



The epic of Gilgamesh

an English version with an
introduction by N. K. Sandars.

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THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

AN ENGLISH VERSION WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

N. K. Sandars

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*The illustration on the cover shows a
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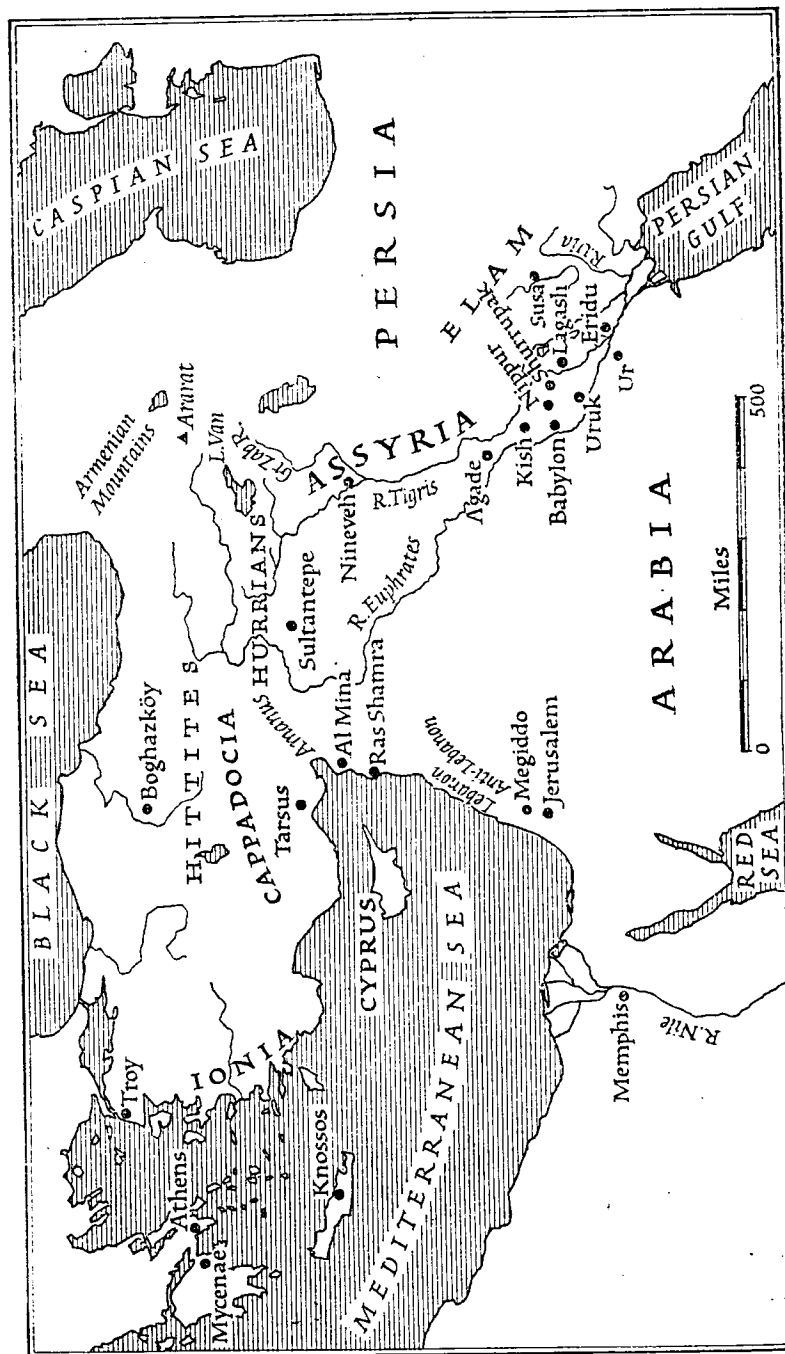
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INTRODUCTION

1. *The History of the Epic*

THE Epic of Gilgamesh, the legendary king of Uruk in Mesopotamia, comes from an age which had been wholly forgotten, until in the last century archaeologists began uncovering the buried cities of the Middle East. Till then the entire history of the long period which separated Abraham from Noah was contained in two of the most forbiddingly genealogical chapters of the Book of Genesis. From these chapters only two names survived in common parlance, those of the hunter Nimrud and the tower of Babel; but in the cycle of poems which are collected round the character of Gilgamesh we are carried back into the middle of that age.

These poems have a right to a place in the world's literature, not only because they antedate Homeric epic by at least one and a half thousand years, but mainly because of the quality and character of the story that they tell. It is a mixture of pure adventure, of morality, and of tragedy. Through the action we are shown a very human concern with mortality, the search for knowledge, and for an escape from the common lot of man. The gods, who do not die, cannot be tragic. If Gilgamesh is not the first human hero, he is the first tragic hero of whom anything is known. He is at once the most sympathetic to us, and most typical of individual man in his search for life and understanding, and of this search the conclusion must be tragic. It is perhaps surprising that anything so old as a story of the third millennium B.C. should still have power to move, and still attract readers in the twentieth century A.D., and yet it does. The narrative is incomplete and may remain so; nevertheless

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it is today the finest surviving epic poem from any period until the appearance of Homer's *Iliad*: and it is immeasurably older.

