

CHAPTER 3

THE SOURCE HISTORY OF THE *EPIC OF GILGAMESH*

Introduction

The *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* has a long and intricate history. Everything happened long before it was written down. Memories of a time that had passed were clouded by romance and fear, excitement and horror: the glory of the ancient time was yearned for, yet issues of the present age were equally important and needed to be addressed.

The *Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* does not efface the past, neither does it colour a rosy future. The *Epic* clings to the past: even for its Babylonian recipients the Sumerian background belonged to the past. However, this background is appropriated creatively, masterly, brilliantly to convey a powerful message for the present.

In the following chapter the history of the transmission of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* will be discussed, its origins, adaptations and final transformations. It will appear that the *Standard Version of the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* never let go of its concepts and ideologies of the remote past, therefore these will also be taken into account, from the very beginning.

1. The Sumerian past

1.1. General background

The Sumerian culture started to flourish during the *Old Sumerian Age*. This period covers the three *Early Dynasties*, usually abbreviated as *ED I, II* and *III*. The *Old Sumerian Age* lasts roughly from 2900 – 2340 BC (cf Boshoff & Scheffler 2000:25-26; Kuhrt 1995:27; Postgate 1994:22; Edzard 1967:54-55).

Researchers and archaeologists are fascinated by the Sumerians and their exceptional high level of civilisation, even today. With regards to language, Sumerian is apparently unrelated to any other known tongue (Schrott 2001:8). In spite of the efforts of some scholars to prove that Sumerian has features in common with the Dravidic language and culture of the Indus Valley, decisive evidence is lacking (Saggs 1962:33). The only point on which everyone agrees is that Sumerian is definitely not a branch of the Semitic languages, therefore the Sumerians were also not ethnically related to the rest of the Semitic speaking peoples who lived in the vicinity of southern Mesopotamia.

Much later myths were told about this strange and fascinating race. These myths refer to them as the *Black-headed people who came from the sea*, and the legendary *Seven Sages* – as though they were the ones who imported civilisation (Schrott 2001:8). This captured the imagination of many people. There are a number of popular theories proposing that the Sumerians were actually aliens who came from outer space to earth to plant civilisation here.

Most probably the real picture is quite simple. Many different peoples inhabited the south of Mesopotamia for many ages. Archaeologists discovered remains of cultural activity dating to the sixth millennium BC, the so-called Samarran 'culture' (cf Kuhrt 1995:21-22). For the next three thousand years people came and went and left their remains. The theory that the Sumerians were highly civilised immigrants or that they were the only race on the scene, must thus be refuted. Most probably the Sumerians inhabited the south of Mesopotamia together with other ethnic groups of which one other group certainly was Semitic (Kuhrt 1995:23).

The first Sumerian poems on Bilgames and the later Standard Babylonian Version seem to intertwine myth, fact and fiction that continued to be

meaningful well after their initial composition. Some concepts and ideologies that prevailed since Sumerian times will now be pointed out.

1.2. Cities

The Sumerians start to dominate the scene when the Uruk III/Jemdet Nasr period phases out and the age of the *Early Dynasties* dawns. This transition is indicated by a marked cultural change: for some reason or another people preferred to live in cities (Postgate 1994:24). Once again, this did not happen suddenly. The process of urbanisation started earlier, gained momentum and by the time of 2500 BC more than 80% of the population lived in cities of more than 40 ha (Kuhrt 1995:31-32). Some well-known Sumerian cities were Eridu, Badtibara, Sippar, Larak and Shuruppak – according to the Sumerian King List these cities existed before the Deluge. After the cataclysm Kish, Uruk, Ur, Adab, Umma and Lagash are prominent (cf Postgate 1994:28).

In this regard two cities deserve attention. The first city is Nippur. At a certain stage Nippur became the most important city in Sumerian theology (Postgate 1994:33). The temple of the god Enlil was in Nippur and he was considered as the god who legitimised kingship. No one could claim kingship unless Enlil approved. The Standard Babylonian Epic retains this theology after the initial fight between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and Enkidu acknowledges the legitimating of Gilgamesh's kingship by the god Enlil.

The second city is Kish. According to the Sumerian King List Kish was the first city in which kingship was established after the Deluge (cf Kuhrt 1995:29). Although it was pointed out that the Sumerian King List does not contain historical truths, the title *King of Kish* did seem to be of special significance. Even kings who were not the actual kings of Kish chose to call themselves *King of Kish* (cf Kuhrt 1995:41-42). This underlines the power of a very old tradition that was preserved for a very long time.

So, to continue, the Sumerian age was marked by the uprising of many cities. The Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* encloses its narrative by the *walls of Uruk*, as it were. And indeed, three types of architectural structures became typical of the Sumerian urban culture: temples, palaces and city walls (Pollock 1999:175-176). Cities were enclosed by sturdy walls, and every city had its own king and a tutelary deity who was worshipped in its temple (Postgate 1994:26). Visitors from outside as well as city-dwellers inside were filled with awe and admiration by the spectacular exterior of the majestic constructions.

But this was not all. City-walls did not only protect the inhabitants of the city, they were also a visual display of power. Some scholars attribute Gilgamesh's tyranny over his people in the Standard Epic to his building activities, especially as he is credited for building the city walls of Uruk in later inscriptions (cf George 1999:xlvii). This may be the case. Sumerian urban culture do seem to reflect a religious and political elite whose image was further boosted by ordinary people who undertook large building projects apparently quite obediently.

However, the prevailing ideology was that all work was done in honour of the gods or in aid of the community (Pollock 1999:179). Sure enough, a degree of coercion may have been involved, but the ideology that inspired people to work should not be overlooked. The significance and the ideology of city-walls that were established during the Sumerian times seem to persist right through to the time of the Standard Epic.

Approximately thirty-one of these city-states were scattered over the southern area of Mesopotamia (Postgate 1994:34). Although they were individual units, every one with its own king, officials, and internal government and so forth, they shared certain common features: language and religion. And although these cities functioned individually, it became necessary to co-operate from

time to time due to political or economic reasons. However, all too often conflict destabilised relationships and cities waged war against one another.

The Sumerian poem of *Bilgames and Akka* reflects something of this relationship between city-states. Indeed, the battle between Uruk and Kish may really have taken place as both cities were important during the third millennium and Enmebaragesi was a historical Sumerian figure. But what could the reason for battle be? The poem simply states: *To empty the wells* (see George 1999:143-146). A possible interpretation is for George that these words should be taken figuratively as referring to the seemingly endless consequences of surrender and the loss of independence. Schrott (2001:12) on the contrary chooses a literal, rather tangible explanation: Uruk had the best sources for fire clay, the most sought after building material in the Ancient Near East. Furthermore, the captivated Akka in his closing speech lauds Uruk as the *smithy of the Gods* (George 1999:148). Schrott (2001:12) also interprets this as reference to the smithy/blacksmith who used copper and bronze to furnish tools as opposed to the primitive stone age customs of the previous era and some of the adjacent peoples in the Ancient Near East. If Schrott is correct, the whole poem speaks of cultural innovation, of a new urban lifestyle.

Indeed, the whole idea of the *triumph of culture and city life as an ideal form of living* seems to be reflected in the recount of the *Creation of Enkidu* in the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (Westenholz & Westenholz 2000:443; Damrosch 1987:94; see also Westerman 1994:58). Modern readers of the *Gilgamesh Epic* often conceive of Enkidu as some kind of *noble savage*, but in reality the Babylonians themselves were not actually impressed with wild nature. Mesopotamian literature describes the *primitive man* as *savage, animal like* (Tigay 1982:202), and the wilderness where he lived, was a place where evil spirits, animals and robbers dwelled. Thus, Enkidu in his primitive, uncultivated state was not idealised by the Mesopotamian civilisation.

In describing Enkidu, his creation and later on his humanisation, the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* contrasts *Nature* over against *Civilisation*, by means of contrasting *the steppe/wilderness* over against *Uruk* (Westenholz & Westenholz 2000:443; Damrosch 1987:94). In fact, Enkidu is portrayed as being hostile to human culture: he pulls out the traps that the hunter had set. The wilderness – nature - Enkidu – is an inferior, boring way of existing. Excitement, real living is that which happens in the city.

Yet, despite the contrasts, the parallels between Gilgamesh and Enkidu are striking: besides their likeness in strength and vigour, both disturb a particular order of existence. Gilgamesh upsets the civil order in Uruk; Enkidu, in his hostility towards culture and civilisation, also disturbs the pastoral order in the countryside (Damrosch 1987:94). Whether the gods had planned this likeness in image in so much detail, is left to the reader's own imaginative devices. But somehow Gilgamesh and Enkidu become a mirror of each other, right from the very beginning.

However, the *Standard Babylonian Epic*, although it favours city life, it is not blind to the costs of civilisation (Abusch 1986:144). Enkidu is introduced to civil life by the prostitute Shamhat. He will become the king's best friend and companion; together they will perform heroic deeds and win the admiration of the people. But Enkidu will suffer illness – and will die eventually. Life, civilisation is exciting, but dangerous (Westenholz & Westenholz 2000:444).

Yet something helps Enkidu cope with the complex city life and new challenges that awaits him: knowledge. After the scene of seduction, after Enkidu discovers that he cannot run as he used to, his knowledge increased:

Tablet I:185 :

u šu is xi h ma rapaš h asiša
broadened

but his understanding

Knowledge compensates for a loss of innocence (Damrosch 1987:95). Enkidu has lost his former friends and his peaceful existence, but equipped with knowledge he is ready to enter into the city – and civilisation.

This preference for city life may be illustrated by another point. One of the most perplexing questions in the *Gilgamesh Epic* pertains to the nature of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. As Enkidu sits at the feet of the prostitute to learn further of his purpose in life, she tells him of the dreams that Gilgamesh dreamed way back in Uruk and the explanation Ninsun had given. The dreams and the explanations concern the heavy object that fell to the ground – initially Gilgamesh cannot pick it up, but when he does so, he loves it like a wife and does something with it: the Akkadian root of the word is *h*𒀭*abābu* (I:239;253;263;268). The translation of *h*𒀭*abābu* is somewhat problematical. George (2003:553-557; 1999:10-11) translates the one word with two: *caress and embrace*. In this regard he probably agrees with The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD) that interprets *elišu h*𒀭*abābu* indeed as *caress and embrace*. However, in a later Akkadian Dictionary of which George himself is one of the editors (2000), *h*𒀭*abābu* is translated as *murmur, chirp, twitter – of water; flies “buzz”; birds; lovers*. Here he seems to agree with Wolfram von Soden's *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch: murmeln, zirpen, zwitchern*. In this particular Gilgamesh-episode Von Soden interprets *h*𒀭*abābu* as *flüstere* – to whisper. And last, but not least, Parpola, in the glossary that he provides at the end of his transliteration, renders *h*𒀭*abābu* with *to make love*. It seems that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu may have been homosexual.

However, apparently sexual relationships could be expressed with several terms of which the nuances are anything but clear to the modern reader. Bottéro and Petschow (in *Reallexicon der Assyriology, Band 4:466*) suggest that the undertones of the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu may resound with the development of civilisation. Together with the erection of cities and

the building of temples for the gods to dwell in, a particular *city cult* also developed. This cult was mainly religious by nature, but not exclusively restricted to religious practices only. Prostitutes – male and female – were institutionalised and an important element of civilisation. The suggestion of Bottéro and Petschow (above) is that Gilgamesh would probably love Enkidu in the way of a civilised city-man: *à la vie civiliséé, à la ville*. The complete transformation of Enkidu from a savage beast to a suave city dweller seems to be implied by this relationship.

Yet another explanation is given by Hardman (1993:1-8). He distinguishes between *homosexuality* and what he calls *homoaffectionism*. The latter pertains to *same sex relationships which do not necessarily involve homosexual acts, but do involve strong emotional bonding, which may or may not include sexual conduct* (Hardman 1993:v). Relationships of this kind are intimate relationships between members of the same gender who mutually support each other, work closely together and are unconditionally loyal to each other. Without these kind of relationships, it would be impossible to conduct wars, to undertake important projects: in short, *homoaffectionism* is important for the evolution of civilisation (Hardman 1993:2).

1.3. Animals

A second important issue that arises from the Sumerian poems is the imagery around the concept *bull*. Bilgames is continuously referred to as a *bull* in some way or another. His mother is Ninsun, goddess/lady Wild Cow. And the Bull of Heaven pertains to the constellation Taurus (George 1999:168). Schrott (2001:13) points out that this is also the constellation in which the sun rose in the sky and in the new year. But he (Schrott) is further convinced that this imagery reflects a cultural historical paradigm.

Sheep and goats were domesticated quite early, roughly during the eighth millennium BC. Cattle were wild beasts at that stage, they were dangerous,

and they roamed the plains, as they needed a large area for grazing. Only about 3000 years later they started to be domesticated, and by the time of the Sumerian age, they were still relatively new on the scene and also a symbol of status. Mostly the government owned cattle that were used in its services: to do heavy work like ploughing, artificial irrigation and transport. Its meat was eaten, but milk was not popular, as its nutritional value was not yet realised. Thus, the *bull* or *steer* symbolises a Mesopotamian cultural revolution. What is significant, is that the *Age of Taurus* is regarded astrologically as the period 4000-2000 BCE (Parker and Parker 1979:44), exactly the time during which Sumerian civilisation and culture dominated the scene.

[In this regard Schrott 2001:31-32 makes some interesting remarks concerning the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the signs of the Zodiac. References to the *lion/lions*, the *scorpion-people*, the *twin* mountains may be the remains of ancient myths incorporated into the *Epic*, and were perhaps significant to its ancient recipients in a way that is very difficult to understand. This aspect certainly deserves research.]

1.4. Kings

The whole ideology around *kingship* is also important. Legends that were composed much later honour three important kings of Uruk: Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Bilgames (George 2003:6). The heroic age of Sumer was kept alive in the memories of many people and inspired the artists of the time. Ancient Mesopotamian art portrays kingship with a hat, a stick and a chair – or a crown, a scepter and a throne (Postgate 1994:216). But unfortunately it is virtually impossible to know exactly how the early Sumerian city-states were ruled.

