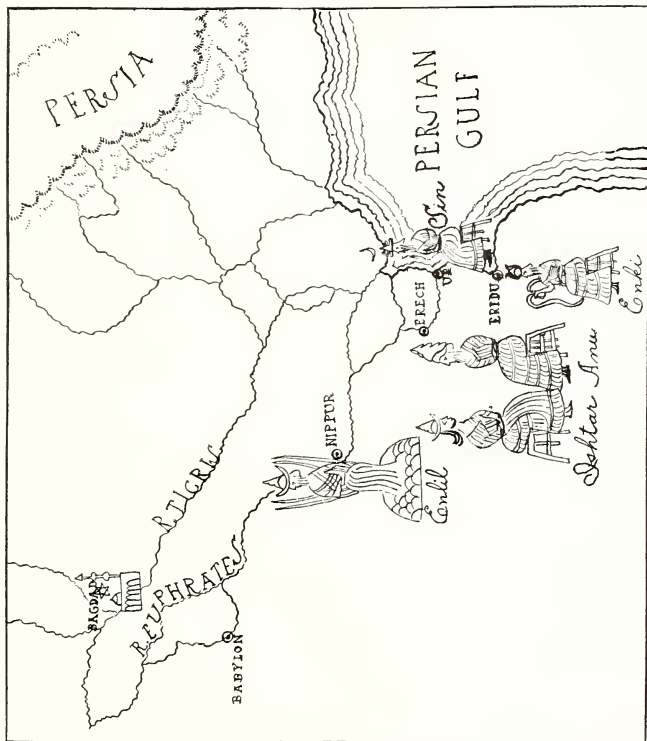


## GILGAMESH AND THE WILLOW TREE

BY S. N. KRAMER

THIS remarkable Sumerian poem, so simple and straightforward in articulating its epic contents, has been reconstructed from the texts of five more or less duplicating tablets inscribed in Sumerian cuneiform writing and dated approximately 2000 B.C. All of the tablets come from the southern part of ancient Babylonia (modern Iraq). Four were excavated by an expedition of the University of Pennsylvania, at the end of the nineteenth century, in a mound which covers the ruins of the ancient city of Nippur. These four tablets, however, were so poorly preserved, that their contents remained quite unintelligible. The fifth tablet was discovered at the ancient city of Ur, by a combined expedition of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania, which has been conducting excavations at that site for the past decade. The recent publication of the text of this Ur tablet by Mr. C. J. Gadd, of the British Museum, has enabled me to piece together the four fragmentary Nippur texts and to restore their contents. The present translation is the result of this restoration.

Sumerian is a non-Semitic language spoken by a people who had invaded Babylonia at some unknown date prior to 3000 B.C. In addition to inventing and developing the cuneiform system of writing, which for many centuries was practically the universal script of the Near East, the Sumerians influenced most profoundly the culture-pattern of the Semitic invaders who later conquered and absorbed them. Although Sumerian became extinct as a spoken language as early as the second half of the third millenium B.C., it continued to be used by the Babylonians in their literary and religious compositions to the very last centuries of the pre-Christian era. It is true, for example, that numerous Babylonian epics have come down to us in several dialects of the Semitic language usually designated as Assyrian. Nevertheless, in translating these epics for the Assyrian dictionary which is being compiled in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, I have found it necessary to utilize continually the Sumerian originals to which almost all of them can be



CITIES OF ANCIENT SUMER

traced. Unfortunately, the Sumerian texts, in addition to the linguistic difficulties which they present, are inscribed on tablets that are only too frequently so fragmentary, that the connected sense usually remains obscure. This poem which I have entitled "Gilgamesh and the Willow," is one of the rare and precious exceptions. Even in this case, however, the texts on which the reconstruction is based, are damaged at several points, and the future discovery of additional material may modify the interpretation to some extent.

In translating this poem, I have tried to "hew" as close to the original Sumerian as possible, so that the reader may absorb its essence not only from the contents but also from its formal structure. However, in order that the reader may obtain a clearer idea of the contents of this poem, I append the following brief glossary:

Anu—"The Heaven," "The God of Heaven." He is the leading deity of the Sumerian pantheon and his main seat of worship was situated in Erech.

Enlil—"The Lord of the Air." In our poem, however, he is treated as "The Lord of the Earth"; the myths of the wars among the gods which might clarify this transformation, are still unknown. Enlil's most important temple was situated in Nippur.

Enki—"The Lord of the Earth." In the extant Sumerian literature, however, he is usually described as "The Lord of the Apsu (the English 'abyss')." As in the case of Enlil, the myths depicting the transformation are as yet unknown. Enki who is the third of the trinity (Anu-Enlil-Enki) heading the Sumerian pantheon, had his main seat of worship in Eridu.