We have good evidence that most of the Gilgamesh poems were already written down in the first centuries of the second millennium B.C., and that they probably existed in much the same form many centuries earlier, while the final recension, and most complete edition, belongs to the seventh century, and is the work of Assurbanipal, antiquary and last great king of the Assyrian Empire. This Assurbanipal was a formidable general, the plunderer of Egypt and Susa; but he was also the collector of a notable library of contemporary historical records, and of much older hymns, poems, and scientific and religious texts. He tells us that he sent out his servants to search the archives of the ancient seats of learning in Babylon, Uruk, and Nippur, and to copy and translate into the contemporary Akkadian Semitic those texts which were in the older Sumerian language of Mesopotamia. Amongst these texts, 'Written down according to the original and collated in the palace of Assurbanipal, King of the World, King of Assyria', was the poem which we call the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Not long after the completion of this task of collation the epic was virtually lost and the hero's name forgotten, or disguised and garbled out of recognition; until it was rediscovered in the last century. This discovery was due, in the first place, to the curiosity of two Englishmen, and thereafter to the labours of scholars in many different parts of the world, who have pieced together, copied, and translated the clay tablets on which the poem is written. It is a work which continues, and more gaps are being filled in each year; but the main body of the Assyrian Epic has not been altered in essentials since the monumental publications of text, transliteration, and commentary by Campbell Thompson in 1928 and 1930. More recently, however, a new stage has been reached and fresh interest aroused by the work of Professor Samuel Kramer of

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Pennsylvania, whose collection and translation of Sumerian texts have carried the history of the Epic back into the third millennium B.C. It is now possible to combine and compare a far larger and older body of writings than ever before.

2. *The Discovery of the Tablets*

The discovery of the tablets belongs to the heroic age of excavation in the mid nineteenth century, when, although methods were not always so scrupulous nor aims so strictly scientific as today, the difficulties and even dangers were greater, and results had an impact which profoundly altered the intellectual perspective of the age. In 1839 a young Englishman, Austen Henry Layard, set off with a friend on an overland journey to Ceylon; but in Mesopotamia he was delayed by a reconnaissance of Assyrian mounds. The delay of weeks was lengthened into years, so that Ceylon was forgotten, but in time Nineveh and Nimrud were excavated; and it was from these excavations that Layard brought back to the British Museum a great part of the collection of Assyrian sculptures, along with thousands of broken tablets from the palace of Nineveh.

When Layard began excavating at Nineveh he did not know that he was restoring to the world a lost literature. This material was so new to the excavators that at first they had not realized that certain small clay objects covered with wedge-shaped impressions were written tablets, and many were probably lost. Nevertheless the number of these tablets surviving today in the British Museum is over twenty-five thousand. The work of decipherment was begun by Henry Rawlinson, at the Residency in Baghdad, where he was stationed as political agent. Before going to Baghdad, Rawlinson, then an army officer in the employ of the East India Company, had discovered the key to the decipherment of cuneiform in the great inscription, the 'Record of Darius', on the rock of Behistun near Kermanshah in Persia,

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which is written with cuneiform (wedge-shaped) characters in the Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian languages. The work begun by Rawlinson in Baghdad was continued in the British Museum when he returned to England in 1855; and soon after his return he started publishing the *Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia*. In 1866 he was joined, as an assistant in the work on the tablets, by George Smith.

Meanwhile Rassam, Layard's collaborator and successor at Nineveh, had excavated in 1853 that part of the library in which were the tablets of the Assyrian collation of the Gilgamesh Epic. A realization of the importance of the discovery did not come till twenty years later, when in December of 1872, at a meeting of the newly founded Society of Biblical Archaeology, George Smith announced that 'A short time back I discovered among the Assyrian tablets in the British Museum an account of the flood.' This was the eleventh tablet of the Assyrian recension of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Soon after this first announcement Smith published the *Chaldean Account of the Deluge*, and with it the outline of the Gilgamesh narrative. Interest was immediate and widespread; but the Deluge tablet itself was incomplete, so the search for more tablets was renewed. The *Daily Telegraph* contributed 1,000 guineas towards further excavation at Nineveh, which George Smith was to undertake for the British Museum. Quite soon after his arrival at Nineveh, Smith found the missing lines from the description of the flood, which was then, as it still is today, the most complete and best preserved part of the whole Epic. Many more tablets were found in this and the following year, and Smith was able to fill in the broad outline of the Assyrian version before, in 1876, he succumbed to sickness and hunger, and died near Aleppo at the age of thirty-six; but already he had opened up a new field in Biblical studies and in ancient history.

When publishing the Assyrian 'Deluge' Smith had stated that this was evidently a copy from a much older version made at

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Uruk, the biblical Erech, known today as Warka. Some years earlier between 1849 and 1852 W. K. Loftus, a member of the Turko-Persian Frontier Commission, had spent two short seasons digging at Warka, where he found puzzling remains, including what are now known to be third-millennium mosaic walls, and also tablets. But Warka had to wait for further attention till the twenties and thirties of this century, when the Germans carried out massive excavations which have revealed a long series of buildings, as well as sculptures and tablets. Thanks to this work a great deal is now known about early Uruk, its temples, and the life of its inhabitants.

Even more important for the history of the Gilgamesh Epic were the activities of an American expedition from the University of Pennsylvania, led by John Punnet Peters, which at the end of the nineteenth century started work on the mound of Niffar, ancient Nippur, in southern Iraq. By this time considerably more experience had been gained of the problems connected with excavating ancient cities; but there were still many hazards. The first season at Nippur in 1888-9 began light-heartedly with the arrival of Peters and his party at the site in a wild gallop through the canebrakes on rearing stallions; but their last view of the mound at the end of the season was of hostile Arabs performing a war-dance on the ruins of the camp. Nevertheless the work continued the following year, and a total of from thirty to forty thousand tablets was found and distributed between museums in Philadelphia and Istanbul. These tablets include a small group on which are found the oldest versions of the Gilgamesh cycle in the Sumerian language. Work at Nippur still proceeds and in their campaign for 1957-8 a joint expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the University Museum of Pennsylvania has recovered, among tablets dating from the end of the third millennium, one text which refers to Gilgamesh. Division of the material has complicated the work of decipherment,

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for in some cases one half of an important tablet has been stored in America and the other in Istanbul, and copies of both must be brought together before the contents are understood.