A rather romantic theory exists that these cities were ruled democratically by means of an elected city council on which any citizen had the right to be a member – even women – and that ultimate decisions were eventually in the

hands of the elders of the city. A leader was appointed only in times of emergency or threat: once the crisis was warded off, the position of leadership was also disposed of (see Saggs 1962:37-39). This theory probably has its roots in the Sumerian poem of *Bilgames and Akka*, and in the later Standard Babylonian account of Gilgamesh and Enkidu seeking the approval of the elders of the city before they venture into the Cedar Forest to slay Humbaba. In both narratives the king needs to counsel the elders of the city before taking action. This theory may have some support, though the high degree of democracy is most probably exaggerated.

What is certain is that the leader – LUGAL, literally *big man* – was in the first place a military leader (Schrott 2001:9; Kuhrt 1995:34; see also Saggs 1962:360). Furthermore, it appears that kingship was neither permanent nor hereditary in the very beginning – this happened only later (Postgate 1994:270). But even when kingship did become a permanent institution, the power of the king was not absolute. It seems that he was kept in check by some sort of council and several advisors.

However, it is necessary to keep in mind that politics was always closely related to religion. Other titles used for the ruler of the city are *e n s i*, mostly translated as *governor* and *e n*: *e n* often pertains to a temple function (Kuhrt 1995:34). Whether these titles had bearing on the one and same person or whether they designated separate offices is rather unclear. However, the king, the leader was definitely also the most notable ceremonial actor. Kings had large impressive temples built for deities. One of the most important duties of the king was to perform sacrificial ceremonies at the temple. He needed to placate the tutelary deity of the city in order to guarantee prosperity for the people.

Thus, the king served as a kind of a mediator between the people and the gods (Saggs 1962:361). Another of the king's duties was to erect elaborate

temple-complexes for the tutelary deity of the city (Pollock 1999: 175).
If the god

or goddess was pleased, the people prospered. If not, the wrath of the gods descended on the people and disaster struck. The king was responsible to ensure that everything possible was done to keep the gods happy.

The king was supposed to be to his people like a *shepherd to his sheep* (Westenholz & Westenholz 2000:443; George 1999:xvi), ruling, guiding and protecting them. He was responsible for social justice and to protect the weakest of the weak from abuse. A text from the latter part of the *ED III*-period attests to the reforms of Uruinimgina: he solemnly promises Ningirsu (god of Lagash) that he will protect the waif and the widow against the powerful (Kuhrt 1995:39). But the same text later on still gives women a raw deal: if she dares to speak disrespectfully about a man, she is to be shut up brutally. Her mouth shall be crushed with a burnt brick that is to be displayed at the city gate for all to see.

Putting the issue of disrespectful women aside – the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* zooms into this ideology of the just and responsible king right after the prologue with its king doing more or less the opposite from what he is supposed to do. King Gilgamesh's behaviour is quite disgraceful.

The expedition to the Cedar Forest is one of the prominent themes in the *Gilgamesh Epic* – from the Sumerian Bilgames poems into the *Old Babylonian Epic*, until the final rendition of the *Standard Version*. Apparently kings of the Ancient Near East achieved an important performance by undertaking an expedition to far-off mountains in order to chop off trees (Ferguson 1999:327; Damrosch 1987:100). It seems that they did not care much about nature conservation and the ozone layer! But chopping off cedar trees was a necessary deed for a king's esteem. Sargon I and his grandson Naram Sin were able to succeed in this regard, and their chronicles recount

the deed of chopping off cedar trees on a mountain in a remote area as one of their heroic performances.

1.5. Theology

The *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* reaches back to Sumerian times not only in terms of ideology, but also in terms of theology. Many gods and goddesses that were prominent in the Sumerian pantheon had ceased to be active by the time of the Middle Babylonian period.

For many ages religion was a matter of oral transmission and only fragmentary remains of religious tradition found their way into writing. However, it is relatively certain that the earliest Mesopotamian religion – that is before the time of the *Early Dynasties* and the city states – was connected to survival and fertility (Nemet-Nejat 2002:178; Pollock 1999:188; Jacobsen 1976:26). During the fourth millennium people were threatened daily by famine and disease. The forces of nature determined the fate of human beings. Nature either gave life or destroyed it. This was interpreted religiously: the gods were responsible for matters concerning life and death. Good and evil spirits lurked everywhere – in the weather, in the seasons, in the crops, in the waters, and so forth (Jacobsen 1976:21-22). Myths were told in order to explain some of these forces over which humans had no control (Nemet-Nejat 2002:178) – for example the seasons and the weather.

Some of these very ancient deities find their way into the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. The most obvious example is the mother of the king, Ninsun, goddess of the wild cow. Furthermore the appearance of Enkidu is compared with attributes of the goddess Nissaba and the god Shakkan respectively (I:90-92). Nissaba was a Sumerian cereal goddess, the goddess of grain who later became the patron goddess of the scribes (George 1999:224; Parpola 1997:147; Walker 1996:43). Shakkan was the

god of gazelles, wild asses and other wild beasts. But unlike Nissaba he does not seem to play any role in later theology.

As social circumstances change, so does religion. As it was stated, city-states started to rise all over southern Mesopotamia round about the third millennium BC (Postgate 1994:34). Cities were governed, life was ordered in terms of rules and regulations. And so the urban bureaucracy became projected into the heavenly realm (Jacobsen 1976:77-79). Gods of nature were transformed into city-gods with powers and duties similar to those of a king and officials in an urban bureaucracy (Nemet-Nejat 2000:179). Sumerian city-states consisted of a council, a king and other officials. Likewise the Mesopotamian pantheon consisted of two councils of deities: the *Igigi* and the *Anunnaki* (cf George 1999:222-223). In due course the *Igigi* became the council of the great gods of the heaven and the *Anunnaki* the council of the gods of the Netherworld. The transition from Tablet VI to tablet VII in the *Standard Version* especially marks the counsel of the great gods: they are deliberating who shall die – Gilgamesh or Enkidu?

Eventually some gods crystallise. Three cosmic gods survive into later Babylonian and Assyrian periods: An (Akkadian Anu), Enlil (Akkadian Enlil) and Enki (Akkadian Ea) (see Nemet-Nejat 2002:182-185; Jacobsen 1976:75-143, Saggs 1962:328-340 and Von Soden 1994:173-182 for a detailed discussion of the Mesopotamian pantheon and its evolution). An personifies the heaven. His name means *sky* in Sumerian, he resides in heaven. He held the most important position among the gods. He represented calm authority. An does not really play a major role in the *Standard Epic of Gilgamesh*. He is honoured as one of the great gods, but he seems very much a *deus absconditus*, even giving in far too easily to his daughter Ishtar's temper tantrum. It seems that he cannot really care any longer what goes on below.

Equal in rank and next to An there was Enlil, literally translated *Lord Wind*. Contrary to the serene calm of An, Enlil represented the force, but also the fickleness and the storminess of the wind. Therefore his attitude towards

human beings was always rather ambivalent: although he was the one who legitimated kingship, he was also the one who brought about the Deluge in the later Atrahasis epic, - the narrative of Uta-napishtim in the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. When the many people on earth start to irritate Enlil, he decides upon a permanent solution to his problem: complete extermination. Enlil's hostility towards humans features in the *Standard Epic* itself. Enlil is the god who appointed Humbaba to guard his Cedar Forest against human intruders; Enlil is the god who decides that Enkidu must die.

Enki (Akkadian Ea) was the clever – even cunning – one among the gods. His domain was the *sweet waters* – the Deep. Contrary to the brute force of Enlil, Enki was the diplomat. Like water he chose to sail around obstacles and to make use of persuasion rather than coercion. Later he became associated with wisdom. Enki/Ea's role in the *Standard Epic of Gilgamesh* is more or less restricted to the Uta-napishtim-narrative. He is the one who lets out the secret of the coming cataclysm to Atrahasis/Uta-napishtim and instructs the man to build a boat that would carry him and his kin to survival.

Ninhursaga (Aruru in the *Standard Epic*) was the only prominent goddess among the three great gods. Although every one of the male gods had their consorts, they were seldom more than a rather hazy figure associated with a male deity. Ninhursaga was something like a primeval mother. Although she was initially the patron goddess of the wild animals, she gradually became the goddess who exercised a determinative influence upon the development of the fetus in the womb. Her creator-role is stressed in the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*: she hears the cries of the women-folk of Uruk and obliges by creating Enkidu from a piece of clay. But Ninhursaga/Aruru does not hold a political office. It seems that she starts to fade away and her features and functions become absorbed by other deities.

At a certain stage Mesopotamian religion changes from being nature-fertility orientated to a religion that is unmistakably astral by nature. The deities next

in rank, also sometimes regarded as children of those above, started to dominate the heavenly scene and kept their influence for many centuries later. These deities pertain to the moon, the sun, and the stars.

Nanna (Su-en who becomes Sîn in Akkadian) was the moon-god. He was the light of the night and measured time, he determined the calendar. He plays a very minor role in the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*: a distraught and tearful Gilgamesh prays to Sîn, in the beginning of tablet IX. He fears the lions that he had once slaughtered, he prays to the moon-god, recognising him as the *light of the night* (IX: 10-11). However, in later Babylonian theology Sîn becomes very important as attested by the religious reforms of Nabu-na'id, the last Neo Babylonian king (Saggs 1962:332).

Utu (the Akkadian Shamash) was the sun god who expelled darkness and brought evil to light. His most important function was to protect law and justice. He plays quite an active role in the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. Throughout the first half of the epic Gilgamesh and Enkidu often bring offers to Shamash. They do so during their trip to the Cedar Forest, and they do so after slaughtering the Bull of Heaven. Ninsun's prayer to Shamash just before the two heroes' trip to the Cedar Forest brings interesting relationships to the light. There seems to be special relationship between Gilgamesh and Shamash. Ninsun prays that the god cares for her son on his perilous journey. Indeed, he intervenes when Humbaba seems to be getting the better of Gilgamesh and Enkidu – Shamash launches thirteen winds that blind the monster. But it also seems that there exists a feud between Shamash and Enlil. According to Ninsun Shamash is the one who put the desire into Gilgamesh's heart to venture into the abode of Humbaba, Enlil's special guardian. Humbaba is associated with *the evil things that Shamash hates* (III: 53). And when Enkidu lies stricken with disease after disposing of the monster, Shamash tries to dissuade Enlil from having Enkidu die. Having failed that, he speaks to the delirious Enkidu, making him come somewhat to

his senses. And after the death when the grief-stricken obsessed Gilgamesh roams the plains, he bends down quite concerned to speak to the sad hero.

What is striking in the *Standard Epic* though, is the omission of the name and function of the god Marduk – almost. In Parpola's (1997) edition his name appears only once in tablet III: 177. It is true that Marduk was still a minor figure among the gods by the time the *Standard Epic* found its final form (George 1999:224). However, he appears on the scene already during Hammurabi's reign, although rising to fame only after the Hammurabi-dynasty (Saggs 1962:340). But nothing of the cosmic strife of *Enuma Elish* is reflected in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Inanna (Akkadian: Ishtar) is the only goddess of the old pantheon who continued to exist on an equal footing with her male colleagues. Initially she was a Sumerian goddess of fertility. Many myths relate her relationship with Dumuzi (Tammuz in Akkadian and the Old Testament). Some way or another Dumuzi lands in the Netherworld where Ereshkigal, Ishtar's *charming* sister is queen. Together with her vizier Namtar they conduct a reign of terror. Inanna ventures into the Netherworld to fetch her lover, everything withers and dries up on earth, becoming infertile. This event is connected to the hot and dry season in Mesopotamia. However, when she finds her beloved Dumuzi, they return, consume their lovemaking and the same fertility becomes visible on earth again. Inanna's early symbol was a bundle of reeds. As religion took on astral features, she became associated with the planet Venus, the morning – and evening star simultaneously. Inanna/Ishtar accordingly becomes the goddess of insatiable sexual lust and bloody war. She represents the intense emotions of love and hate – two sides of the same coin, or planet.

Ishtar never really grows up. Maturity and motherhood are not associated with her. Sex and lust are her attributes, not marriage and children. She is a coquettish fickle nymph who entertains many lovers and then disposes of them,

usually in a macabre way (tablet VI of the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*).

Ishtar's sister, Ereshkigal is probably the most important figure of the Netherworld: here she reigns as queen. At her side is her husband Nergal and her vizier Namtar (see also Mc Call 2001:69-73). These are the most prominent deities of the Netherworld in the *Gilgamesh Epic*.

However, at this point it is important to mention another type of deity – the so-called chthonic deities, those who come up from beneath the earth, but return, sooner or later. Tammuz, who shares the two sisters Ishtar and Ereshkigal in some way or another, is such a deity. But the most important of these deities in the *Gilgamesh Epic* is the snake.

A flight from death or a quest for life is the overarching theme in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. Mortality, a chance to obtain life everlasting is one of the central motifs. In this regard the snake plays an important part. As Gilgamesh leaves Uta-napishtim with Urshanabi the boatsman, he stops on his way back to Uruk to take a bath. A snake creeps up and snatches the rejuvenating plant that Uta-Napishtim had given him as parting gift.

Initially it seems to be an accident: carelessness on the part of Gilgamesh. But is it only that – a mere casualty?

Behind this small yet tragic anecdote lie particular mythical ideologies. According to Ancient Near Eastern myth a distinction needs to be maintained between gods and humans. Humans may never achieve the same pinnacles as gods (Kapelrud 1993:54). In this regard the advice of Siduri, the barmaid of the *Old Babylonian Epic* is significant (this is not included in the Standard Version): she tells Gilgamesh that the gods had destined humans to die, the very moment that they were created. Life – one may assume everlasting life –

they grasp in their hands. Therefore Gilgamesh should enjoy the life that he has whilst he is alive. (See Abusch 1993:1 for the text and a translation.)

