Ancient Mesopotamian Music, the Politics of Reconstruction, and Extreme Early Music

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I write this piece primarily as a musicologist and amateur early music practitioner (viola da gamba player) who tries to understand the ways twentieth- and twenty-first century musicians and scholars have imagined and performed ancient music and dance. This essay emerged from my book project Performing Antiquity: Ancient Greek Music and Dance from Paris to Delphi, 1890-19351 *and brings my training as a historical musicologist and dance historian to bear on issues typically of concern to archaeologists, classicists, and linguists.*

While working on that book, I kept running across a number of individuals working now who are deeply engaged in the same kinds of reconstruction and performance projects like the ones I discuss. This essay serves as the first step toward a "sequel" so to speak to my previous book. I started by interviewing a number of these practitioners of extreme early music (music from before 800 CE), including performers, instrument builders, and scholars in classics and archaeology. Their generosity of time and willingness to share inform my gentle treatment of their work. I am not here to serve as judge and jury to determine if their interpretations, recreations, restorations, or composition are authentic, and I hope that readers don't get too caught up in these questions either. Instead, I hope readers use the politics and performance of extreme early music to interrogate the ways we perform multiple pasts today.

Sometime in July 2015, Daesh (al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham, the self-proclaimed Islamic State or ISIS) apprehended Khaled al-Asaad,2 the chief archaeologist in charge of preserving the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site in Palmyra, Syria.3 After a month of interrogations and presumed torture, al-Asaad refused to reveal where the site's

most prized relics were hidden, and on August 18, 2015, al-Asaad was publicly beheaded in the city square near the ancient Palmyra arch. A few months later, Daesh blew up the eighteen-hundred-year-old ancient Roman Arch of Triumph in Palmyra.[4] Daesh's motivations for destroying and stealing cultural artifacts are multiple[5]: cultural heritage artifacts are valuable on the black market, and razing the sites plays a role in the group's historical and theological mission.

The loss of the arch elicited worldwide condemnation followed by almost immediate calls to reconstruct the Roman ruins to their former ruined glory. And so in April 2016, in collaboration with an international team of researchers and artisans, Oxford's Institute for Digital Archaeology[6] unveiled a reconstruction of the famed arch in London's Trafalgar Square. The artists and researchers produced a nearly identical stand-in for the toppled arch not merely as an exercise in craftsmanship or archaeological reconstruction, but to send a very public message to ISIS that history cannot be destroyed forever and that the world will come together to rebuild it. The ceremony in front of the draped arch was widely attended and combined speeches from elected officials and members of the reconstruction team as well as a performance of music sung in ancient Babylonian—a language of the ancient Mesopotamian cultures that thrived in the lands of modern-day Iraq and Syria in

Figure 1. Mayor of London Boris Johnson gives Daesh two digits in front of the reconstructed Palmyra Arch, April 2016.

the first millennium BCE. The keynote was delivered by then mayor of London, Boris Johnson, who proclaimed, "We are here in the spirit of defiance, defiance of the barbarians who destroyed the original of this arch as they destroyed the original of so many monuments and relics in Syria and in the Middle East and in Palmyra." His speech ended with a shout-out to the team that reconstructed the arch. "Congratulations to the Institute for Digital Archaeology," he yelled to the crowd. "How many digits do you think Daesh deserve? I think two fingers [a vulgar gesture akin to the middle finger in the United States and Canada] to Daesh from the Institute of [*sic*, for Digital] Archaeology and from London folks."[7] See figure 1.

At the conclusion of his robust attack on Daesh, Johnson called for his staff to unveil the Roman arch—itself a symbol of imperialist victory over an ancient Middle Eastern people—for all of London to see. As the mayor posed for a few pictures, singer/composer Stef Conner and harpists Mark Hamer and Andy Lowings stepped forward to perform the title track from their 2014 album *The Flood* (see figure 2).[8] Their chosen piece was a new setting of a section from the four-thousand-year-old tale *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Harpist Hamer accompanied Conner's voice on a playable reconstruction of the forty-five-hundred-year-old lyre of Ur, itself based upon an original destroyed in the looting following the US invasion of Baghdad in the second Iraq War.[9]

Figure 2. Boris Johnson and Stef Conner in front of the reconstructed Palmyra Arch, April 2016.

Within this one performance we have a variety of reconstructions. There are material reconstructions (the arch and the harp) and performed reconstructions of ancient texts with new melodies (Conner's newly composed song), and all three adhere to different expectations of historical accuracy and fidelity. Most importantly, although based upon scholarly sources, the arch, the harp, and the song reconstructions are not meant for a strictly scholarly audience but rather serve as public exemplars of what has been lost and saved from ancient Mesopotamian cultures. Mixed together, the material and the performance reinforce each other's authenticity. In this essay, I explore the power and connections between performed and material reconstructions of what I am calling *extreme* early music, an approach to early music performance that privileges experimental practice as well as techniques and methods from anthropology and archaeology. When antiquity appears as both material and live reconstruction, the allure of the material often gives the performance a sheen of archaeological authenticity the performers perhaps never intended to have. I intend to explore some of the methods and politics of material and performance reconstruction before looking at Conner's setting of the Gilgamesh narrative. I draw on recent scholarship in archaeological preservation and conservation as well as performance studies to contextualize and analyze Conner's music in ancient Mesopotamian languages and the reconstruction and performance of Mesopotamian lyres. The multiple reconstructions of Eastern Mediterranean culture discussed here not only provide a setting to test the limits of musical reconstructions, refabrications, and reinventions but also demonstrate

ways musical reconstructions function as a form of history for general audiences. Such public performances, I argue, sidestep scholarly questions of authenticity and allow us to see how, when, and to whom scholarship becomes "real."