The majority of ancient texts are commercial and administrative documents, business archives, lists, and inventories which, though profoundly interesting to the historian, are not for general reading. The recent decipherment of the so-called 'linear B' script of Bronze-Age Mycenae and Crete has revealed no literature. A huge library discovered at Kültepe in Central Anatolia is entirely made up of records of business transactions; and apart from a solitary text, and that a curse, there is not one of a literary kind. The importance of the excavations at Nippur, Nineveh, and other great centres of early civilization in Mesopotamia is that they have restored a literature of high quality and of unique character.

The Gilgamesh Epic must have been widely known in the second millennium B.C., for a version has been found in the archives of the Hittite imperial capital at Boghazköy in Anatolia, written in Semitic Akkadian; and it was also translated into the Indo-European Hittite, and the Hurrian languages. In southern Turkey parts have been found at Sultantepe; while a small but important fragment from Megiddo in Palestine points to the existence of a Canaanite or later Palestinian version, and so to the possibility that early Biblical authors were familiar with the story. The Palestinian fragment comes from the tablet which describes the death of Enkidu and is closest to the account already known from Boghazköy. Excavation at Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit, on the Syrian coast, has brought to light an independent epic literature of which the written versions mostly date from the later part of the second millennium, and which was also known in the Hittite capital. At this period therefore there was considerable overlapping and some mingling of the various literary traditions, including those of the Hittites themselves; and recently a case has been made

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out for the probable existence of a rather similar Aegean Mycenaean poetic tradition, elements from which would have survived the dark age, and reappeared in Homeric and later Greek poetry. The case is not amenable to proof, but it has been argued persuasively by Professor T. B. L. Webster, who supposes the existence of a strong Asiatic element within this tradition, including a knowledge of the Gilgamesh Epic.

Whether further discoveries will support this or not, and the idea is attractive, there can be no doubt that in the second millennium the fame of Gilgamesh of Uruk was as great as that of any later hero. In time his name became so much a household word that jokes and forgeries were fathered on to it, as in a popular fraud that survives on eighth-century B.C. tablets, which perhaps themselves copy an older text. This is a letter supposed to be written by Gilgamesh to some other king, with commands that he should send improbable quantities of livestock and metals, along with gold and precious stones for an amulet for Enkidu, which would weigh no less than thirty pounds. The joke must have been well received, for it survives in four copies, all from Sultantepe. This text has been translated and published recently by Dr Oliver Gurney.

3. *The Historical Background*

The excavation of sites and decipherment of texts has taught us a great deal about the historical and the literary background of the Epic. Although only the last version, that of Assurbanipal's library, has survived as a relatively complete work, it appears that all the most important elements of the story existed as separate poems in the older Sumerian literature, and may have been, indeed probably were, composed and recited long before they were written down. While no element of the story can be later than the destruction of Nineveh in the seventh century, a recurring situation typical of the third millennium is discernible behind much of the action, and probably provided its

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context. Behind this again the tradition reaches back into a preliterate age on the borderline of legend and history, a little later than the Deluge, when gods were replaced by mortals on the thrones of the city-states. This was the age of the Archaic Sumerian civilization.

The Sumerians were the first literate inhabitants of Mesopotamia, and theirs is the language of the oldest tablets from Nippur which relate to Gilgamesh. They had already irrigated the country and filled it with their cities, before it was conquered by Semitic tribes in the course of the third millennium. They were themselves probably conquerors from the north and east, who arrived during the fourth millennium. The influence of this gifted people, shown in laws, language, and ideas, persisted long after they had been conquered by their Semite neighbours. It has been justly likened to the influence of Rome on medieval Europe. Their language was still written, like the Latin of the Middle Ages, centuries after they had lost their political identity. It is therefore no anachronism to find the early Gilgamesh texts still written in this 'learned' language, although most of them date from the beginning of the second millennium, after the Semitic conquest.

Excavation has shown that the Archaic Sumerian or Early Dynastic civilization of the early third millennium follows notable flood levels at several important sites: Shurruk, Kish, and Uruk among them. These levels close the last prehistoric period, the Jemdet Nasr Period of the archaeologists, and may mark the catastrophe described in the Sumerian story of the flood, the hero of which lived at Shurruk. This however was not the only disaster, and Sir Leonard Woolley, in his excavations at Ur, found evidence of a much earlier flood, which may have devastated part of the country at a time before even the most primitive picture-writing had been evolved. In the Sumerian texts the names of five cities are given which were established before the Deluge, and to them 'Kingship was let

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down from Heaven'. After the catastrophe, according to the texts, Kingship once more descended; and the city-states which then arose were often at war with each other. The semi-historical Sumerian 'King-list', which was composed probably towards the end of the third millennium, shows that the city of Kish was the first to gain pre-eminence after the flood; but after a time Uruk defeated Kish and took away this supremacy. These two states were traditional rivals; and in the King-list Gilgamesh is named as fifth ruler of the first post-diluvian dynasty of Uruk.