Gods do not wish to have humans as their equals – and the only ones that can prevent this happening, are the gods themselves (Kapelrud 1993:54). The snake, here towards the end of the *Epic*, is more than a creature – *nēšu ša qaqqari: a lion of the earth* (XI:306). In the Ancient Near East the snake was a divine power that represented the chthonic realm (Kapelrud 1993:56). These beings lived beneath the earth, they were dangerous, quick and sly in their actions. Snakes were feared because they were dangerous – at the same time they also had healing powers. They had faculties that humans did not have, therefore it was impossible for humans to prevent them from doing what they wanted to. A snake was thus more than an ordinary creature. Eventually humans were outwitted by powers beyond their control.

Thus, it is not by chance that a snake snatches Gilgamesh's precious plant. This snake is in fact on the side of the gods – that chthonic being that the gods themselves had appointed to prevent humans from becoming their equals. In this case, the issue is life everlasting. They dare not take chances, not even with a rejuvenating plant.

Remarks: The *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* reflect many of the concepts, ideologies and beliefs of the Ancient Near East that date back to Sumerian times. Although modern readers are able to understand the narrative perfectly well without the additional information, this knowledge certainly enhances one's appreciation of the *Epic*. It does help to know that wild untamed nature was not the ideal: the bright lights of the city were winking. It explains why the guardian of the cedar woods was killed mercilessly and why trees were chopped off randomly. It also explains who were the deities and why they were worshipped and feared. Thus, at first glance the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a strange, yet fascinating and enjoyable tale. At second glance it becomes serious, intriguing...even scary.

These were the ideas – but what are the facts – if any?

2. Sumerian literature: the five poems on Bilgames

2.1 Obscure origins – did the king really exist?

The figure of king Gilgamesh appears at the dawn of history in southern Mesopotamia. However, awareness of history as a field of study is not realised yet, writing is just being appropriated to record something other than business transactions (Walker 1996 :17). The late Uruk III-period, also known as Jemdet Nasr is rapidly phasing out, and the Old Sumerian Early Dynasties are being established in the many city-states which are rising all over the country (cf Kuhrt 1995:23-27). A highly developed urban culture is replacing the previous agrarian one, peoples' lives are ruled by an urban bureaucracy and its intricate social, economical and political structures (cf Kuhrt 1995:31-44). Wars between these city states are the order of the day, even the lives of the rich and the powerful are uncertain, and people are increasingly looking for protection behind large and fortified city walls (Jacobsen 1976:77-78). Sometime during this revolutionary age of the third millennium BC steps in the figure of King Gilgamesh of Uruk.

The historicity of Gilgamesh cannot be proved without any doubt. His existence cannot be confirmed by inscriptions from his time (Tigay 1982:13). However, the name *Gilgamesh* does appear in the so-called Sumerian King List according to which he, Gilgamesh was the fifth king of the first dynasty of Uruk, and who lived somewhere between 2700-2500 BC. This would place his existence in the Second Early Dynastic Period of Sumer (Tigay 1982:13; see also George 1999:xv&ix; Van de Mieroop 1999:29; Damrosch 1987:89; Kuhrt 1995:29-30).

The Sumerian King List documents all the kings and cities since the beginning of time, this is to say even before the Deluge. In spite of the cataclysm the list continues up to the rulers of Ur III and their successors at Isin (cf Kuhrt 1995:29-31; Postgate 1994:28). An impression is created that kingship always resided in only one city for a duration of time. The first city after the Deluge was Kish and apparently exercised a kind of a hegemony over the other cities. After some time had passed, the city is smitten and kingship and reign are transferred to another city and its rulers: Kish is succeeded by Uruk, Uruk is succeeded by Ur, and so forth. The Sumerian King List reflects a continuous, almost god given rotation amongst the city-states of Southern Mesopotamia.

However, the Sumerian King List is not without some interpretative problems. The first obvious problem is the legendary length of reign of some of the kings, especially those before the Deluge. More significant however, is that this List was compiled during the last part of the nineteenth century BC, that is toward the end of the Ur III-period (cf Pollock 1999:191; Kuhrt 1995:29; Postgate 1994 :28; Tigay 1982:14). Thus, the Sumerian King List does not convey historical facts and should not be treated as a historical document. Rather, this List should be regarded as literature that is also inspired by a particular ideology. It reflects an ideal situation (Kuhrt 1995:31).

Nevertheless, although the Sumerian King List is not reliable historically, this is not to say that it is unimportant. On the contrary! In the first place the ideology which inspired the text was a very important one: it influenced kingship and reign for many past centuries and would continue to do so for centuries to come. Mesopotamian culture was on the whole very conservative. In the second place, in spite of its obvious bias and some deliberate omissions, some kings and cities did really exist. Therefore the existence of Gilgamesh deserves the benefit of the doubt: the Sumerian King List cannot be rejected as mere imagination.

However, by the time that the Sumerian King List was compiled, the tradition of King Gilgamesh of Uruk – or rather Bilgames as he was known at this stage by his Sumerian name - was already firmly established. The first two kings of the Ur III dynasty, Ur-Nammu and Shulgi were fascinated by their ancient Sumerian predecessor (George 2003:108; cf also George 1999:xix; and Schrott 2001:11). Both these renowned rulers composed lyrical poems in honour of the King of Old. Ur-Nammu calls himself the *brother of Bilgames the Great*, and Shulgi calls Bilgames his *brother-friend* (George 2003:108-109). However, at this point it is important to note that neither Ur-Nammu nor Shulgi had any *Epic of Gilgamesh* at their disposal to draw their inspiration from. They had only heard – perhaps read – some Sumerian poems that dealt with King Bilgames of Uruk, his heroic deeds and his death.

These Sumerian poems will now be examined in some detail. Although they do not have any direct bearing on the later *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself, they created an image of a legendary king, therefore they did function to shape a particular frame of reference for the author of the next creative phase of the narrative.

2.2. The poems

(see George 1999:141-208. See also Calmeyer's summary in *Reallexicon der Assyriology, Band 3:360-363*).

Andrew George translates these five poems fully in his 1999-edition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. (In his most recent work, the 2003-edition, he only provides a summary and a brief discussion.) Therefore I take the 1999-translation as point of departure. The rather vague correspondences with as well as the very obvious differences from the Standard Babylonian Version will be highlighted.

(i) *Bilgames and Akka: 'The envoys of Akka'*

Akka, Enmebaragesi's son, king of Kish sends emissaries to Uruk to demand submission of the latter. Bilgames, king of Uruk **convenes a meeting with the elders** of his city, suggesting that the solution to the problem lies in waging war. However, **the elders disagree**, and try to persuade him to surrender. Bilgames **rejects the advice of the elders**, and places his trust in the goddess Inanna. Consequently he **turns to the young men** of the city, once again suggesting war as the only way out. The **young men eagerly agree**. Bilgames commands his **servant Enkidu** to start with the necessary preparations for battle in order to defeat Akka.

Akka commences his siege and Uruk is alarmed. Bilgames asks a volunteer from his royal warriors to go to Akka and confuse him. Birhurturra, his royal bodyguard agrees to do so. As he exits the city, he is taken captive and brutally beaten. He is then brought before Akka.

In the meanwhile the Steward of Uruk has climbed up on the walls of the city. Akka spies him and asks Birhurturra if the one he sees is Bilgames. Birhurturra denies, and adds that if it were, battle would follow as well as the defeat of Akka. For this he is beaten once again. Now Bilgames himself appears on the city walls. Despite the warning and hesitancy of the elders, the young men take up their weapons, and led by Enkidu they proceed from the gate. Akka also sees Bilgames on the rampart and asks Birhurturra again if it is the king of Uruk. This time Birhurturra agrees, and just like he has predicted the previous time, battle commences. Akka is defeated and taken captive.

The denouement of this poem is rather strange. Bilgames addresses Akka in terms of admiration, as a superior who was once extremely generous towards him and gave him refuge. The particular occasion is not mentioned. Akka then acknowledges the status and importance of Uruk as a city of the gods

and asks Bilgames to repay his favour. In due course Bilgames obliges and let Akka go free to Kish.

From this poem the following should become clear: the main point of contact between the Sumerian poem and the Standard Version is Bilgames's counsel with the elders and his hard-headed rejection of their advice. Consequently he turns to the young men of the city who egg him on. This theme finds its way into Tablet II of the Standard Version, however the events differ completely. In the Standard Version Gilgamesh and Enkidu are on their way to the Cedar Forest to slay Humbaba. The main difference from the Standard Epic is that Enkidu is the servant of Bilgames, not his friend. And of course, Akka and Birhurturra are not characters in the later narrative.

From this poem emerges an image of Bilgames who is willful, headstrong, yet magnanimous, expressing admiration and appreciation for others if necessary.

(ii) Bilgames and Huwawa: 'The lord to the Living One's Mountain' and 'Ho, hurrah!'

Apparently two compositions existed, a longer and a shorter one, called Version A '*The lord to the Living One's Mountain*' and Version B '*Ho Hurrah!*' respectively. It seems that the former was the more popular version, and it is significant that this poem is the one that is the most frequently copied out on school tablets (cf George 2003:18). However, the two versions resemble each other and have many lines in common.

Version A: 'The Lord to the Living One's Mountain'

This poem features Bilgames's **obsession with establishing an everlasting name**. He **knows that everybody must die sometime**, therefore he calls his **servant Enkidu** and discloses his plan to venture into the mountain in order

to set up his name. However, as the Cedar Mountain is the concern of Utu, the sun god, **Enkidu advises** the king to inform the god of his intentions.

Consequently Bilgames brings an animal offering to Utu, stating his case as he is **crying: he knows that he must die, but before this he wishes to establish his name**. Utu hears his supplication and obliges by **giving Bilgames seven rather awesome warriors to accompany him**: one with the paws of a lion and the talons of an eagle; the second is an open-mouthed cobra; the third a Dragon Serpent; the fourth spat fire; the fifth a serpent with a devastating tongue; the sixth a torrent battering the mountains; the seventh something that blasts lightning. In addition the **goddess Nissaba also gives him support** that guides him on his way.

Consequently Bilgames summons all the **unattached and able men of the city to his side to accompany him** on his quest: those who have family matters to attend to, are commanded to see to the needs of their families. So, Bilgames, his awesome seven warriors and his crew of fifty unattached and heavily armed men make their way to the Cedar Mountain.

In search for a cedar, Bilgames and his company cross six mountains, only when they reach the seventh one, he finds the cedar that he wants. They fell the tree and stack the wood in a pile. However, by doing this they disturb Huwawa in his lair. Huwawa reacts, seemingly by casting a spell upon them that hypnotises them in a kind of sleep or daze. Enkidu first awakens from **the strange dream and is worried that he cannot rouse Bilgames from this sleep**. He urgently reminds his lord of his duties toward the men who accompanied them, and their mothers.

Bilgames recovers at the words spoken by Enkidu. Immediately he wants to go forth and slay Huwawa. However, **Enkidu warns him** that the creature is extremely dangerous. Nevertheless, Bilgames is confident that the two of them together will succeed, and they proceed. As they draw closer to

Huwawa's dwellings, they are stopped in their tracks by the monster who commands Bilgames to place both his hands on the ground. The king obliges and **starts bargaining** with Huwawa. He promises unconditionally his big sister Enmebaragesi as Huwawa's wife, and his little sister Peshtur as concubine. In exchange of one of his auras of terror, Bilgames promises to become a kinsmen of Huwawa, and – believe it or not – the monster obliges.

The company of Bilgames is only too glad to cut off branches, tie them together and lie them at the foot of the mountain.

Bilgames continues his bargaining in exchange of the rest of Huwawa's auras. Unfortunately the text is damaged and the second and seventh gifts are unclear. However, the remaining ones are interesting: the finest quality flour and bottles of cool water; big sandals for big feet; rock crystal, chalcedony and lapis lazuli.

But cleverly Bilgames deceived Huwawa. Now, without his seven auras he is completely disarmed and easily taken captive. He **desperately pleads for his life**, and initially it seems that Bilgames takes pity on the monster. But **Enkidu is not convinced** and warns his master about the revenge of a captive set free. **Huwawa insults Enkidu about his words**, and Enkidu reacts by cutting off Huwawa's head. They put the head in a leather bag and tip it out before the gods Enlil and Ninlil. **Enlil is enraged** and reprimands them that they should have displayed reverence and courtesy towards Huwawa. In return **the god distributes seven heavenly auras** of his own to the field, the river, the canebrake, the lion, the wood, the palace and the goddess Nungal.

Version B: 'Ho Hurrah!'

This poem is shorter than version A and its restoration is for most of the part incomplete. The main difference from version A occurs after Huwawa cast his

spell over Bilgames and his company. Enkidu is the first one to recover and speaks to his master. But instead of the bravado that Bilgames exhibits in Version A, he seems less sure of himself and calls on his god Enki to inspire his words. George (1999:161) understands this phrase as an inspiration by the god of trickery to *overcome his opponent with cunning speech*.

This poem finds its way into the Standard Epic in an adaptive form. The expedition to Huwawa/Humbaba is well recorded as Gilgamesh's first enterprise to establish an everlasting name. But once again, the Sumerian Enkidu is a servant, not a friend. The Sumerian Bilgames is accompanied by auxiliaries, the Babylonian one goes with only the assistance of his friend. Apparently the initial bargaining of the king with the monster is omitted in the Standard Epic, however, the lines recording the first encounter are missing, therefore it is impossible to know. And in both the poem and the Epic, Huwawa/Humbaba pleads for his life, and it seems that the king is about to take pity on him. From the poem Enkidu's role as counsellor emerges, as well as the concern of the Sun god for the wellbeing of the hero.

However, some roles are reversed. A strange sleep seizes Enkidu as he lies dying in the Babylonian tablet VIII, and Gilgamesh is the one who is concerned by the fact that he cannot wake him. Furthermore, the Babylonian Humbaba is defeated by sheer force, not deceived by the Sumerian Bilgames's insincere promises. In the Standard Epic the distribution of Enlil's auras lacks, however, his anger is carried through: eventually this becomes one of the reasons that Enkidu must die.

Apparently some confusion exists about the direction of the Cedar Forest. The Sumerian texts state that the mountain of the Cedar Forest is the concern of the Sun god, therefore it is implicitly located in an eastern direction (Schrott 2001:12; Tigay 1982:76-77). The Akkadian versions connects this mountain with the Lebanon, therefore it is located in a westerly direction. It seems that a change of direction took place somewhere during the

transmission of the Sumerian poems and the final version of the *Standard Babylonian Epic*.

