

Gilgamesh and the literary traditions of ancient Mesopotamia

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The Epic of Gilgamesh is usually cited as the masterpiece of Babylonian literature. This poem is only one of several literary texts about the legendary hero, King Gilgamesh of Uruk. In many respects the evolution of these texts over more than two thousand years can serve as a paradigm for the history of ancient Mesopotamian literature. This chapter sketches this history, with special reference to Gilgamesh and other narrative poems, focusing on key moments by introducing individual scholars from five points in time.

The literature of Mesopotamia in the pre-Christian era was composed mainly in Sumerian, Akkadian and Aramaic (largely lost). By literature is meant here writings that bear the imprint of creative imagination, i.e. belles lettres; excluded are the corpora of professional texts, such as the huge compendia of divination, astrology and exorcism that accounted for a large proportion of the Babylonian scribal tradition. Modern scholars have evolved a refined typology of this literature, dividing it into categories such as mythological narratives, epic poetry, hymns, wisdom literature, folk tales, etc. In most cases this typology has no counterpart in the ancient world. There were no Sumerian or Akkadian words for myth or for heroic narrative, and no ancient recognition of narrative poetry as a genre.

For present purposes we can identify as narrative poetry a group of long or longish poems that share many features of form and style with the Gilgamesh texts and are representatives of the same literary traditions. Some of these are mythological narratives that relate the exploits of the gods. Others have as their subject matter the adventures of mortals. In Sumerian these are the tales of Lugalbanda, Enmerkar and Bilgames (Akkadian Gilgamesh). In Akkadian we can include, alongside the great poem about Gilgamesh, two shorter heroic tales named after their protagonists: Adapa and Etana. These poems about legendary heroes were probably all rooted in entertainment but became over the course of the centuries pedagogical tools.

Our understanding of the history of ancient Mesopotamian literature relies on random finds and chance survival: what emerges is a succession of periods when we know something of written traditions, punctuated by longer intervals of which we know very little. When literary texts are first encountered in the mid-third millennium two literary traditions are witnessed by roughly contemporaneous Sumerian and Akkadian compositions. Old Sumerian texts of the period far outnumber those in Akkadian. Neither body of material is yet fully intelligible. Old Sumerian literature comes chiefly from Tell Abu Salabikh (ancient name uncertain), Shuruppak and Adab in Sumer. Slightly later copies of some of these compositions have been found in Syria, at Mari on the middle Euphrates and at Ebla south of Aleppo. An archaic Akkadian hymn to the sun god first

encountered at Abu Salabikh was also known at Ebla. The surviving texts bear witness to an early spread of ancient Mesopotamian literature, in both its traditions, well beyond the southern alluvial plain where cuneiform writing was developed late in the fourth millennium. While no text relating stories of Gilgamesh has been identified in this early material, we do have an Old Sumerian composition that clearly features King Lugalbanda of Uruk and the goddess Ninsun. These two occur in the later epic traditions as Gilgamesh's parents. Already at this early time the legendary dynasty of Uruk which according to the Sumerian King List included three great Mesopotamian heroes, Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh, was the inspiration for mytho-poetic narrative.

Little literature, whether Sumerian or Akkadian, survives from the latter part of the third millennium, though there have been isolated discoveries of important texts. The very last century of this millennium, however, certainly witnessed a great activity in the redaction and recording of Sumerian literature, especially under the direction of King Shulgi of Ur, who set up academies of Sumerian learning at Nippur and Ur, respectively the religious and political centres of his empire. A few scraps of this Neo-Sumerian literature are extant, including some pieces of narrative poems about Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh.

Some of the courtly Sumerian literature that was written under Shulgi and his successors was adopted into the curriculum of Old Babylonian scribal schools. Large numbers of eighteenth-century tablets, discovered in scholars' houses at Nippur and Ur, provide us with a set of more-or-less standardized texts, which we may treat as a canon of classical Sumerian literature. This corpus is currently under reconstruction from tablets and fragments scattered around the world. Because the corpus was quite limited, and many texts are extant in dozens of exemplars, there is a real prospect of a complete reconstruction of this literature; however, much Sumerian literature no doubt was excluded from the school curricula, and is gone forever. A small proportion of the extant corpus is representative of the Sumerian tradition of narrative poems about legendary kings: a pair of compositions about Lugalbanda, two about Enmerkar, and five about Gilgamesh.