Ereshkigal—"The Lady of the Great Abode." As our poem indicates, she was the queen of the nether world, described in Sumerian literature as "the land of no return."

Ninanna—"The Lady of Heaven"; the counterpart of the Semitic Ishtar and the Greek Venus. As the wife of Anu, her main seat of worship was also situated in Erech.

Gilgamesh—The prototype of the Greek Hercules. In later Babylonian literature he is described as two-thirds god and one-third man. His deeds and exploits were celebrated in many Sumerian tales and legends. The present poem which tells of his killing "the snake, who knows no charm," is the earliest known version of the "Slaying of the Dragon" myth.

Zu-bird—A creature conceived to be part bird and part man. His irreverent deeds epitomized the spirit of obstinacy and rebellion.

Lillith—A destructive demoness personifying barrenness and everlasting restlessness. While the word “Lillith” came into English as a loan word from the Semitic languages, it is actually of Sumerian origin and its literal meaning is “Maid of the Wind.”

## GILGAMESH AND THE WILLOW TREE

After heaven had moved away from earth

After earth had separated from heaven

    And the name of man had been ordained

After Anu had carried off the heaven

After Enlil had carried off the earth

    And Ereshkigal to the nether world had been presented

After he had set sail

    after he had set sail

        For the nether world

            the father had set sail

        For the nether world

            Enki had set sail

Because of the lord

    the light winds stormed

Because of Enki

    the heavy winds stormed

        The keel of Enki's boat

            the raging waters covered with foam

Because of the lord

    the water at the boat's prow

        like a jackal attacks

Because of Enki

    the water at the boat's stern

        like a lion strikes down.

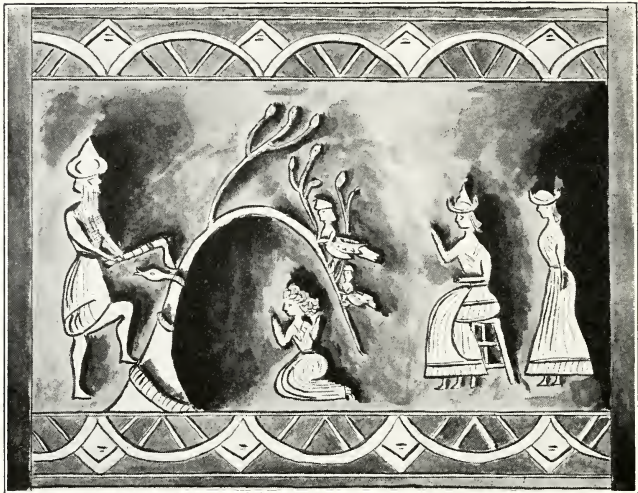
On that day

a tree

a willow tree

On the bank of the Euphrates planted

By the waters of the Euphrates nourished



"HE SMOTE THE SNAKE WHO KNOWS NO CHARM"

Suggested by scenes depicted on seal cylinders from ancient Sumer.

Drawn by Milly Tokarsky.

Fiercely the Southwind

tore at its roots

plucked at its branches

The Euphrates

on its waters carried it away.

A goddess

at the word of Anu trembling

at the word of Enlil trembling

Seized the tree in her hand  
entered Erech:  
    “To pure Ninanna’s holy garden I bring thee.”

The goddess tended the tree with her hand  
at her foot she let it stand

Ninanna tended the tree with her hand  
at her foot she let it stand:

    “When oh when  
    on a holy throne  
    shall I sit me down”  
    she said

    “When oh when  
    on a holy couch  
    shall I lay me down”  
    she said.

Five years  
    ten years had passed  
The tree grew big  
    she dared not cut it down

        At its roots the snake who knows no charm built his nest  
        In its branches the Zu-bird set up his young  
        In its midst Lillith built her house

The maiden  
    ever-singing  
        all hearts rejoicing

Ninanna  
    the pure lady of heaven  
        how she weeps and weeps!

At the break of day  
    as the horizon grew light  
        The hero Gilgamesh stood by his sister’s side

His armor

fifty talents its weight

like thirty shekels he fastened at his waist

His bronze axe

his axe of the road

his axe of seven talents he seized in his hand

At its roots he smote the snake who knows no charm

In its branches the Zu-bird gathered his young

to the mountain he rose in flight

In its midst Lillith tore down her house

to the desert wastes she fled.

The tree

Gilgamesh tore at its roots

plucked at its branches

The sons of his city who had accompanied him

cut down its branches

To pure Ninanna

for her throne he gives them

for her couch he gives them.