Ownership, Colonialism, and Cultural Appropriation

Who owns antiquity? Museums and nation-states have been arguing over cultural artifacts from antiquity for centuries. Famous examples include the so-called Elgin Marbles removed from the Parthenon in Athens in the first decade of the nineteenth century and shipped to London where they are now on display in the British Museum,[10] and the more recent purchase of stolen Iraqi antiquities by representatives of Hobby Lobby who were forced to return the objects in 2018.[11] When it comes to concrete antiquities—physical objects—who has the right to the materials? Does the modern Greek government "own" ancient Hellenic artifacts adorning ruins or buried in the ground centuries before modern Greece became a nation-state? Do the colonialist powers that acquired them (through payment and/or theft) deserve the right to provide continued care and protection to these artifacts?

James Cuno, a curator and art historian, makes the argument that ancient cultural property does not necessarily belong to the modern nations where that property is found.

> What is the relationship between, say, modern Egypt and the antiquities that were part
> of the land's Pharaonic past? The people of modern-day Cairo do not speak the language
> of the ancient Egyptians, do not practice their religion, do not make their art, wear their
> dress, eat their food, or play their music, and they do not adhere to the same kinds of
> laws or form of government the ancient Egyptians did. All that can be said is that they
> occupy the same (actually less) stretch of the earth's geography.[12]

Cuno, borrowing terms from legal scholar John Henry Merryman, stresses preservation of cultural objects using rigorous means to seek truth about our past in these objects and providing the greatest access to objects for scholars and a global public.[13] All of these arguments, however, gloss over the fact that these objects often have real economic value and that concentrating the preservation of, access to, and "truth" of antiquities in the cities of the world's most powerful countries (i.e., London, Chicago, Berlin, New York City, etc.) hurts the communities from whence these materials come.[14]

These material objects from the past are also part of how nations tell their stories. In his examination of imperialism and colonialism in Western literature and culture, Edward Said defines imperialism as "the

practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory."[15]Imperialism envelopes both the colonized people and the colonizing power in profound ways, leading Said to note that "nations themselves *are* narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them."[16] Therefore, those who "own" antiquity narrate antiquity. However, those who "perform" antiquity can also "own" antiquity and they, too, have the power to narrate, or block, emerging narratives of antiquity from coming forth. Perhaps none of these issues matters as much as looming questions of who has the right to reconstruct ruins (material and performed).

Authenticity and Material Reconstruction: Harps and Arches

One of the founders of modern archaeology, British archaeologist Sir Charles Leonard Woolley, discovered a set of four ancient lyres in hi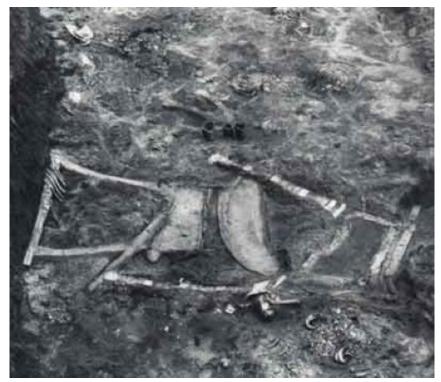s 1929 excavations of the Mesopotamian city of Ur—the birthplace of the biblical Abraham and of Western monotheism. His expeditions to territories in the Middle East under British colonial rule helped popularize the science of archaeology and also reinforced colonialist ideas of ancient Mesopotamia.[17] Although the wooden frames of the forty-five-hundred-year-old instruments had disintegrated, the metal and jeweled decorations remained. See figure 3.

Figure 3. Lyres of Ur buried in a tomb.

Woolley used plaster casts to preserve the shape of the lyres' frames and artisans reconstructed the lyres before placing the precious metals back onto the reconstructed frame. Woolley's team then distributed the reconstructed instruments to various institutions that helped in the excavation: two are at the British

Museum,[18] one is at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,[19] and the great Golden Lyre of Ur (also known as the Great Bull Lyre) ended up at the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad where it stood on display until the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In early April of 2003, the museum was looted. The lyre went missing, only to be found in pieces. The irreparably damaged gold and mother-of-pearl bull's head was subsequently discovered in the flooded basement vaults of Iraq's Central Bank. Looters stripped parts of the body of much of its gold and left the remains in a parking lot.[20] In figure 4, one can see the instrument stripped of its gold and in pieces. The sound box is on the left, the crossbar in the middle, and the two arms on the right.

Figure 4. A badly damaged lyre of Ur.

The loss and destruction of antiquities like the lyre in the fallout of the invasion of Iraq brought wide, international condemnation. It also spurred many not merely to lament and protect the remaining treasures but also to reconstruct as a form of retaliation.[21] Andy Lowings,[22] who reconstructed the lyre of Ur, is a British civil engineer who has overseen massive projects in Dubai and played a key role in the development of the Channel Tunnel: he is not an archaeologist or Assyriologist. He is, however, an amateur harpist[23] with an interest in the culture of the Middle East.

Ancient instruments had been reconstructed before, but Lowings sought to reproduce the work as both an art object as well as a functional musical instrument able to reperform the lost sounds of a twice-destroyed culture. Begun in 2003 during the Iraq War, Lowings's reconstruction work spared no expense in the quest for fidelity to the original instrument's qualities: Iraqi cedar wood was smuggled out of a war zone to build its frame; the instrument is studded with lapis lazuli and other precious jewels and stones; the frame is covered in nearly a kilogram of pure 24 karat gold (at the time worth about $13,000 alone). Furthermore, Lowings used historical materials and methods to create the instrument and took cues from other harp-playing traditions that he was familiar with from across the Middle East and East Africa, where similarly styled lyres are still played. For example, since none of the strings or tuning winches

survived, Lowings had to surmise how many strings to include, what material to use, and determine their gauge and length. He noted that the soundboard of the instrument had eight lapis lazuli emblems, which he then inferred to indicate eight strings. He chose gut as a string material although other materials (cloth, metal, hide) may have worked as well. His strings run up from a bridge to a top bar where they are secured and tuned using cloth and wooden pegs (a combination of ancient Egyptian and modern tuning peg technology). These decisions were all made through a combination of archaeological study, the study of world harp traditions, and experimental practice.[24]