In his later edition George (2003:97) raises the question whether the epithet *the Living One* really should be attributed to Huwawa. He is of the opinion that the *Living One* is the one who also survived the mythical Deluge. Therefore, most probably the poem on Bilgames and Huwawa also included some reference – even a narrative – of a journey to Ziusudra, the Sumerian survivor of the Flood. George suspects that in the process of transmission the original text was abridged by omitting the Flood episode.

The association of Bilgames with Enmebaragesi should also not be overlooked. In the Sumerian poem of *Bilgames and Huwawa* Enmebaragesi is the big sister of Bilgames whom he proposes as wife for the monster. However, Enmebaragesi is also the name of the father of Akka, his adversary in the poem on *Bilgames and Akka*. Apparently the name Enmebaragesi was appropriate for a man – a king – or a woman – a high priestess (George 2003:106). Two possibilities seem likely. Firstly, in the light of royal marriages that were arranged for diplomatic purposes, one may conclude that Enmebaragesi of Kish was a woman who was indeed Bilgames's sister. That may also explain Bilgames's magnanimous attitude towards Akka, who would be his nephew. Secondly, the literary devices of irony and humour cannot be underestimated. Enmebaragesi of Kish could have been an opponent of Bilgames and his name appropriated in this poem for Bilgames's big sister, would have had a comic effect.

(iii) Bilgames and the Bull of Heaven: 'Hero in Battle'

In his 1999-edition George remarks on his rendering of this poem that it is *far from definitive* (:167) due to a lack of reliable sources and textual corruptions. Therefore I shall incorporate additional remarks on the *Bull of Heaven*-poem according to his summary in his recent work (George 2003:11-12).

An anonymous poet praises Bilgames in a hymn-like fashion. Thereafter the king's mother, Ninsun addresses him, assigning tasks that appear rather strange and inexplicable, even to a scholar like George. Bilgames obeys, and as he completes these duties, the goddess **Inanna falls head over heels in love with him. She swears that he will be her man** and that she will not let him go.

Apparently according to some texts **Bilgames asks advice from his mother** adding that Inanna made her advances in the lee of the wall, traditionally the place of prostitutes and prostitution. Ninsun advises her son to **turn down the goddess's proposal**, and Bilgames dutifully obliges during his next encounter with Inanna. Apparently this is not done gently nor discreetly, because the goddess is **driven to rage and tears as she complains about her humiliation before her father An. She requests the Bull of Heaven to kill Bilgames. An initially refuses**, objecting that the Bull of Heaven – the constellation Taurus – grazes in the sky and would have no food on earth. **Inanna** not only **threatens to scream** but actually does so, and as her screams cleave the air, An gives in.

The goddess and her pet descends from heaven, and just like An knew, the Bull devours all grass and slurps up all water. Meanwhile king Bilgames is **enjoying himself during a drinking session**. Lugalgabagal – what a lovely name! – the minstrel who was entertaining him, needs to go outside to relieve himself, but what a shock! He sees the Bull and the havoc it plays and reports to his master. But Bilgames is unconcerned, calls for more drink and more music. Only when he has had his fill, he takes up his weapons, orders his mother Ninsun and his little sister Peshtur to go to the **temple of Enki** and bring some offers. Bilgames resolves to smite the Bull and to distribute its meat to the poor.

Bilgames and Enkidu tackle the Bull, killing it brutally and mercilessly while Inanna is looking down from the rampart. As Bilgames vowed, he butchers the animal and **hurls a haunch at Inanna.** She dashes out of the way and he demolishes the rampart of the city instead. Angrily the king cries, wishing it was the goddess and not the city-wall that he had struck. But, as he earlier vowed, he throws the corpse and innards in the street, and distributes the meat to the orphans.

Once again the ending of poem seems out of place. The horns of the Bull are made into two flasks, and Inanna in her temple Eanna pours sweet oil into them. Holy Inanna is praised.

Obviously this poem also found its way into the Standard Epic, however with major differences. Ishtar falls in love with Gilgamesh when she sees him washed and clad after his combat with Humbaba. The goddess's promises in the poem differ from those in the Epic. Gilgamesh does not need his mother's advice. The Epic has no drinking scene, only a party afterwards. Inanna screams, Ishtar threatens to let the dead out to eat up the living. Preceding the fight, no offerings are brought in the Epic.

However, the main motif remains: the goddess of sexual lust madly falls in love with the king but he rudely spurns her. In her humiliation she seeks revenge by requesting the Bull of Heaven from her father in order to kill the king. Her plan backfires: her beloved pet is brutally butchered by the king and a – slave/friend? The Sumerian poem is unclear whether Enkidu is a slave or a friend. One may assume however that he is still a slave, just like in most of the other poems on Bilgames.

(iv) Bilgames and the Netherworld: 'In those days, in those far-off days'

This poem has many repetitions. It starts by referring to the mythological origins of the world. Heaven and earth had just been separated and the three

major gods are claiming their domain: An takes the heavens, Enlil takes the earth and Enki is in his boat towards the Netherworld, presumably on his way to his cosmic domain, the Ocean Below. The Netherworld has been given to Ereshkigal as a dowry gift.

Whilst Enki is sailing in his boat, a terrible hailstorm rages. The force of the south wind rips out a willow tree from the bank of the Euphrates and blows it down. Presumably some time later (the poem does not indicate this), Inanna comes by, picks up the tree and plants it in her garden in Uruk. (Interestingly she carries the tree in her *hand* and waters it with her *foot* – the significance of this is not clear.) She eagerly awaits the time when she can have a throne and a bed furnished for her by its timber.

But as the years go by, some evil creatures make home in Inanna's tree: a Snake-that-Knows-no-Charm in its bark, a Thunderbird in its branches and a Demon-Maiden in its trunk. Inanna weeps and calls on her brother, the Sun-god Utu to help her, but he does not do so. Still weeping, she turns to her **brother Bilgames** and repeats her story to him. He does what one may expect: he disposes of the vile creatures without any further ado. He gives his **sister Inanna** the wood that she wants, and for himself he makes toys – a ball and a mallet (translation uncertain. George 2003 in chapter 13, his commentary on SB Tablet XII, gives some explanation of these toys.)

Fascinated by these, Bilgames plays with them all day long. Not only does he play, but also he **makes the young men of the city play along with him, to the point of exhaustion**. And whilst the men play with the king, **the women are kept busy** bringing them bread and water. As the day ends, Bilgames draws a mark where he placed his ball in order to know from where to continue the game at the very crack of dawn. However, **the women complain bitterly** (to the gods?). So, when Bilgames arrives at the scene where he had made his mark, both his ball and his mallet fall down to the bottom of the Netherworld.

He sits down at the Gate of Ganzir, the entrance to the Netherworld and sobs bitterly over his lost toys. He desperately calls for anyone to go down and fetch them, eventually his **servant Enkidu** volunteers. However, this is easier said than done. Bilgames gives Enkidu several instructions that include precautions one must take in order to enter and exit the Netherworld unharmed. In the Netherworld lies Ereshkigal, mourning for her son Ninuzu, raking her bare flesh with her nails and ripping out her hair like leeks. But Enkidu pays no heed and does exactly what he is told not to do – and the Netherworld seizes him.

For seven days Bilgames awaits the return of his **servant** and his toys, but after the seventh day he realises what has happened: Enkidu is seized by the Netherworld. Once again he is heart-broken – far more becomingly than a king should be over the loss of a servant. He appeals to the god Enlil in Eshkur to help him, but Enlil does not. Then he appeals to the god Nanna in Ur for help, but Nanna does not. He turns to Enki in Eridu for help, and Enki does, however, indirectly. Enki approaches Utu, the Sun god to make an opening in the Netherworld and to have Enkidu's shadow emerge. And Utu obliges.

Overcome by emotion Bilgames and Enkidu embrace, hugging and kissing each other. A long dialogue, in the form of question and answer follows: Bilgames asks Enkidu about the conditions in the Netherworld.

(This dialogue offers a glimpse on the perspective that the people of the Ancient Near East had on the life hereafter.) It appears that the living and the dead does have some relationship. Obviously those who had many children are the happiest: they are remembered by many and many bring them offerings to serve whatever needs they may have. Death by mutilation of the body – whether illness, injury, devourment by a wild animal – is less pleasant: the injured part of the body keeps on plaguing the sufferer in the afterlife. Those who disrespected their parents or cheated a god face similar grim

circumstances. Someone who was not buried for some reason or another, someone whose *corpse was left lying on the plain* has a shade that does not come to rest. But the worst off were those who were burnt to death. Their smoke went up to the heavens. These spirits were never soothed by the necessary offerings made to them by the living. Therefore they sought revenge and became extremely dangerous. The living feared these spirits the most. However, some spirits were rewarded in the afterlife: those who died naturally of old age, those who died unnaturally very young, and stillborn babies.

This poem calls Bilgames the brother of Inanna, perhaps indicating a symbolic close relationship between the king and the deities rather than meaning that they were literally brother and sister. Bilgames's inexhaustible energy and the demands that he makes on the men and women of his city are recorded in the Standard Version, but the latter does not indicate the reason or reasons for the king's tyranny. And in the Standard Version Enkidu also ventures into the Netherworld. However, the reason for this awesome trip is completely different. The Standard Epic has Enkidu die from illness due to the wrath of the gods. But the emotional embracement between the king and the spirit, and the dialogue that follows, reflect remarkably that which is recorded in Tablet XII of the Standard Babylonian Epic.

(v) The Death of Bilgames: 'The great wild bull is lying down'

This is the last Sumerian poem and starts with a lament for Bilgames who lies on his deathbed. He is dying of old age. Namtar, the agent of Death has seized him. Whilst sweat is rolling from his body, Bilgames has a dream – presumably he is **delirious with fever**. He dreams that the god Nudimmud opens his eyes and he has a vision.

He is **drawn into the assembly of the great gods and they discuss his grim future** with him. They admit that his career was one of fame: **he travelled many roads**, fell a unique cedar, slew Huwawa, **built monuments**

and temples, reached Ziusudra, re-established order after the Deluge, all the Sumerian rites, rituals and cultures that would have been forgotten. Enki explains to the dying king: they do take into account that his mother is a goddess, therefore immortal, but due to the part of him that is human, he is also bound to the fate that awaits all humans – death. The Deluge was meant to wipe out all life on earth, however, Ziusudra managed to survive. He was the only and last one. No more exceptions shall be made. Nevertheless, Bilgames will have a special position in the Netherworld. He will be the governor, chief of the shades and he will be the one to pass judgment. And after his death he will not be forgotten. During the Month of Torches **wrestling matches and trials of strength** will take place. (Apparently the Festival of Lights took place in the fifth month of the Babylonian year, more or less in August, also referred to as the *month of Gilgamesh*. On the ninth day together with the ceremonial lightning of torches young men used to imitate the fight between Gilgamesh and Enkidu by performing wrestling matches in the doorways – see George 1999:196.)

In the midst of Bilgames's delirium Enlil appears and explains that he destined him to be king during a lifetime, not to live forever. The human part of him is destined to die. Not even a king can avoid death. But Bilgames should not despair. He is going to a place where many avowed priests and priestesses lie, he is going to be reunited with his deceased family members, and he is also going to be reunited with his **friend and companion Enkidu**. Furthermore, Enlil repeats that Bilgames will be counted as one of the lesser gods, the governor of the Netherworld.

Apparently Bilgames seeks counsel – it is unclear from whom – but the message of the dream is repeated: no living being escapes death, yet Bilgames is destined a special position hereafter.

In a lucid moment, Bilgames, inspired by Enki, starts working on his tomb. Apparently the agent of communicating the vision and making its meaning

clear is a dog, not a human (for some explanations see George 2003:15). The vision pertains to the site where the tomb is to be erected: it is not to be discovered and not to be destroyed – ever.

Consequently Bilgames orders the workforce of his city to divert the waters of the river Euphrates, and to build a tomb of stone in the riverbed. From the poem it seems that Bilgames's whole household is to be buried alongside him: his wives, children and servants. Furthermore, before his funeral, he also has gifts prepared for the various gods of the Netherworld. Then he lies down, presumably to die. The doorway is sealed, the Euphrates is opened and the river once again follows its normal course. Hereafter no one will ever discover the tomb of Bilgames.

This poem has two different endings according to two different manuscripts (George 1999:207-208). The first and better-preserved one explains a few things. The whole issue of the importance attached to a name in the Ancient Near East is brought to light. People live on after death as long as they are remembered by those alive. Therefore funerary statues are erected and placed in temples to ensure continued invocation of the name of the deceased. Furthermore, Aruru is the one who makes it possible for people to have children and families to remember them and ensure that their names live on. The second ending simply preserves a praise of Bilgames, son of the goddess Ninsun.

Gilgamesh does not die in the Standard Babylonian Epic. However, his famous career is lauded in the prologue. The Standard Epic also explains the wrestling matches that take place in the Month of Torches. The most important point of this poem is that it calls Enkidu explicitly and for the first time the friend and companion of Bilgames.

2.3 The function of the Sumerian poems

The Sumerian poems on Bilgames are more interested in Bilgames and what he *did* than in the inner message of what he *was*. They do not reflect on the inner struggle of the hero, on the questions of life and death or on the meaning of life. This led scholars to conclude that these poems were most probably composed orally soon after his proposed lifetime and meant for court entertainment (George 2003:6; Tigay 1982:36). Indeed, the drinking scene in *Bilgames and the Bull of Heaven* points to a lively royal court where singing and drinking were popular.

The doxologies at the ending of the poems do have a hymn like sound to them, which may indicate some kind of cultic function. Apparently Bilgames was deified quite early, especially in his position as a judge of the Netherworld (see George 2003:119-132), however, liturgical notations seem to be lacking (Tigay 1982:36). Therefore, the oral Sumerian poems on Bilgames most probably were performed in the royal palace for the entertainment of the king rather than in the temple during liturgical ceremonies.

