,” and so on. In English, something must be done to keep the list from killing the epic mood before the story has even started. Here I break the couplet into five separate lines, to emphasize the rhythmic, rigid structure of the list. Further, in order to bring out the shift in focus that invites the audience to consider not just Gilgamesh’s achievement, but the glory of Uruk as a whole, I have inserted the word “Look” at the beginning of the list. It is not there in Akkadian, but I feel that it reflects the thrust of the text, which does ask its audience to summon Uruk in their mind’s eye. Some readers may feel uncomfortable with such liberties, but luckily, more faithful translations of *Gilgamesh* are readily available. What follows is merely my take on this ancient masterpiece.

# GILGAMESH

## TABLET I

# Who saw the deep

There was a man who saw the deep, the bedrock of the land, who knew the ways and learned all things: Gilgamesh saw the deep, the bedrock of the land, he knew the ways and learned all things.	1
He sought out rulers everywhere and came to grasp all wisdom in the world. He discovered a secret, revealed a hidden matter, and brought home a story from before the Flood. He came back from far roads, exhausted but at peace, as he set down all his trials on a slab of stone.	5     10
He built the wall around Uruk the Sheepfold and around that holy treasury, the Temple of Heaven. See that wall—white as wool! Behold the bulwark that cannot be rivaled.	
Step across the ancient threshold and up to the Temple of Heaven, home of Ishtar, that no king will ever outdo.	15
Climb the wall of Uruk, walk its length. Survey the foundation, study the brickwork. There—is it not made of oven-baked bricks? Did the Seven Sages not lay its cornerstone?	20

## GILGAMESH

Look: Two thousand acres for the city,  
two thousand acres for the orchards,  
two thousand acres for the pits of clay,  
and one thousand acres for the temple of Ishtar.  
Seven thousand acres is the size of Uruk.

Now look for the cedarwood box,  
undo its locks of bronze, 25  
open the door to its secrets,  
take up the tablet of lapis lazuli and read aloud:

read of all that Gilgamesh went through,  
read of all his suffering.

He surpassed all kings, that splendid man of muscle,  
heroic son of Uruk, the goring aurochs.<sup>1</sup> 30  
When he marched at the front, he was the leader of his army,  
when he marched at the back, the trust of his troops.

A mighty riverbank, the shield of his soldiers,  
and a furious flood that crushes walls of stone.  
The calf of Lugalbanda, superb in strength, 35  
nursed by Ninsun, the holy aurochs!

Gilgamesh the great, magnificent and terrible!  
He cut passes through the mountains,  
he dug wells in the hillsides,  
he traveled toward sunrise, crossing sea after sea, 40  
he searched in all directions for life without end,  
he reached, through his toils, the faraway Uta-napishti,  
he rebuilt the temples that the Flood had destroyed  
and established the right rituals for vast humankind.

Who can compete with him in kingship 45  
and claim, like Gilgamesh, "I am the king"?  
From the day that Gilgamesh was born and named,

## The Storm of His Heart

Gilgamesh's superhuman forces have been all but spent as he finds himself adrift on otherworldly waters. His search for immortality has led him through strange lands, but now he is stuck. As always, the problem is of his own making. Had he not met everyone with thoughtless aggression, smashing the Stone Ones that used to guard Ur-shanabi's boat, he would not have found himself stranded on the Waters of Death, out of punting poles and out of luck. But Gilgamesh has energy left for one last feat. He strips off his shirt and raises it up to form a sail. With sore and outstretched arms, he becomes a human mast.<sup>1</sup>

This is a powerful image—it hurts. When I first read the passage, I struggled to make sense of it, but it eventually became for me the clearest image of who Gilgamesh is as a person. Throughout the story, he is always driven onward, as a sail bearing the brunt of his own desire. There is a storm in his heart, as the gods say when they create Enkidu.<sup>2</sup> The disquiet in his mind makes him exceptional, but it also brings him much pain, often the result of his own thoughtless fury. Buffeted by winds both within and without, Gilgamesh is led to glory and grief, love and undoing.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Greek heroes who are half man and half god, Gilgamesh is an uneven fraction, two-thirds god and one-third human: he is, in a word, unbalanced.<sup>4</sup> The opening line of the epic's Old Babylonian version is "He surpassed all kings," in Akkadian *šūtur eli šarrī*. The word *šūturu* means "to exceed, to overdo" and this is the hero's defining trait, both the ideal to which he aspires and his main problem. Eager to excel, he is unable to rest. Gilgamesh goes where none has gone before, and often he goes too far. He outdoes all rivals and is too much to bear.

The epic begins with the key problem of Gilgamesh's excessive desire. His surplus energy makes Gilgamesh a tyrant who subjects his people to constant demands. It is not made clear how he exploits the citizens of Uruk—sexual abuses? constant athletic games? forced labor on the wall of Uruk?—but manifestly he asks too much of them.<sup>5</sup> His ambition drives him

to extremes and them to exhaustion. Later that same restlessness will lead him to magnificent quests, such as the expeditions to kill Humbaba and to find eternal life, but where does it come from? What is the force that urges him on to new exertions? Why can't he just find peace in the luxury of his palace? The epic is anything but clear on the question.

Take the expedition against Humbaba. The epic gives several reasons for it, but the actual motive is much more muddled.<sup>6</sup> That Humbaba is evil and should be killed, that precious cedar should be brought back to Uruk, and that Gilgamesh wants to establish a name for himself are all presented as excuses for a quest whose actual origin is surprisingly ambiguous. Gilgamesh first proposes the quest because Enkidu is sad. The passage is fragmentary, but it seems that Ninsun has made Enkidu realize that because he has no family, he will have no one to honor his memory after his death.<sup>7</sup> Gilgamesh's solution is simple: do what no one has done before, become famous, and you will be remembered forever, with or without a family. But if the mission is for Enkidu, it is also despite him, since Enkidu opposes the idea at every turn. Enkidu's sadness may be the occasion for the quest, but it does not sit easily as its cause.

Gilgamesh's idea meets with disapproval from Enkidu, Ninsun, and the elders of Uruk, and to each he explains his plan by saying, "My mind is made up. I will walk the far road to the home of Humbaba."<sup>8</sup> He presents the quest as stemming from nothing but his will, letting the royal resolution "my mind is made up" (literally "I have grown massive," *agdapus*) eclipse any argument for why it should be a good idea.

Ninsun is dismayed by her son's plan. On the roof of her palace she appeals to the Sun God, asking with palpable despair, "Why, Shamash, did you burden my son with so restless a heart? Now you have touched him, and so he will walk the far road to the home of Humbaba."<sup>9</sup> With these words, Ninsun effectively explains why Gilgamesh wants to go: it is because of his restless spirit, literally, "the heart that does not sleep" (*libbu lā sālila*). But in the same breath, Ninsun also complicates Gilgamesh's motive. She repeats Gilgamesh's words but gives them a crucial spin, saying that he will walk the far road to the home of Humbaba, not because his mind is made up, but because the Sun God set him off in that direction. Her description of the quest is the same, but the underlying cause is not, blurring the distinction between internal desire and external influence. So which is it? Did Gilgamesh make up his mind, or did the