The Politics of Material Reconstruction

Both Lowings and the creator of the recreated Palmyra arch Roger Michel emphasize the ability of material culture to help US and European publics connect to the past. In a talk delivered at the Library of Congress in 2009,[25] note the ways Lowings tries to appeal to a "universal" historical, religious, and cultural legacy as a way to avoid potential criticism for his reconstruction of the lyre of Ur: "This is an instrument from before everything . . . from before Christianity, from before Judaism. This is an instrument that connects us all and so nobody can have any fault with us bringing it alive and to today, and to show the history of those ancient times." Lowings refers not only to the material construction but more importantly to its performative potential to connect modern audiences to an imagined ancient Judeo-Christian musical ur-source (or "Ur"-source).[26]

Similarly fascinated with how the public engages with his reconstructions, Michel, the director of the Palmyra project said on NPR's *Weekend Edition*[27] about the controversaries surrounding digital reconstructions: "In the West, we are very fetishistic about originality. We want to touch the object that the master touched. . . . For people in other parts of the world, the role of objects is not to somehow through the object itself bring you close to history. It is a visual cue that provides memories of history. The history and heritage resides in the mind."[28] Michel has also been far more explicit in discussing the ways conflict and war have driven his work. "My intention," he declared in a *Guardian* interview, "is to show Islamic State that anything they can blow up we can rebuild exactly as it was before, and rebuild it again and again. We will use technology to disempower Isis [*sic*]."[29] His statements could imply that a key element of this reconstruction project was an attempt to possess an ancient symbol of ancient European imperialism and to stage it across the world as a modern symbol of Western culture and power.

The economics of these projects prove complicated and rife with controversy as well. Tim Williams, in a series of editorials for the journal *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, has lamented the cost

and questioned the ethics of reconstructing these items: "So the question remains, is this where resources are best spent? Of course humanitarian aid comes first, but the relatively meagre resources for heritage conservation and restoration can be monies well spent—vital to a sustainable tourism industry, lifeblood for the rebuilding of the Syrian economy. But rebuilding facsimiles, however good, of the ruins of Palmyra: the question must be why?"[30] Sultan Barakat's analysis of best-practice policies for postwar reconstruction and recovery of cultural heritage places an emphasis less on external actors and more on local communities; in practice, that means developing a shared comprehensive vision for postwar recovery of cultural heritage.[31]Postwar reconstruction, Barakat argues, is "a range of holistic activities in an integrated process designed not only to reactivate economic and social development but at the same time to create a peaceful environment that will prevent a relapse into violence."[32] It would be hard to argue that the Trafalgar Square performance or any of the subsequent erections of the arch in cities such as New York City, Dubai, Florence, Arona, and most recently Washington, DC, accomplish Barakat's goals.[33] What local people wish to preserve and how they wish to preserve it after war is often different from the aims and methods of international actors. Or, as Layton and Thomas write, "Not all societies use the remains of the past as a means of substantiating their identity."[34] Furthermore, restoring the arch of Palmyra cannot undo or ever adequately respond to the gruesome murder of Khaled al-Asaad. Material reconstruction is not without its complications.

Others involved in reconstruction have expressed similar motivations. In an interview with CBS Evening News, Italian politician and former mayor of Rome Francesco Rutelli described his own interests in the reconstruction of cultural artifacts: "We want to demonstrate that the reconstructions and the scientific terms of reference is [*sic*] necessary and possible." When the interviewer remarked that reconstruction is not the same as bringing back the original, Rutelli replied, "Absolutely not, but we can't accept that the last word is the word of terrorists."[35]

Musical Reconstructions: "The Flood" and Extreme Early Music

Michel's and Lowings's work in material reconstruction fixates on the details of fidelity to the original object, but in their display, the arch and lyre are more like performed reconstructions in that the spaces and contexts of their public display seek to frame the ways we think of that past in the present. If these material reconstructions produce physical emblems that simultaneously connect publics to ancient pasts and fight terrorism, what might the nonphysical reconstructions of these cultures accomplish for audiences? Just as Michel's arch of Palmyra is meant to be touched, Lowings's lyre was built to be

touched and played, not to sit in a museum under glass. After he founded the Lyre of Ur Project as a nonprofit in 2003, he spent many years building the instrument. He did not meet composer and singer Stef Conner until 2012.[36] Lowings found Conner through an informal network of individuals interested in ancient harps—what Conner affectionally calls the "old lyre gang."[37] Lowings initially emailed her with an invitation to collaborate on what he called "very early music."[38]

What Lowings asked Conner to do wasn't *just* early music, but rather *extreme* early music. Scholarship concerning the performance of early music and the historically informed performance (HIP) movement are usually limited to notated European music traditions ranging from the thousand-year period, from 800 to 1800 CE, with the most activity concerning music from the two-hundred-and-fifty-year period of 1500 to 1750. Traditional narratives of music history and historical performance practice often skim over the earliest traces of human music making from prehistory to the middle ages, because scholars often assume that there isn't enough material to properly reconstruct the music of the earliest human civilizations.[39] That assumption is predicated on the idea that in order to properly or authentically reconstruct ancient music we need to rely on ancient sources alone.[40] A number of scholars and performer-scholars are seeking to rectify performance and scholarly lacunae by reimagining and performing music based upon reconstructed ancient sources, often using novel performance techniques and styles.