Thus, although the prime motifs of the Sumerian poems are not repeated in the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*, the inspiration to the later *Epic* can be traced back to the early Sumerian Age. Consequently this age and its concepts and ideologies will be examined.

3. From frivolous frolic to academic achievement: entertainment to literature

3.1. Writing

The first Sumerian poems on Bilgames were composed orally (George 2003:6; George 1999:lx; Schrott 2001:12;), obviously in Sumerian. Several centuries after the *lifetime* of Bilgames – that is if he existed – these poems were written down. This implies that there were several centuries of oral

transmission before anything about Bilgames became concrete in writing. At this stage it is appropriate to give a very brief overview on the *development of writing* in ancient Mesopotamia.

Actual *writing* is preceded by a kind of a token system, called ‘stones’ that can be dated to 10 000 BCE (Nemet-Nejat 2002:48). These were made of clay, more or less the size of small marbles and were used for basic book-keeping in the home or at the market. Thus, in the Ancient Near East writing was appropriated in the first place to record simple household matters or business transactions (see also Walker 1996 :17). During the latter half of the fourth millennium BC this was quite common and not restricted to the south of Mesopotamia or to the Sumerians only, although the earliest *writing* was indeed found at Uruk in Mesopotamia (Nemet-Nejat 2002:49). Everyone who engaged in trade and commerce needed to keep track of what was bought and what was sold. However, these first economical records was what one may call *international*: they were mainly *pictographs* of which the picture represented the object for which it stood. That is to say, there was a picture of an animal or a plant with indications of a number next to it. This referred to what and how much of it was bought or sold and mainly pertained to merchandise and livestock (Nemet-Nejat 2002:49; Walker 1996:21). The earliest *pictographs* were drawn with a sharp tool on wet clay. Then the clay was left in the hot sun to dry out.

Increasing urbanisation brought about a more complex way of living and demanded certain cultural adaptations – also with regards to *writing* (Nemet-Nejat 2002:47). The economic administration of temples and palaces placed new demands on scribes, and it became necessary to develop a kind of a *shorthand* to keep up with the rapid pace of urban life. Therefore, instead of drawing the whole object, a symbolic representation became preferable as it was possible to do this with only a few quick strokes. But these abstract forms needed to be standardised in order to be recognisable for all, and in due course *logograms* became the norm. Very quickly the scribes realised that

logograms could also represent *syllables* in spoken language that could be combined to form many different words, also words with abstract meanings (Walker 1996:21-23). Now it was possible to appropriate writing for a variety of purposes. Besides business transactions many other texts saw the light. Inscriptions lauded kings, hymns praised deities, myths explained the world and its seasons, later on longer epic poems narrated the trials and tribulations of heroic kings, and legal codices ensured a just and orderly society. In short: writing developed as a *response to cultural developments* (Pollock 1999:172). Thus, together with writing that is transformed into language, Ancient Mesopotamia enters the arena of history.

Since it was no longer necessary to draw the accurate pictures that the *pictographs* demanded, a drawing tool with a sharp point was also unnecessary. One with a flat or a blunt point was equally suitable. The impression that the blunt point left on the wet clay was wedge-like: from there the Latin *cuneus* that became *cuneiform* in English (Walker 1996:17).

Writing became increasingly a means of disseminating knowledge – to people about people and about the world. But writing also became a tremendous power. Written material represented a particular *ideology*: that is to say the interests of a minority are presented as though they are beneficial to all (Pollock 1999:194). In a largely illiterate society this was an important issue. Writing became a means to fashion a particular outlook on life and on the world: that of the scribes.

The first readable texts date to the first half of the third millennium and are written in Sumerian (Nemet-Nejat 2002:49).

3.2 From Sumerian to Akkadian

Then rose to the occasion Sargon of Akkade.

Legend and romance obscure the facts of Sargon's heritage. A text from Nineve dating to the eighth century (more than a thousand years after Sargon's reign) records that he was a fatherless child secretly born by an *entum* – apparently a cultic functionary of very high status (Kuhrt 1995:48). His mother placed him in a basket of rushes, sealed it and cast it into the river. Eventually he was found by Aqqi the water-drawer who adopted him, raised him and appointed him as his gardener. But the goddess Ishtar loved him, and he reigned as king for 56 years.

Apparently the truth is less romantic – according to earlier folktales. It seems that Sargon's parents were quite ordinary, his father may have been a date-grower. Sargon served in the court of Urzababa, king of Kish and eventually became the royal cupbearer of the king. The events of the downfall of Urzababa and the consequent kingship of Sargon were attributed to a decree of the gods, but one may assume that Sargon took matters in his own hands to turn the tables and establish a new dynasty.

The dating of the Sargonic period – also called the Old Akkadian Empire or the Akkadian period – is generally accepted as ranging from 2340-2159 (see Kuhrt 1995:44 for different opinions). Two matters are important with regards to the reign of Sargon. He was the first ruler who succeeded in establishing an empire: that means centralised power. Instead of the many independent city-states, every one with its own ruler and bureaucracy, there was now one ruler over them all.

The second point is that Sargon was a Semite and as soon as his rule was established undisputedly, his language also became the spoken language of the region (Schrott 2001:10; Kuhrt 1995:46). This region comprised the south of Mesopotamia where the old Sumerian city-states were located, as well as the north from where Sargon originated. Sargon established a new capital, Agade/Akkade and the Semitic vernacular became known as Akkadian. And very soon Akkadian was not only being spoken, but also being written,

adapting the cuneiform signs of Sumerian to suit its own purposes (see also Nemet-Nejat 2002:49-50). Sumerian was slowly but surely dying out as spoken language, yet, it was still the language of culture and court. Therefore, most probably for the duration of the Sargonic age or Akkadian Empire, the Sumerian poems on Bilgames continued to be transmitted orally, even perhaps in the royal courts of the Sargonic kings.

The Akkadian Empire lasted 140 years reaching its epoch during the reign of Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin (Kuhrt 1995:50-51). However, the stability of the empire seems to have been crumbling, because Naram-Sin's successor, Shar-kali-sharri was the last member of the Sargonic dynasty. Apparently a short period of anarchy followed his rule, enabling a number of local rulers of other centers to re-establish their rule, including cities like Lagash, Kish and Uruk (Kuhrt 1995:53).

3.3. The Sumerian Renaissance

It is difficult to know exactly what happened between the end of the reign of the last Akkadian rulers, Dudu and Shudurul and the establishment of the Ur III Dynasty. A later text from the Ur III-period attributes the downfall of the Akkadian empire to an invasion from the Gutians of the Diyala region in the Zagros-hills (cf Kuhrt 1995:56; Postgate 1994:41). A text describes the Gutians as a barbaric race, destroying everything as they move forward. This text also states the reason for the invasion: Naram-Sin removed goods and divine statues from Enlil's temple in Nippur, therefore the god sent the barbarians to plunder the land (Kuhrt 1995:56). The logical consequence would be the transfer of kingship and rule to another king and another city.

The founder of the third dynasty of Ur was Ur-Nammu. He knew about Bilgames of Uruk and admired him greatly because he composed a hymn praising himself and also calling Ninsun his mother and Bilgames his *brother* (George 2003:108). His successor Shulgi likewise called Bilgames his

brother-friend. These claims on a family relationship with the king of old may indicate that the third dynasty of Ur had had its roots in Uruk. Ur-Nammu appears to have been a former provincial governor under the reign of Utu-hengal of Uruk (George 2003:109; Postgate 1994:41-42), and related to the king either by blood or by marriage. And apparently Utu-hengal of Uruk expelled the Gutians from Sumer. It is unclear how it happened that Ur-Nammu took over from Utu-hengal, whether peacefully or whether by force. Nevertheless, it seems that the idea of kinship and kingship with the ancient kings of Uruk was powerful enough to legitimise not only the newly found dynasty in Ur, but also to have the old Sumerian traditions revive.

Two matters are important with regards to the Ur III period. The first is the development of a particular kingship ideology (cf Kuhrt 1995:68-69). Although many of the royal hymns are preserved mostly in Old Babylonian versions and the original dating to the Ur III period was initially doubted, it now appears that these compositions were indeed performed at the royal ceremonies of the rulers of Ur III.

Often the hymn is composed in the first person, as though it is the king himself speaking. His divine birth is stressed, his parents are usually a mortal king and an immortal goddess. As if this is not enough, he is designated for the throne by the highest gods. Birth and designation thus legitimise his position as king and ruler.

Furthermore the king excels in strength, and his physical beauty is lauded. He is born stronger and more beautiful than them all. He is very brave. He takes the lead in military battle by leading his troops as commander, at the same time he sets the example as the perfect soldier. And he is able to handle all sorts of weapons. The whole world knows of his successful campaigns and this fills his enemies with fear. Occasionally he is described as a hunter of wild and dangerous animals, such as lions. He does not catch them

treacherously with a net, but tackles them face-to-face. By slaying these animals, he guarantees the safety for the shepherds and their flocks.

But the king does not excel only physically, he does so mentally as well. He is the most wise and learned of men. All seeks his counsel, and when he gives it, he is able to speak all the five languages that his subjects use, without the need of an interpreter. These languages were presumably Akkadian, Sumerian, Amorite, Elamite and perhaps Gutian (Kuhrt 1995:69).

The king is also a caretaker of the sublime as well as of the ordinary affairs of the day. He looks after the temple and the religious services, he is devoted to the gods, thereby making sure that the land prospers. He is an outstanding musician who composes the most beautiful hymns in honour of the gods. But he also exercises justice and protects the weak from abuse, just like his Sumerian forbearers. And, what is very important is that the king's scribal abilities are stressed: all his accomplishments and wisdom he wrote down himself for posterity.

In fact, the Ur III ruler appears to be a true *renaissance man*.

From this brief overview of kingship ideology it should be clear that many – in fact, most – of these aspects found their way into the prologue of the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh is of divine descent. He is exceptionally strong, brave and wise. He cares for culture. And his wisdom is recorded – apparently by himself - for posterity.

The second matter pertains to the revival of Sumerian. A question that is often raised, is how did it happen that Sumerian became the language of education and bureaucratic administration if Akkadian was firmly established as the vernacular of the time? Kuhrt (1995:60) seems to agree with Pollock's (1999:194) concept of ideology. Sumerian was a *device that served to define and distinguish the educated élite*. Everybody could speak and understand

Akkadian, only a few exceptional academics knew Sumerian. That is why Sumerian worked.

An epoch of the Ur III period is reached during the reign of king Shulgi. He is known for many military campaigns and a successful foreign policy. He was also responsible for important administrative reforms for example the standardisation of weights and measures, and the establishment of a new calendar (Schretter 2001:308; Postgate 1994:42). But Shulgi also did much to promote the Sumerian culture and to preserve it for posterity. He established academies at Nippur and Ur for this purpose, and most probably the first Sumerian poems on Bilgames were copied out in one or more of these learning centers (cf also Schretter 2001:309-311; Schrott 2001:12; George 1999:xvii; Tigay 1982:13-14).

Although the majority of the Sumerian Bilgames poems date to the eighteenth century and are the products of Babylonian scribal apprentices of this time, their origins can be certainly traced back to the courts and academies of the Ur III period (George 2003:7). Their prime function was probably still to provide court entertainment, but they were also starting to be appropriated in a learning context. A fragment of the Sumerian poem *Bilgames and the Bull of Heaven* that comes from Nippur is the oldest published evidence of a written existence of these poems and undoubtedly date to the Ur III period (George 2003:7).

3.4. The end of Ur III and the Isin-Larsa period

It is often suggested that the downfall of the Ur III dynasty was caused by nomad Amorite tribes who increased their raids on the existing cities (Postgate 1994:42-43). In fact, Shu-sin, king of Ur did build the so-called *Amorite Wall* that was supposed to keep marauding bands at bay. However, Kuhrt (1995:71) points out that the idea of a *barbarian horde of Amorites* that

invaded the land and destroyed everything as they moved along, is not quite correct.

Most probably the Ur III-state consisted of several groups of Amorites who may also have been respectable members of the society. The stability of the imperial structure of Ur III started to collapse already during the reign of Shu-Sin. During the reign of Ibbi-Sin, the last ruler of Ur III, a crisis is indicated: there was a short in the supply of grain resources, prices escalated, central power dwindled, and cities in southern Mesopotamia were left to their own devices for protection and provision. The official calendar was abandoned. And yes, cities were raided by marauding Amorite bands, however, it seems that the Ur III government *dubbed* all groups who took advantage of the crumbling central state *Amorite* (Kuhrt 1995:71). Everything simply contributed to make a bad situation worse.

Thus, when Elam and Shimashki attacked Ur, Ibbi-Sin had very little resources, was unable to offer resistance and the capital was ravaged. And like so often, a touching lament on the fall of Ur closes by attributing the whole disaster to a divine decision (cf Kuhrt 1995:71-72).

Once again a number of independent small city states were scattered over the country that was now known as Sumer and Akkad (Postgate 1994:43). Isin, with its ruler Ishbi-Erra was the first of these cities to establish a dynasty. Apparently Ishbi-Erra was an official, perhaps a governor with whom Ibbi-Sin had been corresponding (Kuhrt 1995:76; Postgate 1994:45). Ishbi-Erra claims that he was the one who expelled the Elamite garrison from Ur, therefore he is also the true successor of the Ur III rule. But because this dynasty could not prove any political inheritance from Ur, they needed divine sanction. Indeed, the Sumerian King List that was most probably completed during the Isin-Larsa period indicates that this was the case: the Isin dynasty is in accordance with the will of Enlil (Kuhrt 1995:76; Postgate 1994:45). And

accordingly the new generation of rulers conducted their rule in the conservative traditional Mesopotamian style.

Not long after the establishment of the Isin-dynasty, about a 100 km to the south arose a rival dynasty, that of Larsa (Kuhrt 1995:78). It seems that the rulers of Larsa had initially been provincial governors in service of the Isin-ones. The break between Isin and Larsa is indicated by the capture of Ur (ca 1932 BC), by Gungunum, the first member of an independent Larsa dynasty. Although the power of Isin was dealt a severe blow and its father-son succession was brought to an end by the usurper Enlil-bani (ca 1860 BC), it seems that the Isin – and Larsa kingdoms continued to run parallel for a considerable time (see time chart in Kuhrt 1995:79).