Because of their wealth the cities were great prizes, tempting to the wild Semitic tribes of Arabia, and to the warlike people of Elam to the east, and of the Persian highlands. Not long after the fall of the dynasty of Uruk, when the Semites had established themselves at Agade in the north, Sargon, their king, claimed that he had a standing army of 5,400 soldiers. Amongst the chief of his exploits was the destruction of the walls of Uruk. These had been a by-word. Men said 'Uruk of the strong walls', and Gilgamesh was traditionally the great builder.

In the Sumerian Early Dynastic age each city already had its temples of the gods. They were magnificent buildings decorated with reliefs and mosaics, and usually comprising a great court and an inner sanctuary, with sometimes, as at Uruk, a ziggurat behind. This was a holy mountain in miniature: an ante-chamber between heaven and earth where the gods could converse with men. So when Gilgamesh calls on the goddess Ninsun, his divine mother, she goes up on to the roof of the temple to offer prayer and sacrifice to the great Sun God. The temples were served by a perpetual priesthood, in whose hands, at one time, was almost the whole wealth of the state; and amongst whom were the archivists and teachers, the scholars and mathematicians. In very early times the whole temporal power was theirs, as servants of the god whose estates they managed. Later a single individual became 'tenant-farmer'

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and caretaker, till 'Kingship descended from Heaven', power was secularized, and the royal dynasties, competitive and aggressive in aspect, arose in turn. The prestige of the temples remained, however, great.

One of the causes of the militarism of the third millennium was economic. The southern part of Mesopotamia as far as the Persian Gulf was, and is, a flat hot land of marsh and plain, very productive when drained, but apart from the date-palm altogether without timber and without metals. The demands of the rival cities on their neighbours in the surrounding highlands soon passed beyond the level of peaceful trade. Merchant colonies and distant trading posts were set up, but caravan communication was often broken, and raw materials were then fetched by force from reluctant tribes in Persia, Arabia, or Cappadocia. Here then the immemorial enmities of hill-tribe and plainsman were established; they provide the setting for a group of Sumerian poems which describe the troubled relations between Uruk and Aratta, a state in the eastern hills.

In the historical material we have nearly contemporary records of several expeditions, undertaken during the third millennium, by Sargon of Agade and Gudea of Lagash, to protect their merchant colonies and bring back timber for their buildings; nor were they certainly the first. Cedar came from the Amanus mountains in north Syria and south Turkey, and perhaps from the Lebanon and from south-east Persia. It is written of Sargon that he made a victorious campaign through the northern lands; and Dagon his god gave him the 'upper region' as far as the 'Cedar Forest' and the 'Silver Mountain'. The cedar forest in this case is certainly Amanus. Again when Gudea, the ruler of Lagash, wished to build a temple for the god Ningirsu, 'They brought from Susa, from Elam and the western lands copper for Gudea ... they brought great willow logs and ebony logs, and Gudea made a path into the cedar mountain which nobody had entered before, he cut its cedars

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with great axes, cedar rafts like giant snakes were floating down the river from the cedar mountain, pine-rafts from the pine mountain. Into the quarries where no one had been, Gudea the priest of Ningirsu made a path, stones were delivered in large blocks, also bitumen in buckets and gypsum from the mountains of Madga, as many as boats bringing barley from the fields.' Behind the solid fleshly Gudea we may see the shadowy figure of Gilgamesh, a great builder of temples and cities, who ventured into strange forests and brought back precious cedar-wood.

4. *The Literary Background*

Five poems relating to Gilgamesh have survived from Sumerian literature. Of these, two are used combined with later material, in this version of the Epic; they are 'Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living', and the very fragmentary 'Death of Gilgamesh'. Another poem dealing with 'Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven' has not yet been translated, but must evidently lie behind the corresponding episodes in the Ninevite collation, which describe the flouting of the goddess Ishtar and her revenge. The Sumerian poem 'Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld' was translated almost word for word and appended to the Assyrian Epic (Tablet XII), with no attempt at integration, although it is incompatible with the events described earlier (Tablet VII), and seems to provide an alternative to the 'Dream' and 'Death of Enkidu' which are placed at the centre of the Assyrian poem. 'Gilgamesh and Agga' like the 'Death of Gilgamesh' is known only in Sumerian. It is a detached and not very heroic tale of debate and mild warfare between the rival states of Kish and Uruk. Its temper, though typical of some Sumerian poetry, is too far removed from the rest of the Gilgamesh material for its inclusion in a 'Gilgamesh Epic'. It is not surprising if Assurbanipal's clerks and scholars rejected it; though of course it may have been unknown to them.

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The story of the Deluge did not form any part of the Gilgamesh cycle in Sumerian literature, but was an independent poem with, in the rôle of Noah, a hero named Ziusudra, which means 'he saw life'. There were also independent Old Babylonian versions dating from the beginning of the second millennium, in which the hero is nameless but is given the epithet 'exceedingly wise' Atramhasis, later Atrahasis; while the flood is only one among a number of disasters sent to mankind by the gods. A late version of the Atrahasis poem was written down in the reign of Assurbanipal. It is not possible to say at what time the flood was drawn into the Gilgamesh cycle, since evidence is lacking from the Old Babylonian period. There has been much controversy on the question of the relationship between the Genesis flood and that of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Sumerian writers. The opinion, at one time widely held, that the Genesis account was a late refinement on a story once current in all the cities of Babylonia, is not now so general; while the view that it derives directly from a very old and independent story has many supporters. There is no need to enter this difficult controversy in order to follow the account of the flood as it stands in the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic. The decipherment of fresh texts may throw more light on the whole question; but at present the Genesis account is probably best seen against a background of many very ancient flood stories, possibly but not necessarily relating to the same disaster, differing from each other in many points and having different protagonists both human and divine. Not all the versions current in Mesopotamia and the Near East in the third millennium need have survived till today. The persistence and independence of different stories is shown by the fact that the hero in the third-century B.C. account of a Greek-speaking priest of Babylon, Berossus, is given the name of Xisuthros or Sisuthros, which can only be the Sumerian Ziusudra, although that name has dropped out of the known Semitic versions.