Reimagination, performance, discovery, and reconstruction play to our interest in "being there," in experiencing the past anew. Like living history projects and battle reenactments, the performance of a reconstruction may create, in the public, a sense of being there, or of time collapsing. In her study of Civil War reenactors, Rebecca Schneider writes that many reenactors feel that "if they repeat an event *just so*, getting the details as close as possible to fidelity, they will have touched time and time will have recurred."[41]The comparison to Civil War reenactors also highlights the high stakes of their performances. Reenactors are invested in their performances in ways that traditional stage actors and musicians might not be. As Schneider[42] has written, however, it is not just about touching time: "[Reenactors] also engage in this activity as a way of accessing what they feel the documentary evidence upon which they rely misses—that is, live experience. Many [Civil War reenactors] fight not only to 'get it right' as it *was* but to get it right as it *will be* in the future of the archive to which they see themselves contributing."[43]

Schneider's argument here is quite similar to Richard Taruskin's in his influential essay "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past." In this critique of the early music movement of the twentieth

century, Richard Taruskin makes a distinction between the "authentistic" and "authentic" performance: "The former construes intentions 'internally,' that is, in spiritual, metaphysical, or emotional terms, and sees their realization in terms of the 'effect' of a performance, while the latter construes intentions in terms of empirically ascertainable—and hence, though tacitly, external—facts, and sees their realization purely in terms of sound."[44] That is, Taruskin sees a difference between those in the early music movement who seek to tell history as they really like/feel it and those who tell it as it really was. Responding to the explosion of creative approaches to performing music of the past that began in the 1950s and '60s with the work of Noah Greenberg, Paul Hilliard, and David Munrow, Taruskin offers a way out of the performative problems of "authenticity." Due to countless factors, performers of early music cannot recreate musical performances how they really were, but rather "their job is to discover, if they are lucky, *wie es eigentlich uns gefällt*—how we really like it,"[45] and that can draw upon a number of authenticities. A composer's intentions are both unknowable and not always ideal guides to authentic performance. Or, as Tarsukin writes, "everyone claims it."[46] In this telling, those who claim specialized knowledge about the way Johann Sebastian Bach might have performed his keyboard suites could no longer criticize the pianist who played the works on modern instruments. Taruskin also urges listeners to not use historical facts and religious adherence to texts "as a veritable stick to beat modern performers."[47] However, while he argues against beating up modern performers for adding personal choice and inspiration to their performances, he still highly values those historical tools used as weapons by his critics: "Original instruments, historical treatises, and all the rest have proven their value," he concludes.[48] Taruskin's historicization of authenticity seemed to put the matter to bed for musicologists in the 1990s, and Schneider's contributions to performance studies have greatly impacted the conversations within that discipline. When applied to extreme early music, especially in the cases of musical cultures where far fewer materials exist, musical "authenticity" that relies on an adherence to a composer's intensions, original instruments, and historical treatises is impossible: there just isn't enough information. That said, Taruskin's work around this problem privileges at least a conversation among those historical sources, performing traditions, and the living performer. For extreme early music, there are no remaining traditions, and the sources are so few that it is impossible to have the kind of engagement that Taruskin seems to call for.

Conner herself makes no claim to the type of authenticity lambasted by Taruskin in her music for *The Flood*. The title track of the album and the song that Conner and Lowings performed under the arch of Palmyra in Trafalgar Square, called "The Flood," is an excerpt from the ancient story *The Epic of Gilgamesh*—a tale of "human mortality as a consequence of divine selfishness."[49] The story opens with the great king Gilgamesh mistreating his subjects in the walled city of Uruk. The gods punish him by

creating a wild man, Enkidu, to stop the king. However, Enkidu and Gilgamesh become best friends and go on adventures together until Enkidu is killed, leaving Gilgamesh devastated.

Confronted with the death of his best friend and his own mortality, Gilgamesh sets forth on a futile journey to find everlasting life. He seeks Utnapishtim, one of the few remaining survivors of the great flood. Upon meeting him, Gilgamesh tells of the loss of his friend, Enkidu, and his fear of death. "I would not give him up for burial, / Until a worm fell out of his nose. / I was frightened. . . . / My friend whom I loved is turned into clay, / Enkidu, my friend whom I loved, is turned into clay! / Shall I too not lie down like him, / And never get up, forever and ever?"[50] Confronted with Gilgamesh's tale of woe, Utnapishtim chides the king for his self-pity. How dare he, Gilgamesh, think that his life is worthy of eternity:

> How long does a building stand before it falls?
> How long does a contract last? How long will brothers
>
> share the inheritance before they quarrel?
> How long does hatred, for that matter, last?
>
> Time after time the river has risen and flooded.
> The insect leaves the cocoon to live but a minute.
>
> How long is the eye able to look at the sun?
> From the very beginning nothing at all has lasted.[51]

The Epic of Gilgamesh suggests that even our most enduring monuments last but a moment in the grand scheme of cosmic history, each just another futile attempt at everlasting life. Why, then, do we reconstruct and reperform when death, violence, decay, and memory no longer connect us to the long-dead culture we wish to resurrect?

The Dangerous Allure of Reconstruction

As sung by Conner under the reconstructed Palmyra arch, the flood narrative of Tablet XI in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* becomes more than just a story of destruction and survival. It becomes a metaphor for the historical enterprise writ large. Gilgamesh's arduous journey leads him to Utnapishtim, "the Distant One,"[52] to learn the secret of cheating death, of everlasting life. The old man's speech begins: "I will reveal to you, O Gilgamesh, a secret matter, / And a mystery of the gods I will tell you."[53] It is the dream

of many historians: to find the sole surviving informant, the last narrative account of the great secret. It is the search for everlasting life many scholars seek in publishing their work. The ability to check or confirm, to see if they got it *right*: if the reproduced ancient lyre sounds like the *real* one did thousands of years ago; if our performance of Bach sounds at all like Bach's performance of Bach. Reconstruction provides this illusion, and it is doubly dangerous to see present and past works, material and performed, merge. As Vanessa Agnew describes, "With its vivid spectacles and straightforward narratives, reenactment apparently fulfills the failed promise of academic history—knowledge entertainingly and authoritatively presented."[54] Reenactment sells: the desire to see the past as we imagine it tends to trump our rational ability to recognize that what we are hearing is really modern. It is a cumbersome cognitive hurdle to leap over. Seeing the ancient instrument makes one hear ancient music regardless of when that music was first created or performed.