By the eighteenth century Sumerian had died out as a living language in Babylonia. The vernacular tongue in cities was an Old Babylonian dialect of Akkadian. The language of literary expression remained Sumerian in the scribal schools, but few new Sumerian texts were added to the traditional corpus. At court Akkadian had overtaken Sumerian as the preferred medium, not only in administration but also in the formal literature of courtly piety, such as royal hymns and lyrics of divine marriage. It seems very likely that court entertainment had also made the transition from Sumerian to Old Babylonian. During the Old Babylonian period we find written traces of a vibrant Old Babylonian literature, including the oldest fragments of the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic and pieces of other well-known narrative poems in the Akkadian language (Anzû, Etana, Atrahasis, the Naram-Sîn legend). Some of these fragments come from the scribal

schools, where they form a tiny minority of Babylonian texts among the huge mass of Sumerian compositions. But this is an opportunity to indulge in a little fantasy, and introduce the first of our five scholars.

1. Name: *Sîn-iddinam*. Time: *ca* 1750 BC. Place: Nippur, central Babylonia

Let us imagine: *Sîn-iddinam*, son of *Ili-iddinam*, sits on the ground on the shady side of the courtyard of his father's house, shaping in his hands a writing tablet out of moist clay got from the bin nearby. He is sixteen years old and has been learning to write for five years. His mother tongue is the local Babylonian dialect of Akkadian but he long since learned Sumerian.

Today he is tired from the night before. His father, a priest of *Ekur*, the great temple of the god *Enlil*, had let him attend a banquet in honour of *Hammurapi*, king of Babylon, who was visiting Nippur to pay homage to the god *Enlil*. Now his assignment is to inscribe a clay tablet with the first sixty lines of the Sumerian poem entitled 'The Lord to the Living One's Land', one of the old compositions about the legendary king and hero, *Gilgamesh*. Instead the boy's mind keeps returning to the evening before, to the sights and sounds of the great royal banquet, and especially to the words of the epic poem that the old king's minstrel had sung. It was in the living language, Akkadian, and it stuck in his mind. One day, he thinks, he would try to set it all down in writing. But for now, he writes out on his clay tablet what he could remember of its beginning.

Surpassing all other kings, heroic in stature,
 brave scion of Uruk, wild bull on the rampage!
 Going at the fore he was the vanguard,
 going at the rear, one his comrades could trust!

A mighty bank, protecting his warriors,
 a violent flood-wave, smashing a stone wall!
 Wild bull of Lugalbanda, *Gilgamesh*, the perfect in strength,
 suckling of the august Wild Cow, the goddess *Ninsun*!

Gilgamesh the tall, magnificent and terrible,
 who opened passes in the mountains,
 who dug wells on the slopes of the uplands,
 and crossed the ocean, the wide sea to the sunrise.

Gilgamesh I 29–40, translated by George 1999: 2

This is the prologue of the Old Babylonian epic. It does not survive on any Old Babylonian tablet yet known, but comes down to us embedded in the later version. However, other parts of the Old Babylonian poem are extant on tablets written by scribal

apprentices in the eighteenth century, so that while *Sîn-iddinam* is the product of my imagination, the scenario presented above is not pure fantasy. An oral origin for the poem of *Gilgamesh* is to be expected, though it cannot be proved. The existence alongside the school tablets of larger, library tablets inscribed with parts of the Old Babylonian epic demonstrates that several attempts were made at this time to commit longer sections of the poem to writing. They give a glimpse of the poem that may well have been very close to the oral tradition from which it sprang. This oral tradition must have continued to evolve but naturally we know only of the development of the written tradition.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, in the reign of King Samsuiluna of Babylon, the urban centres of southern Babylonia experienced a catastrophe that shows both in the archaeological record and in the documentary evidence. Large tracts of cities such as Nippur were abandoned as the populace fled; a sharp decline in economic activity is witnessed by the sudden termination of archives. Though Nippur, at least, enjoyed a short recovery, the city was quickly lost to invaders from the southern marshes (the Sealand) and did not recover until the fourteenth century. This disruption brought with it the closure of the scribal schools at Nippur, Isin, Uruk and Ur, and heralded the end of the southern scribal curriculum that had kept the traditions of Sumerian literature alive for three centuries.