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Outside the Gilgamesh cycle two Sumerian poems have survived (as usual incomplete), which are concerned with one Enmerkar, a forerunner of Gilgamesh on the throne of Uruk; in the Sumerian King-list he is placed second after the flood. In the Enmerkar poems the king is in conflict with the lord of another state called Aratta, which lies eastwards, in the highlands of Persia. The cause of the quarrel is commercial, and appears to revolve round the barter of corn from Uruk against precious metals, gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and probably building stone from Aratta. Although heralds and champions are employed, the action is even less heroic than that in 'Gilgamesh and Agga'. As might be expected from the provenance of the poem, Uruk is in each case successful against Aratta.

Lugulbanda also is the hero of two poems. He stands third in the King-list and is sometimes referred to by Gilgamesh as his semi-divine 'father'. He is a more interesting figure than Enmerkar and, like Gilgamesh, he is a wanderer. In 'Lugulbanda and Enmerkar' he is the liegeman and champion of the latter. Like Gilgamesh too he crosses great mountains and the river Kur (that is to say the underworld river), before he brings Enmerkar relief from his enemies. In 'Lugulbanda and Mount Hurrum' he is left for dead by his companions on another mountain journey, this time to Aratta. By means of pious sacrifices he gains the protection of the Sun God; and, again like Gilgamesh, on his wanderings through the wilderness, he eats the flesh of wild animals and uncultivated plants as though he were a poor hunter. A reference to this episode seems to be intended in our Epic when Gilgamesh is reminded by his counsellors of the piety of Lugulbanda and exhorted to make sacrifices to the sun and 'not to forget Lugulbanda'. It is possible therefore that the later compilers drew upon this cycle as well as that of the original Gilgamesh.

Professor Kramer, the translator of the Sumerian poetic material, places its creation in a preliterate 'Heroic Age',

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when a new warrior population, which he identifies with the Sumerians, had arrived in Mesopotamia not later than 3000 B.C. Here, in the valleys of the great rivers, he believes that they inherited, and at first squandered, the superior civilization and prosperity of the settled inhabitants, who, being illiterate, are known to us only by their beautiful pottery and by village settlements of reed-huts and sun-dried brick houses. Kramer believes that the situation in Mesopotamia was not unlike that which, according to the well-known argument of H. M. Chadwick, gave rise to the Heroic Age of Greek and Teutonic Epic. In each case a new warlike aristocracy was breaking up the established order, in an age he describes as serving 'Mars and the Muses'. It is questionable how far the surviving material really supports the existence of a Sumerian Heroic Age in any political or social sense. The Enmerkar poems, as they stand, are less heroic tales than argumentative contests and disputes. Not enough of the Lugulbanda cycle has yet been translated to judge how far it is heroic and epic in character. Most of the remaining Sumerian poems are either hymns and laments addressed to the gods, or are concerned with their attributes and activities; so Gilgamesh is the one human character of heroic stature who has survived, though heroic fragments may be embedded in other material, as the 'Song of Deborah' is set in the Book of Judges.

A number of 'epics', all more or less fragmentary, are known from the Old Babylonian and later periods; but the protagonists are usually gods and monsters. The exceptions, like the tale of Adapa, whose name means 'man', are few; this is a wry little story of missed opportunities, and of that peculiar ambiguity in the dealings of the gods with men which is so characteristic of the Babylonian outlook. It is far removed from the scale and spirit of the Gilgamesh cycle. The other longer poems are specifically ritual or liturgical in purpose. Most notable of these is the great Creation Epic, the *Enuma Elish*, so called from its

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opening words, 'When on high ...', which was recited on the fourth day of the New Year Festival. In point of length this is the only other work now comparable with 'Gilgamesh', but the cosmic events which it describes arouse emotions of awe and fear rather than human sympathy; while the creation of man himself is introduced as a minor incident.

5. *The Hero of the Epic*

Whether or not there was ever a king of Uruk called Gilgamesh does not affect our enjoyment or understanding of the story, though it does affect its purely historical interest. The occasional discovery, in the course of excavation, of contemporary tablets with the names of characters once thought legendary is a warning against dismissing these early kings as altogether fictional, and their actions as merely marvellous. In the Sumerian King-list, to which I have already referred, Gilgamesh was fifth in line from the founding of the first dynasty which reigned in Uruk after the flood. He followed a god on the throne and reigned for one hundred and twenty-six years, but his son reigned thirty years and thereafter kings lived and reigned an ordinary human span. If this Gilgamesh was a real prince, rather than a 'folk memory', he was probably one of those extraordinary characters who in their lifetime are no more than local worthies, but who possess the magnetism which not only survives long after their death, but increases and attracts to their name many stories of different kinds, some of heroic action, some pure mythology. As actual ruler he would have been remembered first of all as a builder, and as a just judge. The excavations at Warka have shown the magnificence of the temple buildings even in the proto-literate period; while later report made Gilgamesh, like Minos of Crete, a judge in the underworld.

