Global Humanities Reader

VOLUME 1

Engaging Ancient Worlds and Perspectives

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Epic of Gilgamesh (Introduction only)

SNAPSHOT BOX

LANGUAGE: Akkadian

DATE: 13th century BCE (Standard Version)

LOCATION: Mesopotamia

GENRE: Epic

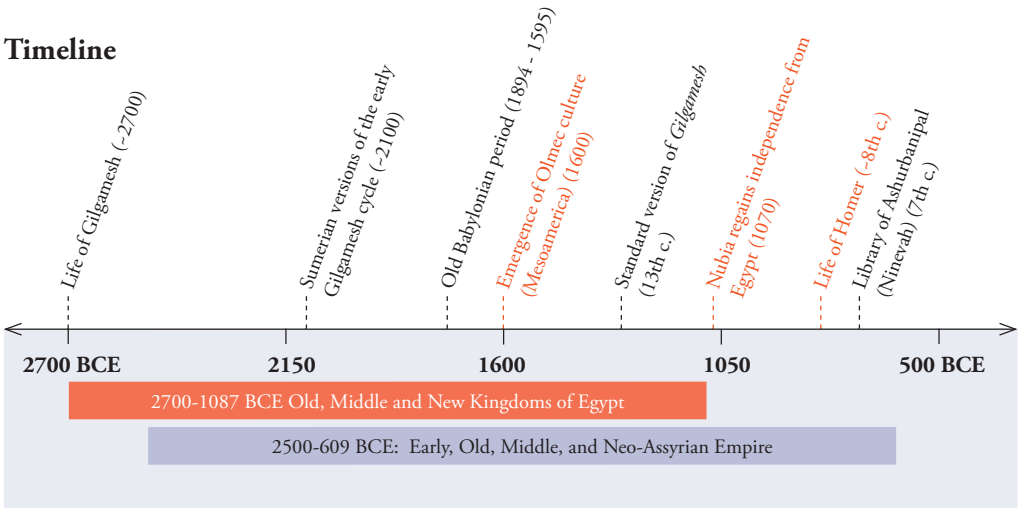
ETHNIC IDENTITY: Babylonian and Assyrian Empires

TAGS: Authority and Leadership; Conflict and War; Death; Deities and Spirits; Divination; Friendship; Identity; Journey; Love; Monument and Artifact; Nature; Oral Histories and Storytelling; Suffering and Compassion

Introduction

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the world's oldest extant literary masterpiece. It was written in Ancient Mesopotamia and read for centuries, until the traditional language and culture of Mesopotamia died out in the first few centuries CE. The epic's hero, the semi-divine Gilgamesh, is based on a historical king who ruled the city of Uruk, thought to be the world's oldest city, sometime between 2700 and 2500 BCE. "Epic," an ancient Greek term for a long narrative about the deeds of heroes told on a grand scale, is appropriate for *Gilgamesh*. Because of its antiquity, we might consider *Gilgamesh* to be **folklore,** a body of culturally meaningful stories circulated orally. There is, in fact, evidence of loosely connected legends called a **cycle** that grew up around the historical Gilgamesh, some of which were eventually collected and written down in Sumerian, the world's oldest written language, around 2000 BCE. Sumerian is related to no other known language. An earlier epic about Gilgamesh was composed during the age of Hammurabi (the Old Babylonian version) that survives only in fragments. The epic that you are reading, called the Standard Version by scholars today, was composed in the thirteenth century in Akkadian, a Semitic language that is an ancestor of Hebrew and Arabic. Its author was Sin-leqi-unninni, a scholar whose profession combined that of doctor, religious healer, priest, and reader of omens. Sin-leqi-unninni's text is indebted to the Old Babylonian version. Thus, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a work of literature that has roots reaching back into folklore.

Sin-leqi-unninni's epic had a name: "He Who Has Seen Everything,"



or, more literally, "He Who Has Seen the Deep."[147] This is, in fact, the first line of the epic. As you read, reflect on the evolving relevance of this title with the themes and events of the epic, and how the different supporting characters, including many powerful women, contribute to the internal and physical journeys Gilgamesh undertakes. *Gilgamesh* is a unified work, overtly thematic, symbolic, and psychological, adapting numerous oral and written genres of literature and speaking. A Mesopotamian reader would have recognized two major models of written literature in the epic: royal propaganda inscribed on monuments and walls, and fictional autobiographies of legendary figures, a popular genre known as ***naru***.[148] When you read the epic, you will encounter numerous genres used by the author to craft the story: prayers, visions, origin stories, myths, combat scenes, and more. What scenes or types of action do you expect from an epic?

