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Can we study ancient civilizations by reading their myths and legends? Studying the
Mesopotamian Civilization by analyzing the Epic of Gilgamesh

Carl Jung once wrote "Myths are mirrors of the human psyche, reflecting our deepest fears, desires, and aspirations" (Jung, 1959). This quote impressively explains the importance of myths, and similar legends, in analyzing different civilizations by pointing out the fact that myths are just a reflection of the human psyche and deep-rooted in them, one can find the fears, desires, and aspirations of different civilizations. This essay will discuss how we can study the ancient civilizations by reading their myths and legends through studying the Mesopotamian civilization while analyzing the literary work Epic of Gilgamesh. The origins of The Epic of Gilgamesh can be traced back to ancient Mesopotamia, a region in ancient Sumeria (Kishlansky et al., 2008). The work is estimated to be written around 2100-2000 BC (Kishlansky et al., 2008). This makes it one of the oldest known literary texts in human history. Various Sumerian and Akkadian poets have contributed to this work with the most famous work being the Akkadian version which is written on 12 tablets (Kishlansky et al., 2008).

To understand the Epic of Gilgamesh better and in detail we need to first understand the historical background that led to the creation of this work. We will start by understanding

the political, societal, economic, religious background, and ideas of ancient Mesopotamia. Around the time when the Epic of Gilgamesh is believed to be written, 2100 to 2000 BC, Mesopotamia was seeing a rise in the number of city-states which were ruled by individual rulers (Kishlansky et al., 2008). These rulers were said to have divine authority over their territory. The Mesopotamian society at this time consisted of various distinct social classes such as priests, elites (kings and nobles), common people (workers), and slaves (Kishlansky et al., 2008). The city-states were mostly indulged in agriculture and trade which served as their major source of income (Kishlansky et al., 2008). The Mesopotamians during this time, were heavily involved with religion (Kishlansky et al., 2008). The Mesopotamians worship various gods with gods such as Anu (the God of Sky), Enlil (the God of Storm), and Enki (the God of water and wisdom) occupying higher positions in the hierarchy (Kishlansky et al., 2008). Since religion was an important aspect of life in Mesopotamia around that time, the Temples held considerable economic influence and as such the priests were politically and economically powerful (Kishlansky et al., 2008). The most prominent ideas seen during that time were once pertaining to morality, divinity, and religion (Kishlansky et al., 2008).

The Epic of Gilgamesh is heavily influenced by these different elements seen in the ancient Mesopotamian society. Gilgamesh, as written in the Epic, showcases the political structure of the Mesopotamian society around that time as the King of Uruk. He is responsible for the smooth functioning of Uruk and these responsibilities are somewhat focused on in the Epic. It also focuses on the role of people in the society such as that of women in households and nurturing and also touches subjects such as slavery and divinity which are important aspects of the ancient Mesopotamian society. The Epic also blends religious themes into the story which showcase the importance of Gods and divinity in the

lives of people during those times. Thus, it touches various important ideas circulating in the ancient Mesopotamian society such as morality, divinity, and religion.

The Epic of Gilgamesh was a set of stories before it was written down on tablets. The purpose of these stories is believed to be to convey important cultural and religious messages in an entertaining and educational manner in order to preserve them for future generations (Abusch, 2001). The work is believed to be targeted towards kings, priests, and scholars (essentially the literate elite). But due to its familiar themes, it appealed to the common people as well (Abusch, 2001). Even after over 4000 years, The Epic of Gilgamesh still remains relevant due to the narratives it dwells into such as religion, morality, power, friendship, and divinity which still resonate with the audiences today and also with the subsequent societies that came after 2000 BC. It has proven to be an invaluable tool in understanding the life of ancient Mesopotamians, understanding their society, religious beliefs and ideas.

When it comes to studying ancient civilizations, Myths and legends can serve as very important sources as they contain reflections of the various aspects of the civilizations where they originate from such as the history and culture, social beliefs and religion, the fears, desires and aspirations of the people among various other aspects.

The study and understanding of the Mesopotamian society can be carried out by looking at and analyzing various references present throughout the tablets in Epic of Gilgamesh. Firstly, we will look at the societal structure of Mesopotamia at that time. It is written in the first tablet that " Supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance, he is the hero,