At the beginning of the poem the hero is described. He is two parts god and one part man, for his mother was a goddess

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like the mother of Achilles. From her he inherited great beauty, strength, and restlessness. From his father he inherited mortality. There are many strands in the story, but this is the tragedy: the conflict between the desires of the god and the destiny of the man. The goddess mother of Gilgamesh was a comparatively obscure personage who had a palace-temple in Uruk, where her son could converse with her. His human father appears in the King-list as a high-priest, and Gilgamesh himself in the Sumerian version is 'the priest of Kullab', a part of Uruk, but in moments of great stress he calls on Lugulbanda as 'father'. This is the Lugulbanda who reigned in Uruk second before Gilgamesh and third after the flood. He was a guardian and protector of the city, and in the King-list, he is called a god and ruled 1,200 years.

In a work which has existed for so long and been subjected to such frequent copying and reshaping, it is no use looking for precise historical events. I have suggested that the political situation in the third millennium provides the most likely setting for the action. More striking is the degree of spiritual unity found throughout the cycle, Sumerian, Old Babylonian, and Assyrian alike, which derives from the character of the hero and from a constantly pessimistic, and only partially resigned, attitude to life and the world. This attitude is a consequence of the Mesopotamian psychology, and of those 'overtones of anxiety' which Henri Frankfurt described as being due to 'a haunting fear that the unaccountable and turbulent powers may at any time bring disaster to human society.' In the character of Gilgamesh, from the beginning, we are aware of an over-riding preoccupation with fame, reputation, and the revolt of mortal man against the laws of separation and death. The story is divided into episodes: a meeting of friends, a forest journey, the flouting of a fickle goddess, death of the companion, and the search for ancestral wisdom and immortality; and through them all runs a single idea, like the refrain of the medieval poet,

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'*Timor mortis conturbat me*'. In the episode of the Cedar Forest it is only a spur on the hero's ambition to leave an enduring name; but after the loss of the faithful companion it is more urgent, 'How can I rest when Enkidu whom I love is dust and I too shall die and be laid in the earth for ever?' At the end it turns to mockery with lost opportunity and wasted hopes; till the final scene of the hero's own death where human ambition is swallowed up and finds its fulfilment in ancient ritual.

The cause of the pervasive pessimism of Mesopotamian thought lay partly in the precariousness of life in the city-states, dependent on vagaries of flood and drought and turbulent neighbours; dependent also on the character of the gods, who were the powers held responsible for such conditions. Since the gods play a considerable part in the Epic it may be well to give some account of these frightening and unpredictable beings. Their names and chief attributes are listed in the Glossary (p. 119), but the few who play a decisive part in the action require rather more detailed description. Their names will seem bizarre and unfamiliar to western ears, and the geography of their world is superficially so odd that a rather fuller explanation seems necessary. The reader may, however, if he pleases, leave aside the following section until he wishes to know more about the chief gods and their habitations in the heavens or in the underworld.

6. *The Principal Gods of the Epic*

The cities of Mesopotamia shared a common pantheon, but the gods were not worshipped everywhere under the same names. The Semites when they invaded Mesopotamia inherited most of the Sumerian gods, but they altered their names, their mutual relations, and many of their attributes. It is not possible to say today if any were native to Mesopotamia, and belonged to the still older stratum of the population which may have been in occupation of the land before the arrival of the Sumerians, but

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throughout it is the known Sumerian gods who play the chief rôle in the Epic; and this is an additional argument, if any were needed, in favour of the great antiquity of all the episodes. From the reign of Hammurabi of Babylon, early in the second millennium, Marduk was the most popular deity among the Semites, but in our epic he is never mentioned.

Each city had its own particular protector who looked after its fortunes and had his house within its walls. Anu (Sumerian An) was a father of gods, not so much Zeus as Uranus, the sky-god who to the Greeks was little more than an ancestral link in the chain of creation; from whose union with Earth came Ocean, the rivers, the seas, the Titans, and last of all Cronos the father of Zeus. A reconstruction of the Sumerian theogony has been made by Professor Kramer, according to which An was the first-born of the primeval sea. He was the upper heavens, the firmament, not the air that blows over the earth. Like Uranus he was united to earth (Sumerian Ki) and begot Enlil, the god of the air. At this time the world was still in darkness and Enlil, the air, was imprisoned between the dark ceiling of heaven, a night sky without stars, and the earth's surface. So Enlil begot the moon Nanna (Semitic Sin), who travelled in a boat bringing light to the lapis lazuli heavens; and Nanna in turn begot the sun Utu or Shamash, and Inanna or Ishtar the goddess of love and war. The texts on which this reconstruction is based are still very obscure; one of them forms the introduction to the Sumerian poem of the descent of Enkidu to the underworld. Anu is not yet so detached as the Greek Uranus, but neither is he any more the active creator of gods. This supreme position was gradually usurped by Enlil, and in our poem it is Enlil who pronounces destinies in sign of authority. But he in turn was to fall before the newcomer, Babylonian Marduk.

Enlil, whose city was Nippur, was the storm and wind, breath and 'the word' of Anu; for according to the hymns in

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his praise, 'The spirit of the word is Enlil, the spirit of the heart of Anu.' This Enlil is power in action, where Anu is power in being. He is 'the word which stilleth the heaven above', but he is also, 'a rushing deluge that troubles the faces of men, a torrent which destroys the bulwarks'. In the Gilgamesh Epic he appears oftenest in his destructive aspect; and beside him Anu is a remote being who lives far away in the firmament, beyond the gate of heaven.