The flood narrative in Conner's song begins after Utnapishtim has loaded the boat with all types of animals, his family, his possessions, and craftsmen. He caulks the door shut, and then the deluge begins. Dark clouds descend, the gods destroy the earth, dikes overflow, the whole earth is set ablaze, light turns to darkness, the earth is smashed like a clay pot. The destruction is so fierce that the terrified gods cower like dogs and Ishtar—the goddess of sex, love, fertility, war, and combat—sees the destruction of humanity and screams "like a woman in childbirth"[55] (a sonic effect heard in Conner's performance).

The song opens with a lilting harp gesture played in a minor mode on the reconstructed golden lyre. Over this simple riff, Conner brings the narrative to life using evocative word painting. The realism of her setting creates a sense of immediacy and urgency as if the horrors she sings about happened just yesterday instead of written thousands of years ago. Conner creates a sense of spontaneity and intimacy in her performance through a variety of techniques. At first, her voice pulls the words out sweetly from the center of her vocal range. She sings lyrically with just enough breath to create a sense of lightness, airy timelessness, and distance, giving the illusion that the words just seem to pop into her head.[56] The pitches create light dissonances with the ostinato and do not stray far from the modally ambiguous central tonality of D (sitting between modern D minor and modern D Dorian).[57] See figure 5.

However, as "the calm of the storm god passed across the sky" (1:50), as the waves crashed, the thunder rumbled, and destruction wiped out humanity, the tessitura changes; Conner digs deep into chesty guttural growls, deftly plays with aspirated consonants, and then swoops up to piercing cries, yelps, and shouts, as depicted in the text. When the gods look down on earth and are unable to recognize the

Figure 5. Lyre riff.

destruction they've caused (2:39), Conner brings her dynamics down to an introspective whisper. When Ishtar screams like a woman in childbirth (3:15–3:35), it is represented in a sustained high a" in the voice. Another mother goddess, Belet-ili, then laments the death of humanity, and Conner represents this goddess's words by descending to a low A:

> Indeed the past has truly turned to clay,
> Because I spoke evil in the assembly of the gods.
> How did I speak evil in the assembly of the gods,
> And declare a war to destroy my people?
> It is I that gave birth to them—my own people! (3:45–4:25)

The song ends with reflective weeping. Conner repeats the final line "The gods, the Anunnaki,[58] were weeping with her [Belet-ili]" on a low intoned A (5:10).

A composer and singer with a PhD in composition, training in early music performance, and an interest in ancient languages, Conner made an ideal collaborator.[59] After selecting texts from Anne Kilmer's 2012 translation and transliteration of ancient Sumerian and Mesopotamian works,[60] she took inspiration from a wide range of music to write a new setting of the ancient text: she studied sung narratives from China and Portugal as well as Christian Syriac chant, including recordings of Sister Marie Keyrouz. Add to that a healthy sprinkling of Diamanda Galas, Björk, Meredith Monk, and a dash of some metal; all of these sources are audible in *The Flood*.[61]

The music for the album began as improvisations since Lowings does not read standard western music notation.[62] *The Flood* is sung entirely in ancient Mesopotamian languages (Sumerian and Babylonian), but the music is new. The CD liner notes state, "The music is contemporary and original, but imbued with tiny glimmers of a style that may well have sounds in common with the music that was originally sung in

Mesopotamia."[63] Those glimmers are in the modes selected for the improvisations based upon the scholarly work of Anne Kilmer, Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin, Richard L. Crocker, and Martin L. West.

I'm not particularly interested in getting deep into the weeds of ancient Mesopotamian tuning controversies here.[64] Musicologists and Assyriologists carried out the earliest scholarship on ancient Mesopotamian and Sumerian music in the 1960s and 1970s with the discovery of new cuneiform sources from the ancient city of Ugarit.[65] Kilmer and Crocker at the University of California, Berkeley, carried out a series of projects deciphering the collection of hymns and performing them. Their 1976 recording *Sounds from Silence: Recent Discoveries in Ancient Near Eastern Music* included a detailed booklet outlining the researchers' methods, discussions of tuning, instrument reconstruction, and music theory.[66] Kilmer and Crocker argued that the scales used by the ancient Mesopotamians and Sumerians very closely resembled tuning practices described by the Ancient Greeks thousands of years later. More recently, John C. Franklin has demonstrated how Ancient Mesopotamian and Sumerian lyre tuning systems influenced the Greek lyric tradition as well.[67] Since their work in the 1960s and 1970s, other musicologists and Assyriologists have attempted reconstructions of these ancient musical and music theory texts. Needless to say, there are differing opinions on how these instruments may have been tuned and how the Sumerian and Babylonian languages may have been pronounced, resulting in a very wide variety of schools of decipherment and interpretation.[68]

Conner told me how she set parameters for her improvisations that drew from both ancient and modern musical sources and traditions. She restricted herself to the modes described in the cuneiform tablet sources that, as translated by Kilmer and West, are very similar to Greek modes and also traditional pentatonic Eritrean lyre tunings, as suggested by her collaborator Lowings. Conner, paraphrasing Taruskin, stated that it doesn't really matter if that's the way it sounded: "What matters is feeling. What might it have *felt* like to play music then." The goal was to make music that was "emotionally sincere" and to make an "empathetic connection." "We want to relate to the words. We wanted to feel like it meant. We wanted to draw from what we knew that was the extent. . . . I've read my Taruskin."[69]

The CD's liner notes paint things a bit differently, emphasizing the fidelity to Babylonian sources and minimizing the composer's creative influences: "Stef memorized Babylonian and Sumerian poems and internalized their likely stress patterns (following Kilmer and West) in order to improvise melodic lines in the Mesopotamian modes that sounded as organically 'Babylonian' as possible, but which were ultimately created entirely in her own style."[70] The booklet provides a final caveat reminding us that little is known about Sumerian pronunciation, so much of the performance relies on imagination, but there is no

mention of Meredith Monk or Diamanda Galas. It does acknowledge that Lowings drew inspiration from world harp traditions. The CD booklet states, "Andy's lyre accompaniment patterns are derived from the mottled pool of influences he accumulated during his travels in Africa and the Middle East, studying lyre-playing traditions that exponents claim are descended from the ancient Near-East."[71] So Conner and Lowings do not claim their music to *be* ancient Mesopotamian.