We have dozens of surviving copies of the Standard Version of *Gilgamesh*, several of which were found in the ruins of the famous library of the king Ashurbanipal (d. 631 BCE) in the city of Nineveh (near modern-day Mosul, Iraq). Mesopotamian books took the form of pillow-shaped **clay tablets**, and writing was made by impressing shapes into the clay with a pen or **stylus** whose triangular tip left marks that are "wedge-shaped," the literal meaning of cuneiform, which is the oldest known form of writing. The Standard Version of *Gilgamesh* took up twelve tablets (the conceptual equivalent of a "book" in an epic like the *Odyssey*) containing about 250 lines of poetry each.[149] As you can tell when reading *Gilgamesh*, none of the tablets of the Standard Version has survived in complete form, although some are better preserved than others. Unlike Homer or the *Mahabharata*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* did not exist as an enduring oral tradition, but was forgotten for nearly 2,000 years until copies were discovered in Iraq in the 1850s and the cuneiform script deciphered. As archaeological excavation continues in the Middle East, more fragmentary copies of the epic turn up—often, unfortunately, through looting—filling out our knowledge of the story.

Sin-leqi-unninni recast folktales about the hero and earlier epic fragments into a particular vision that reflects on what it means to be human and to straddle society and nature. *Gilgamesh* also presented wisdom from Ancient Mesopotamian culture, such as the nature of kingship, the importance of legacy, and more practical advice about living a meaningful life. One of the epic's enduring themes, friendship, was skillfully woven in by a clever transformation: a legendary servant of Gilgamesh

147. In Akkadian, this word refers to the source of rivers and springs. Here, it seems to be a metaphor for the outer reaches of the world and could be translated "abyss."

148. The word *naru* means "stele," a popular style of monument erected by rulers that contained both texts and images. A famous example is the Naram Sin stele. The *Code of Hammurabi* was also written on a stele.

149. Note that in Maureen Gallery Kovacs's translation, tablet 12, a later addition to the epic that sees Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel to the underworld, is omitted. The original epic, without a doubt, ended with tablet 11. It is not known whether Sin-leqi-unninni was responsible for the addition of the twelfth tablet or not.

known from Sumerian legends named Enkidu becomes his closest friend, and their relationship (which has unmistakable erotic overtones) blossoms into the dominant theme of the second half of the epic: mortality, leading the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) to famously call *Gilgamesh* "an epic about the fear of death." This theme saturates the whole epic with a profound feeling of pity and sorrow, or **pathos**. Theoretically, Gilgamesh the character may not seem relatable to us, being far removed from our own experience, yet all of the epic's readers, past and present, share his human vulnerability: the inevitability of aging, loss, and death.

We should not get weighed down in the epic's depiction of human pathos at the expense of enjoying it as a work of storytelling. The epic narrative of *Gilgamesh* is made up of individual units that tell of mighty deeds, battles, long journeys, ominous dreams, and long-anticipated meetings that nevertheless build on each other toward a revelation that Gilgamesh experiences about death. It also raises muddier questions about human motivations in their relationships to the natural environment side by side with dazzling set pieces, such as when Gilgamesh traces the sun's path through the underworld, emerging into a dawn garden of jewels, and charming details, for example, offering an explanation for why snakes shed their skin. Equally memorable are several interludes, such as the entertaining telling of the myth of the Great Flood in tablet 11.[150] The epic was written by a sophisticated storyteller who knew how to introduce and flesh out characters, create suspense, and foster investment in the epic's themes and ideas on the part of the reader. In what different ways is Gilgamesh presented with the possibility of immortality, and how has his perspective on the meaning of life and his legacy evolved by the close of the epic? Do you think the ending is climactic or anticlimactic?

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[Content Notice: Non-consensual sex, may have outdated language related to sex work, violence]

Recommended Translation: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Maureen Kovacs. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989.

150. The Great Flood was a popular myth in Mesopotamia and was known, either in its *Gilgamesh* version or in other text, by the author of the Noah story of the Book of Genesis (chapters 6–9).