Equally important in the Epic are the kindly and just Sun God Shamash, whom the Sumerians called Utu, and Ishtar the beautiful but also terrible goddess of love. The sun is still 'shams' in Arabic, and in those days Shamash was the omniscient all-seeing one, the great judge to whom anxious mortals could make their appeal against injustice, and know that they were heard. The hymns from Nineveh describe his many attributes: 'All mankind rejoice in you, O Shamash, all the world longs for your light ... in a hollow voice feeble man calls out to you ... when his family is far away and his city far-off, the shepherd boy fearful of the open field comes before you, the shepherd in confusion among his enemies ... the caravan which marches in dread, the trader, the pedlar with his bag of weights.' Nothing escapes the sun's eye, 'Guide and beacon who constantly passes over the infinite seas, whose depths the great gods of heaven do not know; your gleaming rays go down into the Pit, and the monsters of the deep see your light ... you make it to burn over unknown stretches of distance for countless hours ... by your terrible brilliance the land is overwhelmed.' The two aspects of the god as omniscience and justice are united in the figure of the net: 'Spread out is your net to catch the man who covets', and 'Thrown down like a net over the land are your rays.' He is also the god of oracles: 'By the cup of the diviner, by the bundle of cedar-wood, you teach the priest of the oracle, the interpreter of dreams, the sorcerer ...'; and in another hymn he is the judge,

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'Daily you determine the decisions of heaven and earth; at your coming in a flame and fire all the stars of heaven are covered over.' It was he also who gave to Hammurabi his system of laws.

Ishtar (Sumerian Inanna) was worshipped in the great temple in Uruk, together with Anu. She is the queen of heaven, and as goddess of love and of war an equivocal character; 'an awful and lovely goddess' like Aphrodite. Most of the gods had both a benign and a dangerous aspect, even Shamash could be terrible; but in this poem, except for a single moment, we see Ishtar only in her darker character. That she could be gracious is shown by a hymn of about 1600 B.C. 'Reverence the queen of women, the greatest of all the gods; she is clothed with delight and with love, she is full of ardour, enchantment, and voluptuous joy, in her lips she is sweet, in her mouth is Life, when she is present felicity is greatest; how glorious she looks, the veils thrown over her head, her lovely form, her brilliant eyes.' This is the radiant goddess of love as she first appeared to Gilgamesh, but her aspect very soon altered to become that of the familiar 'lady of sorrows and of battles'. In this character she is addressed in a hymn from Babylon: 'Oh, star of lamentation, brothers at peace together you cause to fight one another, and yet you give constant friendship. Mighty one, lady of battles, who overturns mountains.'

The only remaining god to play an important part in the poem is Ea (Sumerian Enki), the god of wisdom, whose particular element was the sweet waters bringing life to the land, and whose house was at Eridu, which was then on the Persian Gulf. He appears as a benign being, a peace-maker, but not always a reliable friend, for, like so many exponents of primitive wisdom, he enjoyed tricks and subterfuges and on occasion was not devoid of malice. But here he acts as the great 'lord of wisdom who lives in the deep'. His origins are obscure, but he is sometimes called the son of Anu, 'Begotten in his own image ... of broad understanding and mighty strength.'

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He was also in a particular degree the creator and benefactor of mankind.

Over against heaven and its gods lies the underworld with its sombre deities. In the old Sumerian myth of creation, already referred to, after An had carried off the heavens and taken possession of the firmament and after Enlil had carried off the earth, then Ereshkigal was borne away by the Underworld for its prize (or perhaps was given the underworld for her prize). The meaning of the myth is obscure, but this part of it seems to describe another rape of Persephone. Ereshkigal was sometimes called the elder sister of Ishtar, and was herself originally a sky-goddess who became the queen of the underworld; but for her there was no spring-time return to earth.

The Sumerian name for the underworld, 'Kur', also meant mountain and foreign land, and there is often considerable ambiguity in its use. The underworld was beneath the earth's surface but above the nether waters, the great abyss. The way to it was 'into the mountain', but there were many circumlocutions for the place itself and for the way down. It was 'the road of the chariot' and 'the road of no-return'; nor are we ourselves so unlike the Sumerians in this respect, as can be proved by comparing the relative length of the entries under 'Life' and 'Death' in the English Thesaurus.

Later on the old story of the rape (if such it was) seems to have been forgotten or to have lost its importance, and with it was lost the personality of 'Kur'; for, as with Hades, the grim god became little more than a dark place, while Ereshkigal is given other husbands. The Queen of the Underworld is an altogether terrifying being who is never more than obliquely described: 'She who rests, she who rests, the mother of Ninazu, her holy shoulders are not covered with garments, her breast is not covered with linen.' There are several poems, both Sumerian and Semitic, that describe the underworld. Sometimes it is the scene of a journey taken by a goddess or a mortal.

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A certain Assyrian prince, under the pseudonym of 'Kummu', has left a horrifying vision of death and hereafter. It is a dark apocalypse in which the angels are all demons; where we recognize the sphinx, the lion and the eagle-griffin, the cherub with human hands and feet, along with many monsters of the imagination which haunted men's minds then and long after. They reappear continually on sealstones and ivories and carved rock-faces; and they have survived through the medium of medieval religious iconography and in heraldry into the modern world. If they have lost their power as symbols, the mysteries they represented are still the same as puzzle us today.

Throughout the narrative of the adventures of Gilgamesh the presence of the underworld can be felt. It is the foreseen end of his journey however much he struggles to escape it, for 'only the gods live for ever'. It appears to Enkidu in a dream before his death, and in a separate poem the same Enkidu goes alive down the 'road of no-return' to bring back a lost treasure. But unlike the journey of the Greek heroes Heracles and Theseus when sent on similar errands, this journey was fatal; the only return permitted was that of a ghost with no more substance than a puff of wind which, when questioned by Gilgamesh, answered, 'Sit down and weep, my body which once you used to touch and made your heart's delight, vermin devour like an old coat.'