The press, however, has latched on to the "authenticity" of Conner's work. She has been interviewed in *Newsweek* and *New Scientist*, among other popular magazines. Conner has expressed frustrations to me with these interviews. She claims that reporters and editors have slapped headlines on the pieces that do not properly represent what she is trying to do.[72] For example, the *New Scientist* lead reads, "I'm reverse-engineering Mesopotamian hit songs," which Conner insists she never said. Although the headline may make great clickbait, it is not representative of her philosophy or her work.[73] Regardless of how many times Conner says publicly that this is new music, the editors and authors of the headlines fall into the trap of seeing the performance as part and parcel of the material reconstruction. When material and performance reconstructions are presented together, many audiences default to the material. "Extreme early music" seems to suggest that new music becomes ancient because either the real relics of ancient cultures or their simulacra trick our rational capacities to distinguish between real and fake, past and present, even if we've "read our Taruskin." Without musical scores, or large quantities of other supporting musical documents to perform long-lost works, anyone can perform authentically ancient music so long as they feel it. However, what makes audiences and performers "feel it" is rarely the performance itself, but usually the material things they see.

Conclusion: Everlasting Life

Conner's song ends with the gods weeping over the earth they ruined, but Tablet XI continues: for six days and seven nights the storms raged and then they stopped. Utnapishtim looked upon the world and saw that "the whole human race had turned to clay. / The landscape was flat as a rooftop."[74] Regretful of their harsh punishment of humanity, the gods grant everlasting life to Utnapishtim and his wife. Gilgamesh ultimately leaves the "Distant One" without everlasting life. Although he takes back a parting gift, a plant of rejuvenation, he is never able to experience this gift himself, as it is stolen by a snake.[75] In the end, Gilgamesh returns to his home city of Uruk with a story of the great flood. The narrative gains everlasting life but not its bearer.

Gilgamesh is the perfect metaphor for the reconstructed harps and arches and the newly invented music of the ancient Sumerians. Like Gilgamesh himself, the music is merely the storyteller and the historian. And the history this music tells is not solely for other historians but for all people. The public performance of history (real, imagined, or destroyed) inspires many musicians to perform the past; made accessible, it reenacts destruction and rebirth. Gilgamesh believes he never should have set out on his search for everlasting life; he fears he failed in his quest, but this is the moral of the story: as scholars, we often mistake our successes as failures. Although sharing the tale with the world may not have been the goal, everlasting life—sharing the tale with the *future*—is the real prize. Monuments, museums, and triumphal arches don't stand forever. War, violence, time, neglect, and human stupidity destroy all. As *The Epic* proclaims, "Nothing at all has lasted." What survives is the process of history. The telling anew of history endures: reconstructed and reperformed again and again.

Notes

1. Samuel N. Dorf, *Performing Antiquity: Ancient Greek Music and Dance from Paris to Delphi, 1890–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), https://global.oup.com/academic/product/performing-antiquity-9780190612092?cc=us&lang=en&.

2. Kareem Shaheen and Ian Black, "Beheaded Syrian Scholar Refused to Lead Isis to Hidden Palmyra Antiquities," *Guardian*, August 19, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/18/isis-beheads-archaeologist-syria.

3. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designates landmarks or areas around the globe that are "of outstanding universal value" and meet a number of criteria (https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/). UNESCO describes the significance of the site at Palmyra as follows: "An oasis in the Syrian desert, north-east of Damascus, Palmyra contains the monumental ruins of a great city that was one of the most important cultural centres of the ancient world" (see UNESCO, "Site of Palmyra," UNESCO World Heritage List, accessed December 26, 2019, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/23/). From the 1st to the 2nd century, the art and architecture of Palmyra, standing at the crossroads of several civilizations, married Graeco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences."

4. Kareem Shaheen, "Isis Blows up Arch of Triumph in 2,000-Year-Old City of Palmyra," *Guardian*, October 5, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/05/isis-blows-up-another-monument-in-2000-year-old-city-of-palmyra.

5. Benjamin Isakhan and Jose Antonio Gonzalez Zarandona, "Erasing History: Why Islamic State Is Blowing up Ancient Artefacts," The Conversation, June 4, 2017, https://theconversation.com/erasing-history-why-islamic-state-is-blowing-up-ancient-artefacts-78667.

6. Roger Michel, "Home," The Institute for Digital Archeology, accessed September 12, 2020, http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/.

7. In the UK, Ireland, Australia, India, Pakistan, and New Zealand, the gesture of raising the index and middle fingers splayed with the back of the hand facing out is a vulgar gesture akin to the American use of the middle finger. Live Satellite News, "Boris Johnson Unveils Palmyra Arch, London (4–19–16)," YouTube, accessed June 14, 2018, https://youtube.com/embed/n6d7pFBEdPk.

8. Stef Conner, "Discography: *The Flood*," Stef Conner, accessed September 12, 2020, http://www.stefconner.com/music/the-flood-2/.

9. See Andy Lowings, "Introduction & Background," Lyre of Ur Project, accessed December 23, 2019, http://www.lyre-of-ur.com/intro.htm.

10. BBC News, "How Did the Elgin Marbles Get Here?" Entertainment & Arts, December 5, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-30342462.

11. Emily Cochrane, "Iraqi Artifacts Once Bought by Hobby Lobby Will Return Home," *New York Times*, May 2, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/us/politics/iraq-artifacts-hobby-lobby-ice.html.

12. James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 9–10.

13. John Henry Merryman, "The Nation and the Object," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 1 (1994): 61–76.