We do not yet know exactly when the curriculum underwent the transition that saw most of the old Sumerian compositions discarded and the adoption in their place of literature in Akkadian, for evidence for scribal education in the succeeding four centuries is scarce. It is likely, though, that the collapse of economic and intellectual life in the south played a large part in what happened. A shift of wealth and power to the north can already be observed in the early eighteenth century, under King Hammurapi. The events that ushered in a long interval in the Babylonian domination of the south reinforced that shift. Small discoveries of school texts from northern towns show that, already in the early eighteenth century, the curriculum there included rather more Akkadian than was the case further south. Therein lay the roots of the later scribal tradition.

Two bodies of material give us a glimpse of ancient Mesopotamian literature in the last third of the second millennium BC. First there are tablets written in Mesopotamia proper. A small number of Middle Babylonian scribal exercises and library tablets from such old Mesopotamian centres as Babylon, Nippur and Ur date roughly to the twelfth century. A larger corpus of Babylonian literary texts in Middle Assyrian script derives from the city of Ashur, on the middle Tigris, and dates roughly to the period between kings Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207) and Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076). Already the Babylonian scribal tradition has become thoroughly Akkadianized: many of the great works of Babylonian narrative poetry are present, including *Gilgamesh*, *Atrahasis*, *Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld*, and *Etana*. Only a few Sumerian compositions survive, and almost all are equipped with Akkadian translations in bilingual format.

The second body of material is the tablets from Syria, Palestine, Anatolia and Egypt. These tablets mostly stem from scribal education. Here again we see an Akkadianized corpus of traditional Mesopotamian literature, including Gilgamesh, Adapa, Nergal and Ereshkigal, Atrahasis, and legends of Sargon. Some of these traditional Middle Babylonian texts were subject to local adaptations, being retold in paraphrase and even translated into vernacular languages such as Hurrian and Hittite.

As manuscripts proliferated, variant recensions grew up. At the same time new compositions were introduced, many of them of an explicitly scholarly nature or the work of learned scholar poets. Newly prominent were the Poem of the Righteous Sufferer (*Ludlul bel nemeqi*) and other ‘wisdom’ poems that dealt with questions of morality and the perceived unjustness of human life. It was probably towards the end of this era that the Babylonian Gilgamesh poem was reshaped into the form in which it remained for the rest of its history, a second opportunity to fantasize.

2. Name: Sîn-leqi-unninni. Time: *ca* 1200 BC. Place: Uruk, southern Babylonia

Just suppose: Sîn-leqi-unninni is a scholar of thirty-five or forty years, still young enough to be able to read cuneiform script on clay but highly learned and respected. By profession he is an expert in medicine and prophylactic-apotropaic rituals (Akkadian *ashipu* ‘exorcist’), supported by the great temple of Uruk since graduating from scribal school about fifteen years earlier. There he mastered the Sumerian language, studied the antique classics of Babylonian literature and committed to memory the written lore of his profession. He has maintained his interest in the intellectual legacy of his forbears and is now a scholar of high reputation for learning. He has the task of establishing the definitive text of a fine old traditional poem that exists in many variant versions. It is the poem ‘Surpassing All Other Kings’, an epic narrative that sings the glory of Gilgamesh. Sîn-leqi-unninni finds the poem very old-fashioned in language and style. And although his colleagues have managed to assemble before him dozens of different clay tablets from far afield to help him establish a reliable text, it is clear that parts of the poem are missing entirely. He knows it by heart anyway, but has long thought that it needs equipping with a greater sophistication of narrative and language, filling out with fashionable diversions and embellishing with a more modern, less naively heroic mood. He sets aside the dusty old tablets that have been collected for him and begins to write:

He who saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,
 who knew the proper ways, was wise in all matters!
 Gilgamesh, who saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,
 who knew the proper ways, was wise in all matters!

He explored everywhere the seats of power,
 and learnt of everything the sum of wisdom.

He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,
 he brought back a tale of before the Deluge.

He came a far road, was weary, found peace,
 and set all his labours on a tablet of stone . . .