It would be an over-simplification to say that where the Egyptians give us the vision of heaven, the Babylonians give the vision of hell; yet there is some truth in it. The gods alone inhabit heaven in the Sumerian and Babylonian universe. Among mortals only one was translated to live for ever 'in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers', and he like Enoch who 'walked with God, and he was not, for God took him,' lived in the dim past before the flood. Ordinary mortals must go to 'The house where they sit in darkness, where dust is their food and clay their meat, they are clothed like birds with wings for

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garments, over bolt and door lie dust and silence.' It is a depressing vision of heavy moping voiceless birds with dragged feathers crouching in the dirt. In this underworld there also lived the Annunaki, the nameless 'Great Ones' who once, like Ereshkigal, lived above with the host of heaven, but who through some misdeed were banished to be judges of the underworld, much as Zeus banished the Titans, or like the fallen Lucifer. In Babylonia the soul of a dead man was exorcized with the incantation: 'Let him go to the setting sun, let him be entrusted to Nedu, the chief gatekeeper of the underworld, that Nedu may keep strong watch over him, may his key close the lock.'

The scene may not always have been so dark. There is one Sumerian fragment which says that a righteous soul shall not die and hints at a judge whom the virtuous need not fear; but for the purposes of the Gilgamesh poems the underworld is that place of wailing which the spirit of Enkidu describes in the twelfth tablet. The journey there recalls the last book of the Odyssey, when Penelope's suitors are led away, 'gibbering like bats that squeak and flutter in the depths of some mysterious cave when one of them has fallen from the rocky roof, losing his hold on his clustered friends. With such shrill discord the company set out in Hermes' charge, following the Deliverer down the dark paths of decay. Past Ocean Stream, past the White Rock, past the Gates of the Sun and the region of dreams they went, and before long they reached the meadow of asphodel, which is the dwelling-place of souls, the disembodied wraiths of men.' Except for the 'Deliverer' Hermes, who takes the place of the frightful being with talons and a sombre countenance who led Enkidu away to the palace of Ereshkigal, this is recognizably akin to the Babylonian vision of last things. Whether the Hebrew place of the dead 'Sheol' ever meant a region like the Babylonian underworld is too deep a question to enter into here, but it would seem that the conception, at

least, was familiar to the author of Psalm XLIX when he wrote, 'They are appointed as a flock for Sheol: Death shall be their shepherd: and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning: and their beauty shall be for Sheol to consume, that there be no habitation for it.'

The dying Egyptian, on the other hand, had a reasonable hope of paradise to comfort and encourage him at the end. After judgement and weighing of souls the righteous man could expect, through a form of rebirth, to enter the fields of paradise, 'I know the field of reeds of Re ... the height of its barley ... the dwellers of the horizon reap it beside the Eastern Souls.' This rebirth was not for some single exceptional man alone, nor the king alone, but for 'millions of millions ... there is not one who fails to reach that place ... as for the duration of life upon earth, it is a sort of dream; they say "Welcome, safe and sound" to him who reaches the West.'

7. The Story

Although the gods play a great part in the Epic, in its later form at least, *Gilgamesh* appears to have been as much a secular poem as the *Odyssey*. There is no suggestion that it was recited as part of religious ritual, as was the great Babylonian poem of Creation the *Enuma Elish*, though it contains quasi-religious material in the laments over the dead, and in the set pieces of 'Wisdom'. It is a secular narrative, divided into loosely connected episodes covering the most important events in the life of the hero.

There are no marvellous birth and childhood legends for Gilgamesh, as there are for so many heroes of folk-lore. When the story begins he is in mature manhood, and superior to all other men in beauty and strength and the unsatisfied cravings of his half-divine nature, for which he can find no worthy match in love or in war; while his daemonic energy is wearing his subjects out. They are forced to call in the help of the gods,

and the first episode describes how they provide a companion and foil. This was Enkidu, the 'natural man', reared with wild animals, and as swift as the gazelle. But in time Enkidu was seduced by a harlot from the city, and with the loss of innocence an irrevocable step was taken towards taming the wild man. The animals now rejected him, and he was led on by stages, first learning to wear clothes, eat human food, herd sheep, and make war on the wolf and lion, until at length he reached the great civilized city of Uruk. He does not look back again to his old free life until he lies on his death-bed, when a pang of regret catches hold of him and he curses all the educators. This is the 'Fall' in reverse, a *felix culpa* shorn of tragic development; but it is also an allegory of the stages by which mankind reaches civilization, going from savagery to pastoralism and at last to the life of the city. It has even been claimed from the evidence of this story that the Babylonians were social evolutionists!

The great friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu that begins with a wrestling bout in Uruk is the link that connects all the episodes of the story. Even in a dream, before he had seen Enkidu, Gilgamesh was drawn to him by an attraction 'like the love of woman'. After the meeting Enkidu becomes 'a younger brother', a 'dear friend', though in the Sumerian poems the master and servant relationship is stressed to a greater degree. It is Enkidu who brings news of the mysterious cedar forest and its monstrous guardian, the encounter with whom is the subject of the second episode.

The journey to the forest and the ensuing battle can be read on different planes of reality, like medieval allegory. The forest is an actual forest, probably the Amanus, in north Syria, or perhaps in Elam in south-west Persia; but it is also the home of uncanny powers and the scene of strange adventures like those of Celtic heroes and medieval knights; and it is the dark forest of the soul. On the first level, the historical, the need of the cities for timber is the motive for the whole expedition.