born of Uruk, the goring wild bull. He walks out in front, the leader, and walks at the rear, trusted by his companions" and "He walks around in the enclosure of Uruk, like a wild bull he makes himself mighty, head raised (over others). There is no rival who can raise his weapon against him. His fellows stand (at the alert), attentive to his (orders ?)" (Kovacs, 2004). This can help us understand the power dynamics in the society at that time. Gilgamesh is written to be the leader (kings in some translations) of Uruk at that time which leads us to the conclusion that the ancient Mesopotamian society was a monarchy. He is shown to have absolute power over his subjects, including the other kings (nobles), which further reinforces the idea that the hierarchical structure in the society was monarchy with the king holding the utmost power. Furthermore, we can also study the labor division in the society from analysis of the Tablet XI. Tablet XI narrates the building of an ark in preparation for the flood supervised by Utnapishtim. He organizes the laborers and craftsmen specialized in boat making which indicates that the Mesopotamian society, more precisely Uruk, had people specializing in different fields of work and the labor division was organized. Also, we can study the family dynamics of the Mesopotamian society by reading Tablet XII. In Tablet XII, it is written that "(When) the carpenter's wife was verily like my mother who bore me, (When) the carpenter's daughter was verily like my younger sister!" (Kovacs, 2004). This segment of the tablet helps us understand that the maternal roles of nurturing and caring were prevalent in the society and women filled the nurturing roles which is very similar to the present society. Thus, the study of text present in the Tablets can help us understand the societal structure of the Mesopotamian society at that time.

We can further reinforce our argument by showing that the culture of ancient societies can also be studied using their myths and legends. We can do this by studying the culture of ancient Mesopotamia, more precisely Uruk, by analyzing the Epic of Gilgamesh. The

existence of the Epic in itself is a proof of the storytelling tradition present in ancient Mesopotamia. As the text was not originally in written form, it was passed down from generation to generation in the form of stories which leads us to conclude that the society had a culture of storytelling. Their language was also quite developed as they made use of imagery which we now call similes and metaphors. One such example is the description of Gilgamesh in the Tablet I. It is written that, “He walks around in the enclosure of Uruk, like a wild bull he makes himself mighty, head raised (over others). There is no rival who can raise his weapon against him. His fellows stand (at the alert), attentive to his (orders ?)” (Kovacs, 2004). Here the absolute power of Gilgamesh is emphasized by comparing him to a wild bull which showcases that their language allowed poetic expression. Furthermore, the Epic also sheds light on the importance of festivals and celebrations in the ancient Mesopotamian society. Tablet XI mentions, “I gave the workmen(?) ale, beer, oil, and wine, as if it were river water, so they could make a party like the New Year's Festival” (Kovacs, 2004). This leads us to the conclusion that consumption of alcohol and wine was commonplace in the society and festival's such as the New Year's festival were observed with great celebration. As such, the analysis of the Epic to discern the cultural values of ancient Mesopotamia further supports our claim of using myths and legends to study ancient societies.

The study of religion with the analysis of the Epic of Gilgamesh can further reinforce our claim that the study the ancient civilizations can be carried out by reading their myths and legends. Religion and the role of Gods is extensively covered throughout the tablets. In tablet 11, the story of the flood is mentioned in the passage “Shuruppak, a city that you surely know, situated on the banks of the Euphrates, that city was very old, and there were gods inside it. The hearts of the Great Gods moved them to inflict the Flood, [...], its dimensions must measure equal to each other: its length must correspond to its width” (Kovacs, 2004).

The narration of the story by Utanapishtim and the involvement of gods in the flood, especially Enlil, showcase the importance of gods in the ancient Mesopotamian culture. The role played by Enlil in the creation of the flood and that of Ea in guiding Utnapishtim to construct the ark showcase how the ancient Mesopotamian people viewed gods as being capable of both punishment and mercy and helps us in understanding their religious beliefs. The story of construction of the ark to save the people and the animals is also very similar to that of Noah's ark and thus helps us draw relationships between the beliefs of different societies. In tablet 11, it is written that, "Shamash had set a stated time: 'In the morning I will let loaves of bread shower down, and in the evening a rain of wheat! Go inside the boat, seal the entry!'" (Kovacs, 2004). This passage mentions how God of the sun, Shamash, set the time for the flood to end and guided people to seal the boat till then. This showcases the close relationships that the ancient Mesopotamian people believe existed between them and their gods. Thus, by analyzing the Epic, we are able to get a better understanding of the religious beliefs of the people of ancient Mesopotamia which further strengthens our original argument.

In conclusion, after analyzing the Epic of Gilgamesh to study the ancient Mesopotamian civilization, we reaffirm our argument that by reading the myths and legends we can study ancient civilizations. Using this epic we were able to deduce an understanding of the culture and civilization of Mesopotamian society as well as an insight into human nature and experiences. This Epic gave us an overview of how the power dynamics, societal structure, religious beliefs which in turn helped us create a rough image of the ways of the Mesopotamian society. The Epic showcases the fears, aspirations, cruelty and desires of the Mesopotamian people as well. In a nutshell, all of these insights allow one to make a connection between the Epic of Gilgamesh and the society of that time.

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