3.5. Babylon

However, next to the rival kingdoms of Isin and Larsa, a third dynasty was slowly but surely rising: that of Babylon, beginning with Sumuabum (1894 – 1881 – Kuhrt 1995:79). Hammurabi, the most famous Babylonian king rose to the throne in ca 1792 BC. Initially he was no more than one of the many kings who followed another stronger overlord. And the first victories attributed to him were in fact those of the then more powerful kings: Shamshi-Adad of Assyria and Rim-Sin of Larsa of whom he was an ally. However, in 1763 he undertook a successful campaign to the east of the Tigris region and thereafter defeated Rim-Sin of Larsa. And his control spread rapidly. He gained control over Isin, Uruk, Ur and Nippur, as well as the sizeable dominions of Larsa (Kuhrt 1995:108-109). Babylon, previously an unimportant town, no more than a village, became the capital of the region of Sumer and Akkad (Schrott 2001:13; Kuhrt 1995:108; Postgate 1994:39).

3.5.1. Akkadian supreme

The period that is known as *Old Babylonian*, roughly ranging from the end of Ur III to the end of the first dynasty of Babylon (1595 BC) is not a historical but a linguistic terminology (George 1999:xx; Kuhrt 1995:74; Postgate 1994:36; Edzard 1967:178). During this time a language was spoken, commonly referred to as *Old Babylonian* that was actually a dialect that developed from the earlier Akkadian.

On the political scene new masters were ruling, those of Semitic Amorite heritage. Conventional forms, even in places of learning were being abandoned. The old traditional style of literature was adhered to at the traditionalist royal court of Isin, however, scholars at the academy of Nippur seem to have treated this conservative approach with considerable scorn (George 2003:21). The intellectuals could no longer remain oblivious to the world outside and had to take note of the common language of the time. Therefore it is quite possible that students, especially would-be scribes started to practice their writing skills also in Akkadian Babylonian. Literature in the Akkadian dialect of Old Babylonian was blooming and reached a zenith (George 2003:30; 1999:lx).

Because the recent dynasties conducted their rule in traditional Mesopotamian fashion, they also continued to use Sumerian for official purposes. Nevertheless, it is fairly certain that already by the eighteenth century Sumerian literature was restricted to places of learning and appropriated almost exclusively by teachers and pupils (George 2003:17). Sadly enough, this would also have been the fate of the Sumerian *Bilgames* poems. Fortunately outside the school walls a new hero was taking shape in the vibrant tongue of the vernacular. Poets were telling of Gilgamesh. During this time the *Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* came into being.

One should never overlook the preceding oral tradition of ancient Mesopotamian literature (George 2003:17 & 20-21). Most probably shorter poems or longer narratives were composed orally before they were written

down. This would also be the case with the development of the *Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. But although it is impossible to trace back the whole process of transmission, both George (2003:22) and Tigay (1982:42) agree that the version that was eventually written down, was the work of one creative mind. George states that *...we may be sure that the poem was originally the work of a single poetic genius, whether he sang or wrote it.*

According to Schrott (2001:14) the *Old Babylonian Version* of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was composed during the time of Hammurabi; this standpoint cannot be proved nor refuted completely. Nevertheless, one may argue that there may have been relative stability during the reign of Hammurabi – although stability only pertains to the existence of a central government, not to peace and tranquil in general. Wars were continually waged over either guarding or expanding territory, nevertheless, it is also true that literature bloomed, also during the reign of Hammurabi. Therefore the Old Babylonian world will now be examined.

3.5.2. The Old Babylonian world

Hammurabi was once again the model of an ideal Mesopotamian ruler. He built and restored temples, city walls, public buildings, and he undertook irrigation projects (cf Kuhrt 1995:111-112). Nowadays he is most famous for his law-code. Reverently he poses before Shamash, the Sun god, god of justice and solemnly swears to exercise all that the god expects: justice and protection of the weak.

(i) Marduk

By the time of Hammurabi the gods were definitely known by their Akkadian names, the Sumerian ones had become obsolete (Schrott 2001:14). Furthermore, new gods rose to the occasion. Marduk, previously a minor god

– just like Babylon was an unimportant town – became the patron god of Babylonia (Schrott 2001:14; Kuhrt 1999:112). At this point the almost complete omission of Marduk in the *Standard Version* is striking: the primary Sumerian gods with their Akkadian names are retained, but Marduk (d AMAR UTU) appears only once in the *Standard Babylonian* epic: III:177 (Parpola 1997). In this regard it is interesting that the name of Marduk occurs in connection with the Cedar Forest – just before Gilgamesh and Enkidu leave. Unfortunately the tablet is badly damaged, it is virtually impossible to determine in which context and who mentions this god.

(ii) Aya the bride

Yet another influence of Hammurabi's reign is indicated in tablet III:55. This pertains to Ninsun's prayer, primarily directed towards Shamash for the protection of her son and his friend during their perilous voyage to the Cedar Forest. She expresses the wish that *Aya the bride* remind the god (Shamash) of her (Ninsun's) request.

A particular range of female cultic personnel existed in Hammurabi's time (Kuhrt 1995:114-115). Hammurabi's code stipulates some of them and explains their rights and duties, but these were not the only ones. From a cloister in Sippar were recovered some other sources that refer to the *naditu* of Sippar. These girls had breeding, some of them were even princesses from neighbouring states. They were *dedicated to the god Shamash of Sippar as 'betrothed' and developed a particular close bond with his consort Aya* (Kuhrt 1995:115; see also Harris in *Reallexicon der Assyriology Band 4*: 391-393). They lived inside the cloister walls, were secluded and not allowed to marry, but nevertheless, they could not have been too unhappy. They were not poor and had enough to live from. Their dowry (if they had any) and their servants came along. Making use of outside agents, they engaged actively in business. Probably these women were of the literate few in their time as they

also served as *scribes* for their own cloister administration (Nemet-Nejat 2002:56).

A *nadītu* could even adopt a daughter. If she had property, she could bequeath it freely, although her dowry had to be returned to her family after her death. But often the property was left to the adopted daughter, much to the dismay of the family. Furthermore the Code of Hammurabi protected the rights of a *nadītu* (as well as the rights of women of other classes). A particular section stipulates that a cloistered *nadītu* should receive her full share of her inheritance at the death of her father if she had not been given a dowry beforehand (Harris in *Reallexicon Band 4:393*).

Usually the *nadītu* retained close emotional bonds with her family because she remained dependent on them. Parents did not mind, because their daughter brought them considerable honour and status. Besides, one of the main functions of a *nadītu* was to pray for the well being of her family. In this regard the role of Ninsun in the above-mentioned passage is illuminated: she prays on behalf of her son, and she even carries out the act of adoption (III:122-127 in Parpola 1997). But she does not adopt a daughter, she adopts Enkidu as her son.

There was another type of *nadītu* – *the nadītu of Marduk* (Harris in *Reallexicon der Assyriology Band 4:392*). These women were uncloistered and they were also allowed to marry, but they were not permitted to bear children. They could adopt children, adopt slaves as children, or permit their husband to marry another woman – often as sister – who could bear children. However, the *nadītu* of Shamash in Sippar enjoyed greater prestige than those of Marduk.

3.5.3. The Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic

The *Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* broke away from the nature of the Sumerian poems. The Sumerian poems were unrelated with regards to theme, they were five separate and independent units. There did not exist a Sumerian Epic of Bilgames. The *Old Babylonian Epic* on the contrary focuses on a specific character and works out particular motifs concerning him: *power and kingship, wilderness and civilization (sic), friendship and love, victory and arrogance, death and life, man and god* (George 2003:20). Most probably the Babylonian author knew the Sumerian poems from his scribal training at school, but these were not his primary sources. He revised them (George 1999:xxi) to create a new literary product to address a new audience (Tigay 1982:42).

Unfortunately the *Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* is not as well preserved as the *Standard* one. It appears that the material is rather badly damaged and has mixed origin (George 2003:22; Tigay 1982:45). Nevertheless, the main theme

corresponds with that of the *Standard Babylonian Version*: Gilgamesh's futile hope for literal immortality (George 2003:23; Tigay 1982:50). The main point of contact with the Sumerian poems is the journey to the Cedar Forest. Episodes that are missing are the fight with the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu cursing and blessing the prostitute, his vision of the Netherworld and the myth of the Deluge (George 2003:23). Significant differences are that Enkidu is Gilgamesh's friend, no longer his slave, and that all the gods are known by their Akkadian names.

Most probably the *Old Babylonian Epic* bore the title *šūtur šarrī* - surpassing all other kings (George 2003:22; George 1999:xxi; Schrott 2001:14; Tigay 1982:48-49). This line occurs in the *Standard Babylonian Version*, l:27 (Parpola 1997), forming part of the prologue. Both George (2003:24) and Tigay (1982:102) remark on the fresh and spontaneous poetic style of the *Old Babylonian Epic*. It makes the many repetitions of the *Standard Epic*

seem redundant and in terms of modern criteria for aesthetics one would be inclined to evaluate the *Old Babylonian* text as superior. Nevertheless, this was not to be the final text, because the *Old Babylonian Version* was soon being altered and adapted.

4. The Middle Babylonian period

After Hammurabi's death the realm once under his control declined gradually (cf Kuhrt 1995:115-116). Nevertheless, Babylon remained a fairly important city until it was sacked in 1595 BC by Mursili I, the Hittite king. But seemingly the Hittites were not interested in Babylon because instead of occupying the city, they withdrew up the Euphrates. Nevertheless, political affairs were pretty chaotic (Kuhrt 1995:333) until Mesopotamia became subjected to Kassite rule.

Just like the Sumerians the Kassites are from unknown origin and their language is unrelated to any known tongue. Nevertheless, Kassite rule seemed to bring stability once again to the country (Kuhrt 1995:335). Furthermore, the Kassite dynasty reigned exceptionally long, almost for four hundred years (c. 1530-1155 BC). However, what is most important is that this new group of apparently foreign rulers fitted into ancient Mesopotamian culture as though it was their very own (Kuhrt 1995:338).

Of the original Kassite pantheon little is known. The royal house seemingly venerated their own protective deities, Shuquamuna and Shumaliya, but none of their other gods were recognised in the Babylonian cult or cult centers. Furthermore, the god Marduk who was allegedly pillaged by the Hittite raid and removed to Hana on the Euphrates, was allegedly recovered by Agum II kakrime (an early Kassite king) and reinstated as the most important god of the Babylonian pantheon. Consequently Babylon also became the ceremonial capital (Kuhrt 1995:338). Thus, evidence seems to indicate that the Kassite rulers were concerned to protect and to promote traditional Babylonian cults

and customs, thereby winning the support and loyalty of the indigenous people. Once again Mesopotamian culture withstood changes in dominion, its imprint was fixed (Schrott 2001:16).

4.1. The *Middle Babylonian Gilgamesh*

The next reworking of the *Gilgamesh Epic* dates to the Late Bronze Age and *bridges the gap* between the *Old Babylonian* - and the *Standard Version* (George 2003:24-25). These texts are the result of the spread of Babylonian culture in the second millennium. In due course Akkadian became the language of power and prestige (George 2003:27) and consequently cuneiform script was studied over the whole area of the Ancient Near East: Syria, Palestine, Anatolia and even Egypt. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* was one of the literary texts that was copied in many learning centers and thus formed part of the scribal teaching curriculum. Places like Emar, Ugarit, Megiddo and Bogazkoy yielded Middle Babylonian texts of Gilgamesh. Not only was the *Epic of Gilgamesh* copied, it was also translated in Hittite and Hurrian (George 2003:24).

Remarks

Unfortunately the texts of the Middle Babylonian period are even more disparate and scattered than those of the Old Babylonian period. Nevertheless, one may observe a change in function of these texts. Initially, in the courts of the Sumerian kings until the end of the Ur III regime, the poems on Bilgames served to entertain the kings and the royalty. As Sumerian died out as a spoken language, the popularity of the Sumerian poems also declined and they became confined to the walls of the scribal learning centers. In due course narratives in vibrant Akkadian were composed on the hero Gilgamesh that eclipsed the popularity and the function of Bilgames. But also these poems were written down, and once again they started to find their way into the learning centers of scribes.

As was previously indicated, literary activity bloomed during the Middle Babylonian period. Akkadian was the *lingua franca*, and by this time Sumerian had definitely died out as spoken language. Towards the end of the second millennium Kassite reign was also nearing the last century of its rule, the Middle Babylonian period was drawing to a close, and it became now necessary to organise and categorise Babylonian literature (George 2003:30; George 1999:lx). With regards to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* one should also keep in mind that there were many texts and versions around in the many academic centers, and even some translations existed.

5. The genius

Most scholars agree that someone with the name Sîn-lēqi-unninni had something to do with the creation of the *Standard Babylonian Version of the Epic of Gilgamesh* (George 2003:28-33; George 1999:xxiv-xxv; Schrott 2001:16-17; Tigay 1982:12). Not much is known about him. He may have been an exorcist priest (George 1999:xxiv; Tigay 1982:12), therefore capable of averting evil by means of prayer, incantation or magic ritual. However, one may be definitely certain that he was trained in the scribal profession: some scribal families and priestly classes of Uruk and many cult-singers (*kalû*) regarded him as their remote ancestor.

Evidence for Sîn-lēqi-unninni's authorship of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* comes from a Neo-Assyrian list that proposes to be a catalogue of texts and authors. The *Gilgamesh Epic* is recorded as follows (George 2003:28):

iškar (éš.gàr) ^d GIŠ-gím-maš: ša pi-i ^{md} sîn(30)-lē-qí-un-nin-ni ^{lu} x[(x)x]
Series of Gilgamesh: from the mouth of Sîn-lēqi-unninni, the...

The expression *ša pí – by the mouth of –* was a typical way to express authorship. But exactly when Sîn-lēqi-unninni lived, is uncertain. The scholars

mentioned above all place him late in the second millennium, however, this estimation is based rather upon an intelligent guess than on concrete evidence. Thus Sîn-lēqi-unninni is dated somewhere between the thirteenth and the eleventh centuries BC (George 1999:xxv).