See the tablet-box of cedar,
 release its clasps of bronze!
 Lift the lid of its secret,
 pick up the tablet of lapis lazuli and read out
 the travails of Gilgamesh, all that he went through.

Gilgamesh I 1–28, lightly restored, after George 1999: 1–2

According to Babylonian tradition the exorcist *Sîn-leqi-unninni* of Uruk was the author of the poem ‘He who saw the Deep’, the ancient title of the late or Standard Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh epic. An extended family of Late Babylonian cult-singers from Uruk considered him their ancestor, and he was falsely reckoned by native scholarship to have lived in the reign of Gilgamesh himself. Nothing more is known of him. It is improbable that he was the first to set the poem down on clay. More likely he was responsible for establishing, as envisaged above, the standard written text that circulated in first-millennium Assyria and Babylonia. In this case he lived some time towards the end of the second millennium BC, a time when exactly this kind of activity was being carried out by learned Babylonian scholars.

Comparison of the very fragmentary Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian versions of Gilgamesh with the much better-preserved Standard Babylonian poem suggests that the modernizing of the epic wrought profound changes on it. The poem that celebrated the glorious heroism of the most famous king and mightiest hero of Babylonian legend gained the new prologue quoted above, a prologue that established a mood and emphasis very different from the Old Babylonian poem. Large and small alterations occurred throughout the text. The result is a poem of greater sophistication in terms of plot development and literary effect, though one less vibrant in its language. Most of all the epic is recast as a sombre meditation on death, its hero a man who endured terrible hardship for no ultimate gain. Other literary compositions, chiefly the philosophical and didactic texts known as ‘wisdom’ literature, reveal that a greater profundity of thought, coupled with a bleakness of expectation by the individual in the face of the great unseen powers that govern the universe, are motifs characteristic of the late second millennium.

The next large body of extant material is the royal library of the late Assyrian kings, comprising tablets written in possibly the ninth century, certainly the eighth century and especially the seventh century. This library, discovered in the 1850s, remains the paramount source of later ancient Mesopotamian literature; contemporaneous tablets

from private Assyrian libraries add to our knowledge of the corpus, as do a growing number of later tablets from Babylonia. The masterpieces of Babylonian poetry are all present in seventh-century Assyria and later Babylonia, including parts of all the well-known narrative poems: Gilgamesh, Adapa and Etana; the legend of Naram-Sîn; Anzû, Atrahasis, the Creation Epic (*Enuma elish*), Erra, Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld, and Nergal and Ereshkigal. Most of these compositions clearly survive in standard versions deriving ultimately from Old or Middle Babylonian recensions, and are the result of what seem to have been deliberate attempts to establish received texts. However, a few traces survive of variant versions that remained extant in imperial Assyria alongside the more commonly attested standard versions.

Among ancient Mesopotamian libraries, the Assyrian royal library of Nineveh constitutes a very valuable exception. Its holdings were the result of a deliberate attempt by King Ashurbanipal (668–627) to bring together in one place the sum of traditional learning, which he considered a resource essential for good governance. For this reason the library, buried in the palaces of the citadel when the Medes and Babylonians sacked Nineveh in 612 BC, had a comprehensive collection of texts of the Babylonian scribal tradition, some in multiple copies. Other first-millennium libraries, Babylonian as well as Assyrian, are random accumulations of samples of the traditional texts. Typically they are found in private houses belonging to families of the literate professional classes, and such collections appear mostly to be the result of scribal teaching and learning spread over two or more generations. Other collections come from temple contexts, but again a close connection with pedagogy is suspected.

Traditional learning in this period still depended on a mastery of cuneiform writing and a thorough knowledge of the Sumerian and Akkadian languages. In a world where Aramaic was the vernacular and increasingly the language of officialdom, and where the predominant technology of writing was more and more the West Semitic alphabet penned on ostraca, parchment and papyrus, the old, traditional learning began to become obsolete. Traces of a court literature in Aramaic suggest that the language of living literature was no longer Babylonian. A third vignette offers a glimpse of the place of Babylonian literature in this time of cultural transition.