14. Kwame Anthony Appiah offers a contrasting argument in support of a cosmopolitanism where we are citizens of the world and argues that what separates us, what creates "others" and "difference," has been overemphasized. Cosmopolitanism, he claims, is "universality plus difference." See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 151.

15. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 9.

16. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii.

17. See Billie Melman, "Ur: Empire, Modernity, and the Visualization of Antiquity Between the Two World Wars," *Representations* 145, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 129–51.

18. The British Museum, *Queen's Lyre*, Southern Iraq, Sumerian, about 2600–2400 BC, from Ur; Lapis lazuli, shell, red limestone and gold (H. 112 cm), Excavated by C. L. Woolley, ANE 121198a, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1928-1010-1-a.

19. Penn Museum, *Lyre Fragment Plaque*, 2450 BCE, University Museum Expedition to Ur, Iraq, 1928; shell, bitumen (L. 31.5 cm x W. 11 cm. x D. 1.5 cm), U.10556 - Field No SF, https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/4466.

20. For more on the looting of the Iraqi Museum and the subsequent investigation to find the missing and stolen materials, see Michael Bogdanos, "The Causalities of War: The Truth about the Iraq Museum," *American Journal of Archaeology* 109, no. 2 (July 2005): 477–526.

21. Very often this desire to reconstruct a destroyed artifact stems from the feeling that the destruction was a personal attack. This is despite the fact that the reconstructors discussed here were not directly impacted by the wars in Iraq or Syria.

22. All Mesopotamia, "Q&A: Andy Lowings, a Reincarnated Ancient Mesopotamian (I'm Pretty Sure)," All Mesopotamia, November 11, 2011, https://allmesopotamia.wordpress.com/tag/andy-lowings/.

23. Andy Lowings, "Harpist Andy Lowings," Spanglefish, accessed September 12, 2020, http://www.spanglefish.com/harpistandylowings/.

24. Lowings provided a detailed narrative of the evolution of his project in a talk delivered at the Library of Congress in 2009. See Andy Lowings, "Lyre of Ur Project," lecture presented at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, March 17, 2009, accessed December 18, 2019, https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-4548.

25. Lowings, "Lyre of Ur Project."

26. Lowings, "Lyre of Ur Project." The city of Ur is also the legendary birthplace of Abraham, the founder of many of the world's monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, among others.

27. Roger Michel, interview by Scott Simon, NPR, Weekend Edition Saturday, April 2, 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/04/02/472784720/upon-reclaiming-palmyra-the-controversial-side-of-digital-reconstruction.

28. Michel, interview by Simon.

29. Quoted in Simon Jenkins, "After Palmyra, the Message to Isis: What You Destroy, We Will Rebuild," *Guardian*, March 29, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/29/palmyra-message-isis-islamic-state-jihadis-orgy-destruction-heritage-restored.

30. Tim Williams, "Syria: The Hurt and the Rebuilding," *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites* 17, no. 4 (November 2015): 300.

31. Sultan Barakat, "Postwar Reconstruction and the Recovery of Cultural Heritage: Critical Lessons from the Last Fifteen Years," in *Cultural Heritage in Postwar Recovery*, ed. Nicholas Stanley-Price (Rome: ICCROM, 2007), 29.

32. Sultan Barakat, "Post-War Reconstruction and Development: Coming of Age," in *After the Conflict: Reconstruction and Development in the Aftermath of War*, ed. Sultan Barakat (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 11.

33. The Institute for Digital Archeology, "City Hall Park, New York City," exhibition announcement, September 19–23, http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/new-york-city/; The Institute for Digital Archeology, "World Government Summit, Dubai

UAE," announcement, February 11–14, 2017, http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/dubai/; The Institute for Digital Archeology, "G7 della Cultura 2017, Florence, Italy," announcement, March 27–April 27, 2017, http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/florence/; Dubai Future Foundation, "The Triumphal Arch In Arona," announcement, Khaled al-Asaad Archaeological Museum, Arona Italy, April 29, 2017, https://www.archinitaly.org/; The Institute for Digital Archeology, "The National Mall, Washington, DC, USA," announcement, September 26–28, 2018, http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/washington-dc/.

34. Robert Layton and Julian Thomas, "Introduction: The Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property," in *Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property*, ed. Robert Layton, Peter G. Stone, and Julian Thomas (Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

35. Seth Doane, "ISIS Destroyed Monuments Reconstructed," CBS Evening News, October 16, 2016, https://www.cbsnews.com/video/isis-destroyed-monuments-reconstructed/.

36. Stef Conner, "Home," Stef Conner, accessed September 12, 2020, http://www.stefconner.com/.

37. Prior to his collaboration with Conner, Lowings worked with Assyriologist Anne Kilmer and harpist Laura Govier. Kilmer and Govier produced their own creations based upon the Silver Lyre of Ur. See Lorna Govier and Anne Kilmer, *The Silver Lyre: New Music for a Mesopotamian Lyre* (Tucson, AZ: Southwest Harp, 2012).

38. Stef Conner, Skype interview with author, June 12, 2018.

39. See Iain Morley, *The Prehistory of Music: Human Evolution, Archaeology, and the Origins of Musicality* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

40. See Peter Kivy, *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1995); Nicholas Kenyon, ed., *Authenticity and Early Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); John Butt, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Nick Wilson, *The Art of Re-Enchantment: Making Early Music in the Modern Age* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Gary Tomlinson draws upon evolutionary theory, nonlinear histories, and other models from anthropology to write about the musical capabilities of human's earliest ancestors. See Gary Tomlinson, *A Million Years of Music: The Emergence of Human Modernity*(Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015).

41. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 10.

42. Rebecca Schneider, "Rebecca Schneider: Professor of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies," Brown University, accessed September 12, 2020, https://vivo.brown.edu/display/rcschnei.

43. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 10.

44. Richard Taruskin, "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past [1988]," in *Text and Acts: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 99.