Once again a large gap separates the time of Sîn-lēqi-unninni's literary labour from the extant sources. These date to two periods. The older texts are from the mid – to late seventh century BC and were discovered in Ashurbanipal's libraries at Kuyunjik (Nineve) and other Neo Assyrian private libraries in other contemporaneous cities. The younger ones date from the fifth to the first centuries BC and are from late Babylonian libraries, mainly in Uruk and Babylon. Both groups of sources record the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in twelve tablets. George (2003:31) is convinced that this version, known as the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* was already fixed before the Neo Assyrian and Late Babylonian periods, and that the man Sîn-lēqi-unninni was responsible for this composition and its division in twelve tablets.

Obviously Sîn-lēqi-unninni had the *Old Babylonian* and/or *Middle Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* – even the Sumerian poems on Bilgames - at his disposal, but he wrought some major changes to the material. What were they?

Sîn-lēqi-unninni supplied the existing *Old Babylonian šūtur eli šarrī* with a prologue: *ša naqba īmuru – he who saw the Deep*. The heroic Old Babylonian king *who surpasses all others* is replaced by another one who *saw the Deep*. This opening line immediately invokes a reflective mood. Rather than an outward show of superiority, the focus of the new text is on inward reflection – a different kind of achievement. Whatever the old king had done, is now placed in a different perspective.

Then the narrator in the prologue invites the reader to climb onto the city walls. These words are echoed in the closing lines by the hero himself, now speaking to the boatman. Thus, the poem is tightly enclosed by its own walls,

as it were. The prologue also gives the impression that the whole narrative is actually an autobiography in the third person (I:25-26 – Parpola, 1997). This was typical of a specific kind of Mesopotamian genre, known today as *narû*-literature (George 2003:32; Tigay 1982:144). Texts of this kind resort under wisdom-literature, especially with regards to royal counsel (George 1999:xxxv). The biblical books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are examples of this kind of literature. The words of the king are recorded to instruct his son and to prevent him from pitfalls during his reign. But the address of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is apparently aimed at a wider audience. The reader is to imagine that the words of Gilgamesh – by the mouth of the narrator - are addressed to everyone that hears/reads them: in short, these words are set down for posterity, for the benefit of the many generations that are yet to come.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* goes beyond the usual lecturing and moralising of texts of this kind. The hero acquires wisdom through failure, shame and personal suffering. He also realises the value of tangible labour during one's life. But he learns the hard way. The abstract qualities of wisdom and learning and the concrete rootedness of human existence in everyday life are masterly illuminated in the prologue and the matching ending lines. George (2003:32) states: *In reprising the prologue, the ending offers insight into the realities of human existence, with the city held up as a symbol of human activity and permanence. The mood at the close is just as pensive as the new prologue.*

But why did it become necessary to reflect upon life and its problems?

5.1. The changes

Damrosch (1987:87 - 118) suggests that the differences between the *Old Babylonian Version* and the *Standard Babilonian Gilgamesh Epic* mark a process of historicising – transition from *myth* to *history*. He points out three significant interventions within the *Standard Version*: interventions of addition or deliberate omission.

(i) The creation of Enkidu (Damrosch 1987:94)

In the *Old Babylonian Epic* Enkidu is raised from his Sumerian status as Bilgames's slave to Gilgamesh's friend. His origins are of no importance. The *Standard Version* – although it does not elaborate the point – pictures the beginning of his life as a primitive human being who was created by the gods – Aruru to be specific.

In *myths* gods intervene directly in human affairs: they talk directly to them, they even have sexual relationships with them. Of course they can still do so. But in the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* the preference is for indirect dealings from the divine side. Instead of stepping in personally into the situation, the gods create Enkidu. This *divine withdrawal from direct action in the story* marks for Damrosch (1987:97) the *historicising of poetic epic*.

Indirect communication is further emphasised by the occurrence of the many dreams in the *epic*. These dreams need to be interpreted by someone: their meaning is not revealed directly by the gods themselves. Thus, although the gods can talk to Gilgamesh and Enkidu directly, they prefer to communicate indirectly. And this is the way that people also experienced historically their communication with the gods.

(ii) The rejection of Ishtar (Damrosch 1987:103)

(A more detailed discussion of Tablet VI follows to illuminate some other viewpoints that are not relevant right now.)

It seems strange that Gilgamesh rejects the advances of the goddess of love: does he do so only because she has proved herself to be an inconsistent and fickle lover in the past? It appears that Ishtar's previous lovers all had their original natures directly reversed (Damrosch 1987:105), thus, for Gilgamesh

Ishtar becomes *the perversion of the proper function of the thing in question. The free become domesticated; insiders are expelled; the settled are forced to wonder; the living die; and humans are turned into animals* (Abusch 1986:173-174). Wherever Ishtar intervenes directly in human culture – whether artifacts, animals, people - the consequences are devastating. The stable order, balance and harmony become disrupted. This point is illustrated even more clearly in the following scene: the descent of the Bull of Heaven. Ishtar's father had warned her – the Bull is a celestial beast, it grazes in the sky. And indeed, when it arrives in Uruk, it creates havoc in the city. It destroys culture, it destroys life.

What seems to be happening in these scenes is the beginning of a process of human culture defining itself over against the supernatural world of the gods. Cosmic realms – the natural and the supernatural should not mix (Damrosch 1987:107). Not that divine and human affairs should be separated completely – this is not what the *epic* is proposing. It rather stresses that each group should keep its place, only then the relationship between humans and gods can be stable, tolerable and even mutually supportive.

There are definite boundaries between the worlds of gods and of humans. Neither gods nor humans may violate these boundaries. When Enkidu tears off the right flank of the Bull and flings it into Ishtar's face, he does just this: he taunts the gods and believes his strength matches theirs. This is his fatal error – therefore the gods decree that he shall die and not Gilgamesh (Damrosch 1987:109). Thus, the mythical world of the gods and the historical world of culture should respect each other in order to guarantee the stability of both.

(iii) The Deluge

Damrosch (1987:114) states: *When Gilgamesh visits Utnapishtim* (sic), *history visits myth*. Obviously the recount of the Deluge has been inserted into

the *Epic* for a particular purpose: Uta-napishtim did achieve immortality, Gilgamesh cannot. These are two different stories, the one of Gilgamesh and the one of Uta-napishtim. However, the Deluge-story is not inserted simply for the sake of its difference. It also points to the reality that the time has come when the gods no longer act as they did in myth.

At the time of the composition of the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, the world had become increasingly secularised. The truth of the old stories of the gods was seriously doubted, or euhemerised. What is happening in the *Standard Babylonian Epic* is not the questioning of the *truth* or *reality* of Uta-napishtim's story. Rather, it is rendered inaccessible (Damrosch 1987:115). Uta-napishtim's name is qualified by *rūqi*: the Far-off, or the Distant. Even the place where he lives – beyond the Waters of Death – cannot be reached by any mortal. Gilgamesh was the last who had done this.

When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk together with Urshanabi, he boasts with the walls of his city as he walks around. Then he engraves his story on a stela to bear witness to all future generations. These are tangible, durable records of human constructions. In this way the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* becomes the story of the loss of myth and the gain of history (Damrosch 1987:118).

The omission of Siduri's counsel from the *Standard Version* is puzzling. In fact, it is such common sense (see George 2003:279; Abusch 1993:1; Tigay 1982:97; Thompson [now out of print] 1930:53). This advice corresponds remarkably with that of Qohelet 9:7-9. But for some or other reason Sîn-lēqi-unninni omitted the barmaid's piece of sound advice and common sense from the *Standard Babylonian Epic* and rather had Uta-napishtim give a long – almost philosophical -- lecture on wisdom towards the end of Tablet X.

George (2003:32) understands this omission as a deliberate intention of Sîn-lēqi-unninni to highlight the encounter between Gilgamesh and Uta-napishtim, thereby stressing the futility of the quest of the hero. However, Damrosch (1987:92) suggests that the omission of Siduri's counsel should be understood together with the addition of the *prologue* and the *epilogue*. The hedonistic trait of the barmaid's advice is de-emphasised, but a broader wisdom perspective is gained – wisdom of a serious reflective nature on life, culture and human history.

To summarise: the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* does not abandon the mythical tradition. It chooses to rework older material thereby redirecting the theme altogether. The distance between gods and mortals becomes separated temporally as well as spatially. On the walls of Uruk Gilgamesh realises that he is responsible for his life, his story – history if you will – within the real world of material culture.

5.2 The puzzle of Tablet VI

Why would any normal man reject the advances of a goddess – especially a goddess of love?

Damrosch (above) provided a possible explanation: the cosmic realms of above and below are better kept apart. Gods and mortals are not supposed to mix or intrude into each other's domains.

However, there seems to be another explanation. For Tzvi Abusch (1986:149) the answer is to be found in Ishtar's words as she proposes to Gilgamesh (VI:9 – Parpola 1997) :

attā lū mute''imu anāku lū aššatka you will be my husband, I will be your wife

These are the same words that Ereshkigal says to her future spouse Nergal who is to reign with her over the Netherworld: these are also the words of the demon Arad-Lili to a human female.

According to Abusch (above) this is a unilateral formulation: there is no mutual agreement between the partners. One decides and this decision implies finality and control. Furthermore, Ishtar's proposal is framed by likewise proposals from the Netherworld – thus, she is in fact inviting Gilgamesh to become part of the world that invites him, the world of the grim, spooky and colourless infernal regions.

Already the last Sumerian poem on Bilgames – *the Death of Bilgames* – assigns to the deceased the role of judge and ruler of the shades in the Netherworld (see *The Death of Bilgames: 'The great wild bull is lying down in this thesis*). This tradition is found elsewhere in other texts: Gilgamesh is called the 'ruler of the Netherworld' in an Old Babylonian copy of a Sumerian hymn to Utu (George 2003:127); in the *Death of Ur-Nammu* he is 'king of the Netherworld'. A cultic lament *Urummairrabi* groups Gilgamesh together with two other deities of the Netherworld: Ningishzida and Dumuzi (George 2003:128). But even more striking is a late Babylonian text that actually equates Gilgamesh with Nergal (George 2003:129-130).

Thus, Ishtar's proposal comes from the world below; she is inviting Gilgamesh into his tomb – into the world below. What she is promising him – a chariot of lapis-lazuli and gold that is drawn by demon-like mules (VI:10-12 - Parpola 1997) – have bearing on the funeral rites: these will transport him to his tomb (Abusch 1986:153). The fragrant odours of line 13 refer to the incense that form part of a funeral ritual (Abusch 1986:155). And the princes and nobles that will kiss his feet (VI:16 – Parpola 1997) are those inhabitants of the new world – the Netherworld that Gilgamesh is about to enter.

Ishtar is deceiving Gilgamesh. She is promising him everything she is revered for: honour, power, wealth, sex, fertility, as though these will be bestowed onto him whilst he is still living. Yet, the moment he accepts these gifts, he will be transferred to the Netherworld.

Abusch (1986:157) notes that *both marriage and death involve leaving one state and group and entering another, with the wedding and funeral facilitating the transition*. Here particular *rites of passage* are performed – wedding and funeral ceremonies seem to have more in common than one would like to admit. Marriage rites involve leaving one family to become part of another; so do funeral rites. Both *marriage* and *funeral* are part of Ishtar's proposal: if Gilgamesh does marry Ishtar, he will leave this world and enter into another via his tomb: the Netherworld (Abusch 1986:158-160).

Gilgamesh is no fool. He is understanding perfectly well that Ishtar is inviting him to take his position as ruler and judge of the Netherworld prematurely. But right now he is simply *too young to die*.

This interaction between Gilgamesh and Ishtar foregrounds once again the whole issue of mortality – or immortality, if you wish. This is what the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is all about. Yes, later on Gilgamesh will grapple with the realisation of the finiteness of life. Enkidu will become ill, he will die and be buried in tablet VII. From tablet IX Gilgamesh will venture on a long journey in search of life everlasting. Only in tablet XI, after his encounter with Utanapishtim, Gilgamesh will accept that his life-span is limited. And only afterwards, in tablet XII will Gilgamesh be ready to learn more of the Netherworld where he is about to take up a leading position in the future.

5.3 The puzzle of tablet XII

Abusch (above) suggested that tablet VI has in a way paved the way to tablet XII. In tablet VI Gilgamesh was not ready yet to accept the inevitability of his

death: after tablet XI he has come to terms with himself, life, death, and so forth, and is now ready to learn more about his future domain.

Nevertheless, Tablet XII of the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* has always been a contentious issue among scholars (see George 2003:50-52 for a survey of different opinions). The first eleven tablets form a neat and close unit – Tablet XII does not seem to belong, in fact, its addition seems quite unnecessary. Just as Gilgamesh accepts the death of his friend and starts to go on with his life again, the ghost of Enkidu is called up from the Netherworld to upset matters anew. Why?

In 1982 Tigay (:5) regards Tablet XII as an *inorganic appendage*, and even George in his 1999 edition (:100) considers this tablet as an appendix that is *no part of the epic at all*. However, this tablet is there and it would not go away, no matter how hard scholars try. And since 1999 George has done intensive research that brought him to some significant conclusions. What follows is a summary of a discussion in his latest edition on the *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (George 2003:47-54).

What is striking is that Tablet XII is almost a mechanical translation of the second part of the Sumerian poem of Bilgames and the Netherworld. This simply does not fit the picture of the creative genius Sîn-lēqi-unninni – or his earlier forerunner. The word order and the vocabulary are described as *plain and unimaginative* (George 2003:48). Furthermore, as it has been pointed out above, the plot is inconsistent. In the first six tablets the epic builds up to a climax, Enkidu dies at the end of Tablet VII. Gilgamesh grieves, he undertakes his futile search for life everlasting, and at the end of Tablet XI he realises that life is all about living meaningful here and now. Enkidu is dead and buried, life must go on. And suddenly, in the beginning of Tablet XII, Enkidu is alive and well and on his way to the Netherworld. For some or other reason another story is inserted with another explanation of how it had happened that Enkidu was seized by the Netherworld.