3. Name: Ashur-ra'im-napishti. Time: *ca* 725 BC. Place: Ashur, Assyria

The Assyrian empire is at its peak as a political and military superpower. Ashur-ra'im-napishti is fourteen years old. His family, rich and privileged, has produced generations of singers at the royal court. As natives of Ashur they speak the Assyrian dialect of Akkadian at home, but use Aramaic when ordering the servants about and haggling for luxury goods in the market place. As long as his voice stays good when it breaks, Ashur-ra'im-napishti will also be a royal singer, performing courtly songs in Assyrian and Aramaic. But like his father and grandfather before him, he is undergoing the traditional education of the literate professional classes. In order to write cuneiform

Ashur-ra'im-napishti has learned primeval Sumerian and an antiquated literary dialect of Babylonian, and is now what is called a junior apprentice. Today he has an important assignment. He has to make a perfect copy of Tablet VI of 'He who Saw the Deep'. It is the bit when the goddess Ishtar tries to seduce the hero, Gilgamesh is rude back to her, and he and Enkidu save the city of Uruk from the Bull of Heaven. It is a classic of the old literature, no longer a living text, but his father says it is a key component of a proper education.

Suppressing a yawn, Ashur-ra'im-napishti takes up his new stylus, the one exquisitely decorated with lapis lazuli and carnelian, and sits himself down on his mother's best woollen carpet amid a scatter of silky cushions. Reaching out a plump hand he pulls nearer an ivory-inlaid tablet stand on which some unseen servant has placed a beautifully prepared clay tablet already ruled off neatly in three columns on each side. In a clear and practised hand of precocious elegance Ashur-ra'im-napishti begins to write:

He washed his matted hair, he cleaned his equipment,
 he shook his hair down over his back.
 Casting aside his dirty gear he clad himself in clean,
 wrapped cloaks round him, tied on a sash.
 Then did Gilgamesh put on his crown.

On the beauty of Gilgamesh Lady Ishtar looked with longing:
 'Come, Gilgamesh, be you my bridegroom!
 Grant me your fruits, O grant me!
 Be you my husband and I your wife!

Gilgamesh VI 1–9, translated by George 1999: 48

A young apprentice scribe called Ashur-ra'im-napishti really did write a beautiful copy of Gilgamesh VI on a three-column tablet, for it was excavated at Ashur in the ruins of his family's house, complete with a colophon reporting his name and title. The family was certainly well off, but the picture of privileged adolescent ennui is fantasy.

The final and most glorious century of the Assyrian empire was a time when both Assyrian and Babylonian were rapidly losing ground as vernacular languages to Aramaic. Increasingly their use was confined to those areas of human activity that had long demanded literacy in cuneiform: the guidance of the king, the administration of the law and the old institutions, and the scribal education that was the vehicle for training the professional elite that serviced them. Against this background it is unlikely that a written work of the old tradition like the Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh epic had any life as literature outside pedagogy, where it was studied for its Old Babylonian quality as a good story and for its veneer of Middle Babylonian profundity.

The very last literary texts written in cuneiform come from Babylon in the last two centuries BC, when a residue of professional families connected with the temple of the god Marduk (Bel) — astrologers and cult-singers — still passed on the old scribal tradition in teaching cuneiform writing to their offspring. Eventually, however, this activity came to an end, and with it passed from human memory whatever of the written intellectual legacy of ancient Mesopotamia that was no longer of use in the Helleno-Parthian east. Near the end of the long centuries of cuneiform writing, a fourth scholar grappled with Gilgamesh.

4. Name: Bel-ahhe-usur. Time: 15 Kislimu, *ca* 130 BC. Place: Babylon

It is a bright day late in autumn. Bel-ahhe-usur squats in a corner of the courtyard of his family's large but dilapidated house in the centre of Babylon. The city is slowly becoming a vast ruin. Power moved elsewhere years ago, when the royal court decamped to Seleucia, and most of the population went with it. All that remains of the city is Esangil, the ancient temple of the god Marduk built by Kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal 550 years before, the families that work for it and a few Greek colonists.