45. Taruskin, "The Pastness of the Present," 148.

46. Taruskin, 98.

47. Taruskin, 147

48. Taruskin, 150.

49. See Benjamin R. Foster, "Introduction" to *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Benjamin R. Foster (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2001), xx. Like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in the Homeric tradition, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*was most likely a written tradition recited for members of court, not an oral tradition. See Foster, "Introduction," xiv.

50. Tablet X, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 81. I cite a few of my favorite English translations of the Gilgamesh tale in this essay to offer readers a taste of the diversity of approaches.

51. Tablet X, David Ferry, *Gilgamesh: A New Rendering in English Verse* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), 64.

52. Tablet XI, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 84.

53. Tablet XI, 85.

54. Vanessa Agnew, "Introduction: What Is Reenactment?" *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 330.

55. Tablet XI, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 87.

56. Mark Harmer, "Stef Conner / The Lyre Ensemble / Union Chapel 2016," Vimeo, June 26, 2017, https://vimeo.com/223171700.

57. Without a leading tone or sixth-scale degree, the ostinato cannot establish D minor nor modern D Dorian.

58. Wikipedia, "Anunnaki," Wikipedia, accessed September 12, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anunnaki.

59. Conner's PhD is from the University of York (UK). She studied voice with Anna Maria Friman of Trio Mediaeval and John Potter of the Hilliard Ensemble.

60. Govier and Kilmer, *The Silver Lyre.*

61. Stef Conner, Skype interview with author, June 12, 2018.

62. Subsequently, Conner has written out some of the instrumental parts so that she can perform the songs with other musicians. Stef Conner, email message to author, April 27, 2018; and Stef Conner, Skype interview with author, July 10, 2018.

63. The Lyre Ensemble, *The Flood*, The Lyre of Ur, 2014, CD booklet, 3.

64. The majority of scholars affirm that the surviving documents describe a seven-note diatonic scale achieved through a tuning process of ascending fifths and descending fourths. Describing the Hurrian Hymn in his *Oxford History of Western Music*, Richard Taruskin described the music as "remarkably similar to what we've got now." Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1: 31–32. Also see Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, Richard L. Crocker, and Robert R. Brown, *Sounds from Silence: Recent Discoveries in Ancient Near Eastern Music* (Berkeley, CA: Bīt Enki, 1976), 8–11.

65. Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin, "Découverte d'une gamme babylonienne," *Revue de Musicologie* 49 (1963): 3–17; Anne D. Kilmer, "The Discovery of an Ancient Mesopotamian Theory of Music," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 115, no. 2 (April 1971): 131–49; Anne D. Kilmer, "The Cult Song with Music from Ancient Ugarit: Another Interpretation," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 68, no. 1 (1974): 69–82; Oliver R. Gurney, "An Old Babylonian Treatise of the Tuning of the Harp," *Iraq* 30, no. 2 (Autumn 1968): 229–235; Richard L. Crocker, "Remarks on the Tuning Text UET VII 74 (U. 7/80)," *Orientalia* 47, no. 1 (1978): 99–104; and Hans G. Güterbock, "Musical Notation in Ugarit," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 64, no. 1 (1970): 45–52.

66. Kilmer, Crocker, and Brown, *Sounds from Silence*, 8–11.

67. John C. Franklin, "Epicentric Tonality and the Greek Lyric Tradition," in *Music, Text, and Culture in Ancient Greece*, ed. Tom Phillips and Armand D'Angour (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 17–46.

68. I was never formally trained as a scholar of ancient history, archaeology, or linguistics; I am a musicologist and try to understand the ways twentieth and twenty-first century musicians, dancers, and scholars imagine(d) and perform(ed) ancient music and dance. I have read the scholarship on ancient music not just to understand it and compare it to the work of modern performers, but also because the performers of extreme early music have read it as well and often refer to the scholarship of Martin L. West and Stefan Hagel, among others. See Martin L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Stefan Hagel, *Ancient Greek Music: A New Technical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Richard Crocker, "Mesopotamian Tonal Systems," *Iraq* 59 (1997): 189–202; Anne D. Kilmer, "Musik A. I. in Mesopotamien," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, ed. Erich Ebeling and Bruno Meissner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997): viii, 463–82; Oliver R. Gurney and Martin L. West, "Mesopotamian Tonal Systems: A Reply," *Iraq* 60 (1998): 223–27; Martin L. West, "The Babylonian Musical Notation and the Hurrian Melodic Texts," *Music and Letters* 75 (1993/1994): 161–179; Theo J. H. Krispijn, "Beitrage zur alrorientalischen Musikforschung 1. Šulgi und die Musik,"*Akkadica* 70 (November/December 1990): 1–27; Sam Mirelman, "A New Fragment of Music Theory from Ancient Iraq," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 67 no. 1 (2010): 45–51; Sam Mirelman and Theo J. H. Krispijn, "The Old Babylonian Tuning Text UET VI/3 899," *Iraq* 71 (2009): 43–52; Anne D. Kilmer and Jeremie Peterson, "More Old Babylonian Music-Instruction Fragments from Nippur," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 61 (2009): 93–96.

69. Conner, Skype interview with author, July 10, 2018.

70. *The Flood*, CD booklet, 3

71. *The Flood*, 3.

72. Conner, Skype interview with author, June 12, 2018; Conner, Skype interview with author, July 10, 2018; and Stef Conner, personal conversation with author, December 12, 2018.

73. Stef Conner, interview by Mick Hamer, "I'm Reverse-Engineering Mesopotamian Hit Songs," *New Scientist*, September 17, 2014, https://www.newscientist.com/article/2009121-im-reverse-engineering-mesopotamian-hit-songs/.

74. Tablet XI, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 88.

75. Gilgamesh abandons the rejuvenating plant for a moment only to see a snake devour it. Weeping, he cries, "What shall I do? The journey has gone for nothing. / For whom has my heart's blood been spent? For whom? /For the serpent who has taken away the plant. / I descended into the waters to find the plant /and what I found was a sign telling me to abandon the journey and what it was I sought for." Tablet XI, *Gilgamesh*, 81.