Tablet XII also puts the neat symmetrical division of Tablets I – XI under pressure. The first five tablets deal with establishing an everlasting name by means of heroic deeds: by defeating men, monsters and gods. The combat with Humbaba is the climax. Tablet VI marks the transition, the hinge as it was, the fatal overstepping of limits by the two heroes. They had pushed their luck too far. Ishtar was a goddess not to be defeated, and her pet, the Bull of Heaven was the monster not to be smitten. This sin was not to be forgiven. The antagonised gods retaliate by having one of the heroes die in the greatest shame and without offspring: Enkidu.

The next five tablets deal with Gilgamesh's grief and a different search for everlasting reminiscence: not only by means of a name, but by means of physical presence, by means of being alive forever. This is the motif of the next series of tablets. And then suddenly an appendix is added which simply does not belong.

Thus, there are three disturbing issues - language, plot and structure – that disqualify Tablet XII as part of the *Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Nevertheless, it was appended: when, and why?

Long before the time of Sîn-lēqi-unninni, during the eighteenth century BC, the Sumerian poem of Bilgames and the Netherworld was a popular exercise in scribal training (George 2003:49). Later on, during the first millennium BC most of the Sumerian canonical literature does not feature at all. George is convinced that Sîn-lēqi-unninni added Tablet XII to the *Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* during the Middle Babylonian Period – but once again, why only the latter part of the Sumerian poem, why did he do it so unimaginatively, or perhaps more perplexingly, why did he do it at all?

Perhaps the text itself holds the answer suggests George (2003:52). The second part of Tablet XII, the dialogue between Bilgames and the shade of Enkidu focuses on commemorative rites of mourning. These rites are supposed to be carried out at prescribed intervals after mourning, but more specifically, they are concerned with those who have died, leaving no descendants to perform the necessary commemorative rites. Enkidu was one of these unfortunate shades. Like an animal such a shade has to scavenge for food and drink because nobody cares for it. Thus, Tablet XII, a partial translation of the Sumerian poem on Bilgames and the Netherworld, stresses memorial offerings and the need for proper commemoration.

Memorial offerings and proper commemoration rites raise the question of the function of Bilgames/Gilgamesh in the cult. An Ur III tablet credits Bilgames for honouring his deceased parents and ancestors with the appropriate rites (see George 2003:53), and apparently since the latter part of the third millennium his symbolic presence was obligatory at rituals of burial and commemoration. But once again, Sîn-lēqi-unninni composed his *Epic* towards the end of the second millennium, and by this time language and cultural values certainly had changed. The question now is: did the original poem of Bilgames still have its original function? Did it have any use outside the scribal curriculum? Was it necessary at all to translate the original Sumerian poem on Bilgames and the Netherworld to be used later on in rituals of commemoration?

An explanation is to be found perhaps even later on. Towards the end of the eighth century Sargon II, now a king of the Neo Assyrian empire died in battle (ca 705 BC - see Kuhrt 1995:498). Alongside him many soldiers perished, many of them had no descendants, and their bodies were never recovered for proper burial: exactly the concern of Tablet XII (see also Schrott 2001:18). An Assyrian court scholar, Nabû-zuqup-kēnu (George 2003:49) immediately made a copy of Tablet XII as soon as the news of the tragedy reached him. Thus, it seems that even in the late period of Assyrian rule commemorative

offerings to appease unspecified and anonymous shades were not abandoned (George 2003:54).

The whole *Epic of Gilgamesh* centers on death and dying. The stark reality of the *Grim Reaper* confronts the modern reader as much as it did the pre-literate Sumerian society. Afterlife is but a hazy hope or hazard. Kings and paupers die alike. The quality of afterlife is determined by commemoration and proper burial rites: are you remembered, and will they do what is necessary?

The description of Tablet XII as an *eloquent reminder of the duties owed by men to their ancestral spirits* (George 2003:54) seems apt. But there are other possibilities.

A drama perhaps?

It may be that the entire series of twelve tablets was either sung or recited for ritual use, for example at funerals or in memorial cults, especially those of kings (George 2003:54). The Babylonian month *Abu*, the fifth month of the Babylonian year was specifically dedicated to Gilgamesh (George 2003:126; Schrott 2001:33). During this month, the month of the *festival of torches* (George 2003:126; George 1999:203; Schrott 2001:33) the legendary struggle between Gilgamesh and Enkidu was commemorated. Young men partook in wrestling matches in doorways, imitating the fight between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the doorway of the wedding house. These matches lasted nine days, nine days were also the conventional duration of the commemorative rituals that honoured the dead. Significantly, the very early Sumerian Poem on the Death of Bilgames refers to this activity: before his death Bilgames has a dream describing those rites that will be conducted by torchlight during the month *Abu*, during the *festival of lights*.

Schrott (2001:33-34) offers an interesting interpretation of this aspect of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and connects it to the seasons and the calendar of ancient Babylonia. His point of departure is the three months that designate summer: Dumuzi, Abu, and Ulul: these are June, July, and August.

During the month of Dumuzi the festival of the Sacred Marriage took place. The king acted as a substitute for the sacred gardener Dumuzi. During this festival offerings were brought to invoke the favour of the gods, especially fertility. The festival lasted two days and coincided with astrological planetary positions that indicated the end of winter and the beginning of summer. (Ancient Mesopotamia distinguished only two seasons, winter and summer.) The end of winter and the beginning of summer was determined by the day on which the sun rose for the first time in a particular zodiac sign – that of Taurus, also the constellation that is connected to Gilgamesh (cf Schrott 2001:13).

Schrott goes so far as to propose that the whole epic may have been a drama that was performed during the two days of the New Year's festival. The first part staged the struggle between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the trip to the Cedar Forest and ends with the lament over Enkidu's death. The next series pertain to a prolonged wailing: Gilgamesh's lamentation over the loss of his friend and the realisation of his own mortality. However, Schrott seems to jump a far distance when he connects the Babylonian month Ulul with the Greek ἀλαλή - a cry. This connection fires imagination but exceeds the limits of rational historical reflection: the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was composed long before the Greeks arrived on the cultural scene.

6. The place of the *Gilgamesh Epic* in academic circles

The *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* became known to modern scholars mostly from the discoveries made at Ashurbanipal's royal libraries in Nineve (George 2003:348; George 1999:xxvii). These tablets are called the

Kuyunjik tablets and remain the largest group of tablets that record the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. However, it is not as though Sîn-lēqi-unninni issued a master copy of his work that was duly printed and reprinted and distributed in the various outlets of the Ancient Near East. Just like the *Old Babylonian Epic*, the *Standard Version* also seems to have undergone changes. Also, towards the end of the second millennium the power and glory of Babylonia were declining and a new might was rising: that of Assyria (see Kuhrt 1995:473-501). The age of the Neo Assyrian Empire had dawned. And indeed, some Neo Assyrian manuscripts of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* differ considerably from the *Standard Babylonian Version* and seem to correspond rather to the *Middle Babylonian* one (see George 2003:31-32 for a full discussion of the extant variants). Thus, although there was a *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* (which one should never forget is a modern way of reference), this did not exclude the circulation of the other variant texts of the *Epic*.

At this point it may be informative to look closer at the scribal tradition of Babylonia from the second millennium onwards. Once again, the ancient tutors did not leave an exposition of their teaching curriculum with its standardised outcome based goals. What is left to the modern scholar is but damaged and scattered tablets that he or she has to struggle with, very much like struggling with a jigsaw puzzle of which most pieces are missing. One has to infer, deduce, make intelligent guesses on what little evidence one has at one's disposal (George 2003:35).

Most crafts in ancient Mesopotamia were traditional and passed on from father to son for many generations. Scribal art was no exception (George 2003:35). It appears that there were two phases in the training of a scribe (George 2003:35; Walker 1996:43-45). A student started by practicing the most elementary skills and performing less advanced exercises. These exercises were mostly copies of basic words or short sections of traditional literature. Thereafter he (scribes were mostly male) proceeded towards demonstrating that he had mastered the intellectual and academic demands

that were required from a scribe. He was requested to reproduce long tablets of whole literary compositions, or large sections of those. Most tablets that are recovered are the products of such a scribal education and were written out by boys for their fathers as proof that they were worthy of passing the scribal examinations (George 2003:37).

Before the eighteenth century the prescribed curriculum consisted mainly of traditional Sumerian texts (George 1999:xx). However, soon afterwards matters changed rapidly as Akkadian started to replace Sumerian as the spoken language, also by academics. And although Sumerian continued to form an important part in the scribal curriculum, Akkadian started to appear alongside Sumerian on the clay tablets of would-be scribes. These students were either improvising, memorising or copying episodes from Babylonian narrative poetry in the language they knew best: Akkadian. And the text that they selected and preferred for this exercise was Gilgamesh (George 2003:35).

Already in the fourteenth century the former power of Babylonia started to dwindle and other kings and countries dominated the eastern Mediterranean. The Late bronze Age saw the rise of the Egyptian New Kingdom and the Hittite Empire. Nevertheless, Akkadian continued to be the *lingua franca* of international communication of the region (George 1999:xxv). Both the Hittite king and the Egyptian Pharaoh conducted their international correspondence in Akkadian and the minor rulers of the Levantine coast and Syria likewise addressed their overlords in Akkadian (George 1999:xxvi) – although often spotted with local Canaanite and Hurrian idioms.

International Akkadian correspondence was conducted in the traditional manner: by means of cuneiform script on clay tablets. Therefore local scribes - whether they were Egyptian, Hittite, Canaanite, et cetera – also had to be trained in the traditional manner in order to comply to the international standard of composing letters, drawing up treaties and other documents of

their rulers. This standard was set according to the Babylonian scribal tradition with its lists, vocabularies and literature. Especially during this time, the Late Bronze Age, *Gilgamesh* was a popular exercise in the scribal schools of Syria, Palestine and Anatolia (George 2003:39). Also during this time the local versions in Hittite and Hurrian were composed.

Also the thirteenth century BC has some evidence for the popularity of *Gilgamesh* as a scribal exercise in learning centers of the West: those at Emar, Ugarit and Hattusa (George 2003:35). Apparently learner scribes were introduced to *Gilgamesh* fairly early in their training. A scriptorium excavated at Emar yielded texts of different genres: folk-tale, fable, wisdom sayings and literary texts. George (2003:35) concludes that texts, besides serving as an exercise for practicing writing skills, also had a pedagogical function.

School tablets from the first millennium illuminate the process of scribal training more clearly. At Babylon, Sippar, Kish and Uruk such tablets were recovered. Apparently a student in his first phase needed to master the basics: syllabary and lexicon, the essential pantheon, some proverbs and a very few literary texts (George 2003:36). Some of the literary texts were *the birth legend of Sargon, the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin, the literary letter known as the Weidner Chronicle, a literary letter of Samsuiluna, the Poor Man of Nippur and Gilgamesh*. Obviously young Babylonian children were enticed by exiting stories like those of Gilgamesh, Sargon and Naram-Sin and were introduced at an early age to oral versions of these heroes. The formal scribal curriculum appropriated this familiarity fruitfully.

As a student moved on to his secondary and more advanced phase of scribal instruction, he encountered more literary texts. But the Babylonian tablets of the first millennium reveal rather upsetting evidence. The usual exorcist texts, vocabularies and lexical lists were there, but literary texts were restricted to *Enūma eliš, Ludlul bēl nēmeqi, the Marduk prayers and Tintir* (Babylon) (George 2003:36). The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is very poorly represented. George

infers that texts of this period in Babylon had a twofold purpose: besides for preparing a student for apprenticeship as a junior *asipu* – a novice scribe – he had to be acquainted with the contemporaneous theology and political ideology of the capital. A young scribe needed to prove his practical skills, but by now he was also supposed to move on beyond the entertaining storytelling of the first phase. During the second phase a particular worldview was inculcated.

However, in Late Babylonia of the first millennium it was not only the *Epic of Gilgamesh* that failed the test for the second phase of scribal instruction. Many traditional texts such as *Etana*, *Adapa*, *Anzû*, *Nergal* and *Ereshkigal* do not feature even in elementary education. [Henrietta McCall (2001) provides good English translations of these myths as well as some other texts.] George (2003:36) believes that *this was not because they were unpopular, but they did not serve the pedagogical needs of the time.*

Thus, it seems that the traditional Babylonian texts were replaced by new ones to suit the ideologies of Babylonia. However, it also seems that these very texts were still copied out at other learning centers of the west and in Assyria. Towards the middle of the eleventh century – a time when also Sîn-lēqi-unninni may have lived – traditional Babylonian literature was standardised and canonised. Allegedly much of this was done by someone with the name of Esagil-kin-apli (George 2003:352). And although these texts declined in popularity in Babylonia soon after the turn of the millennium, they were duly copied out elsewhere in scribal schools, especially in the peripheral centers of Assyria. In these centers classical Babylonian texts survived. The provincial regions were by nature more conservative and tended to retain the old traditions. Many Babylonian texts that were copied during the Middle Assyrian Period found their way into Assyrian libraries of the seventh century BC, including the famous library of Ashurbanipal.

Thus, although the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is poorly represented on extant material from first millennium Babylonia, this is what one might expect. The minds of young would-be scribes had to be filled with other matters. Especially the second half of the *Epic* seems to be very rare. But this is exactly the part that had to be mastered by the more advanced students, therefore its limited appearance. Nevertheless, material from outside Babylonia indicated that *Gilgamesh* continued to function as an exercise in scribal schools. George (2003:39) states: *To sum up, I would maintain that in the late second and first millennium the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh had two functions in training scribes. It was a good story and thus useful, in small quantities for absolute beginners. And as a difficult classic of traditional literature it was studied at greater length by senior pupils nearing the end of their training. If its use in the formal curriculum of scribal education was limited this way, this does not necessarily mean that the poem was unpopular in wider circles.* Literate people seem to have enjoyed *Gilgamesh* to a considerable extent.

Remarks

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* had come a long way. It began as *light entertainment*. It survived a change of culture and language. It took on a new shape altogether. This final new shape will be examined in the following chapters: the *discourse* of the *Epic*.