Bel-ahhe-usur's family are astrologers and members of the assembly of Esangil. He himself is seventeen and has been learning the old cuneiform traditions for years from his father, Itti-Marduk-balatu, an astrologer who holds a senior bureaucratic office in Babylon. At home Bel-ahhe-usur speaks Aramaic but as an apprentice astrologer he has had to learn Sumerian and Babylonian Akkadian. Working under his father has also exposed him to a little Greek. Today is the day of an important examination. He is making a perfect copy of an old tablet inscribed with Tablet X of the Epic of Gilgamesh. He knows the poem well. It is a distillation of ancient wisdom but not of any practical use. The same can be said for most of the classic works of the old literature. Bel-ahhe-usur will pass on the cuneiform tradition to his sons, if he has any, but he is not confident that they in turn will do the same for their sons. He can see that one day soon the tradition of writing in cuneiform on clay will die out.

We can imagine the boy shivering in the cooling afternoon. He pulls an old woollen blanket over his shoulders. With a sigh he picks up his well-worn stylus, a family heirloom bequeathed to him by his grandfather, Iddin-Bel, and proceeds to finish his tablet. It is the passage where the wise Uta-napishti, immortal survivor of the flood, instructs the hero Gilgamesh on the fragility of human existence and on the inevitability and unpredictability of death:

'Man is snapped off like a reed in a canebrake!

The comely young man, the pretty young woman —
all [too soon in] their [prime] Death abducts them!

'No one at all sees Death,

no one at all sees the face of Death,
 no one at all hears the voice of Death,
 Death so savage, who hacks men down . . .

‘The Anunnaki, the great gods, held an assembly,
 Mammitum, maker of destiny, fixed fates with them:
 both Death and Life they have established,
 but the day of Death they do not disclose.’

Gilgamesh X 297–322, translated by George 1999: 86–7

A lad called Bel-ahhe-usur did indeed write out a copy of Gilgamesh X in Babylon on 15 Kislimu in a year reckoned in the Parthian era, for such is reported in a colophon appended to one of the latest surviving copies of Gilgamesh. Assuming his identity with the astrologer of the same name and ancestry known from other dated tablets from Babylon, he would have been a scribal apprentice in the 130s BC.

This was a time of great political upheaval, in which Babylonia stood on the battlefield between the Seleucid kingdom of Syria and the Parthian Arsacid kingdom of Iran. Bel-ahhe-usur may have been old enough to remember the conquest of Babylonia by the Parthians under Mithridates I in 141 BC. He would certainly have witnessed the brief restoration of Seleucid power in 130–129 and also the rapid return of Arsacid hegemony under the vice-regent Himeros. By 127, when Babylon was briefly ruled by Hyspaosines of Characene, Bel-ahhe-usur and his brother Nabû-mushetiq-uddi were already taking over some of their father’s duties as astrologers in the temple Esangil. We last hear of Bel-ahhe-usur twelve years later, when he would have been in his middle thirties and Babylon was firmly under the control of the great Mithridates II.

Bel-ahhe-usur’s lifetime bridged the transition of Babylonia from a province ruled by the Macedonian heirs of Alexander to a dominion of an Iranian empire. Hellenism survived the departure of the Seleucids, but so did the much older native traditions of Babylonia. Writing in cuneiform survived at Babylon well into the first century AD. The old cults continued for hundreds of years more. And Babylonian practical expertise found its way into Greek, Aramaic and other intellectual traditions. At the turn of the eras, however, the written Epic of Gilgamesh was not a text with any obvious or identifiable use beyond the part it played in training the dwindling number of scribes who wrote in cuneiform. Its death knell was sounding.

But the cuneiform tradition was not the only tradition of literature in Mesopotamia in the first millennium BC. Important elements in Mesopotamia’s legacy to its neighbours and successors must have been the vital indigenous literature in Aramaic, which survives only in a few traces, and the equally vital oral literature of market-place entertainers, by the mid-first millennium BC also in Aramaic. It is from these lost literatures and from later adaptations of them in Judaized and Christianized form, that one must suppose to

have arisen many elements of later literatures which invite a Mesopotamian derivation. One story ostensibly of Babylonian origin is that handed down by the last of our five scholars.

5. Name: Claudius Aelianus. Time: *ca* AD 200. Place: Italy

The Roman rhetorician Aelian was writing his treatise on the ‘Nature of Animals’ (*De natura animalium*) and wanted to illustrate a point about the occasional kindness of animals to human beings. He recalled an old story about a king of Babylon. It was the tale of the king’s birth that interested him. Summarizing it in his best Greek (which some unkind people considered bad Greek), he wrote out the episode as follows:

A love of man is another characteristic of animals . . . When Seuechoros was king of Babylon the Chaldeans foretold that the son born of his daughter would wrest the kingdom from his grandfather. This made him afraid and . . . he put the strictest of watches upon her. For all that, since fate was cleverer than the king of Babylon, the girl became a mother, being pregnant by some obscure man. So the guards from fear of the king hurled the infant from the citadel, for that was where the aforesaid girl was imprisoned. Now an eagle which saw with its piercing eye the child while still falling, before it was dashed to the earth, flew beneath it, flung its back under it, and conveyed it to some garden and set it down with the utmost care. But when the keeper of the place saw the pretty baby he fell in love with it and nursed it; and it was called Gilgames and became king of Babylon.

De natura animalium xii 21, transl. Scholfield 1958–9: III 39–41

Aelian’s story of Gilgames has some connections with Babylonian traditions about Gilgamesh, essentially that he was a grandson of Enmerkar (of which Seuechoros is a corruption), of uncertain paternity, and a king of lower Mesopotamia, but beyond the tenure of kingship the account holds nothing in common with the written epic that we know. Where then did it come from? As Aelian knew, the story of the princess imprisoned because of a prediction of the king’s overthrow by his grandson, but impregnated nevertheless, also occurs in the well-known myth of the birth of Perseus. Mid-air rescue by an eagle and the king raised by a gardener are motifs that occur in Mesopotamian literature, in the poem of Etana and the legend of Sargon of Akkade. The saving by wild animals of national heroes as babies is a more international topos, for it informs famous legends about the founders of Persia and Rome. Probably it was a favourite motif of storytellers in the second half of the first millennium BC.

Aelian’s story of Gilgames is thus a composite of narrative elements drawn eclectically from the mythology of the east Mediterranean and Near East. It is unlikely that it was his own invention, for Gilgamesh was a figure alien to the Greek and Roman world. More probably he had encountered a tale of Gilgamesh translated into Greek from

Aramaic or Phoenician. Such a story would have stemmed from an oral tradition of the poem of Gilgamesh that in its accretion of detail bore the imprint of non-Mesopotamian traditions but was ultimately descended from the oral poem of the Old Babylonian period. With the passing of two thousand years, it need not surprise us if the Babylonian poem is unrecognizable in Aelian's account of Gilgamesh. What else could we expect after a succession of some sixty generations of tellers of tales?

It is obvious that written traditions are likely to be more stable than oral ones. The Mesopotamian evidence, as interpreted here, corroborates this. Many efforts have been made in recent years to bridge the gap between ancient Mesopotamian literature and other contemporaneous and later literatures. In doing this too much emphasis has been placed upon the cuneiform tradition. This is unsurprising, for most literature written on media other than clay has perished and the ancient oral traditions are of course lost and unknowable. But by the late first millennium BC the cuneiform tradition was the jealously guarded property of a tiny scribal elite. The contemporaneous oral traditions of literature no doubt had a wider currency, as well as a greater influence on the cultural traditions of the new civilizations that occupied the Near East in the Hellenistic and Christian eras.

Further reading

Essays that describe ancient Mesopotamian literature appear in Jack Sasson's encyclopedic *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (Sasson 1995): for literature in Sumerian see Michalowski 1995; for that in Akkadian see Bottéro 1995. Narrative poems about legendary heroes ('epics') are treated by Alster 1995 and Renger 1978; the history of the Gilgamesh traditions is given by George 2003, alongside a critical edition and facsimiles of the cuneiform texts. For the standardized Babylonian literary traditions of the first millennium see especially Reiner 1991.

Useful anthologies of Sumerian literature are Jacobsen 1987 and Black et al. 2004; the fullest source is the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk). Outside this on-line resource the most complete translations of the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems are those of George 1999: 743–77 and of Douglas Frayne in Foster 2001: 99–155. For printed translations of the poems about Lugalbanda and Enmarkar see Vanstiphout 2003.

The best collection of English translations of literature in Akkadian is Benjamin Foster's monumental anthology (Foster 2005). For paperback translations of the Babylonian Gilgamesh see George 1999 and Foster 2001. Translations of all the other narrative poems are given in Foster 2005; less complete is Dalley 1989.

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