Chapter Two

Sex for the City

Building Narratives

After two prologues that announce and partly describe the hero, an astonishing narrative opens with a portrayal of Gilgamesh in what may be called an oddly ambivalent way. It depends on who is viewing him. The citizens of Uruk complain that the great ruler is oppressing them, and they cry out to the gods for relief. On the other hand, one of the most interesting characters in *Gilgamesh* has only praise and admiration for Gilgamesh and his city. The character, an insider, a woman in the service of Ishtar, is surprisingly well-developed before she leaves the story. The woman is one among many female figures who are mentioned in the first two tablets. Intensely sexual, they are also carriers of wisdom. A woman seduces a creature in the wilderness, humanizing him and then by stages civilizes him. Like Ishtar herself, whom the First Prologue imagines as dwelling at the heart of Uruk, the woman in Ishtar’s service is the center of the story of Enkidu’s development as a human being. The story was recovered in Victorian times, and the frank sexuality of the Enkidu story was a problem for the first translators of *Gilgamesh*. It remains problematic for us today, though we profess to being liberated from Victorian hang-ups about sex. The story is deeply rooted in the culture of Sumerian Uruk, and by the time the Standard Akkadian version of the story was composed, it may already have been problematic for Mesopotamians outside the famous First City.

While the 11 (or 12) cuneiform tablets that make up *Gilgamesh* usually begin and end a series of episodes, the tablets themselves are divided into six columns of text. The first two tablets run to about 300 lines of poetry each, and they end with Gilgamesh already preparing for his first great adventure, the expedition against Humbaba. They are better read together, for reasons that I hope will become clear in this discussion. But inside the 600-plus lines are episodes that are narrated in unusual and remarkable ways.

The main lines of the Tablets 1-2 narrative are readily mapped, even though much of Tablet 2 has not been recovered. (It is regularly filled in with earlier Old Babylonian versions of the story.) Gilgamesh oppresses his citizens. They appeal to the gods, who create Enkidu and literally toss him into the wilderness, where he knows only the animals, mainly quadrupeds, whom he protects from intruders, i.e., humans. Ironically it will be Gilgamesh who figures out a way to deal with the problem Enkidu is causing; ironically, because his wise scheme will bring into the city the only one capable of challenging Gilgamesh’s power. A woman is sent out to meet Enkidu, entices him into having amazing sex with her, and then teaches him what he needs to know in order to enter the city. He confronts Gilgamesh. They fight and immediately become friends. Their intimate relationship changes everything for Gilgamesh. By the end of Tablet 2 Gilgamesh is ready to take on a task that will take three well-developed tablets to narrate: a journey to the mountain dwelling of Humbaba.
Within this larger narrative pattern the individual segments are filled with—to us—unusual narrative devices. We get a glimpse of the complexity by taking at first an indirect approach: the missteps taken by the 19th century CE translators who tried to make sense of the story.

From the first—counting either from the earliest Gilgamesh poems or from the earliest appearance of the hero in England in the 1870s—Gilgamesh was considered powerful enough and courageous enough to fight lions and bulls, including the fierce wild aurochs. A famous traveler in Iraq, Austen Henry Layard, noticed in the 1840s that lions were often encountered south of Baghdad. Whenever possible, Layard hunted “such noble game.” He already knew that ancient Mesopotamia celebrated the lion hunt as the great sport of kings. And he knew that wrestling was a great sport in ancient Iraq as it is today. The excavators at Mesopotamian sites could not resist depictions of heroes overpowering, especially wrestling, lions. One such representation shows a nude Gilgamesh fighting a bull while his companion Enkidu fights a lion.

![Image of Gilgamesh and Enkidu fighting a lion and a bull](image.png)

It threw off the earliest readers of *Gilgamesh* by suggesting that Gilgamesh would wrestle, not Enkidu, but a very special lion (or tiger), the *midannu*-beast. This tiny (3.6 x 2.3 cm.) cylinder seal would obscure the “primitive” character of Enkidu. One wonders, given the Victorian preoccupation with Darwinian evolution (not to mention our own interest in the subject) how important Enkidu’s rise from animal to human would have figured in the debate if George Smith had not considered Enkidu a “sage.” (The *midannu*-beast was Enkidu’s “pet.”)
Enter Enkidu—in the 1870s

The Enkidu readers of *Gilgamesh* know today is dropped into the wilderness, where he lives with the animals until a city woman seduces him and he must become first a man and then civilized before he can enter Uruk. There he challenges Gilgamesh, fights him and instantly becomes his friend. The first modern scholars to read the texts knew a very different Enkidu and, so, a very different *Gilgamesh*. 
It now appears certain that the story of a natural humanoid who becomes civilized was already pretty much set by the Old Babylonian period, early in the 2nd millennium BCE. The earliest Gilgamesh scholars knew how to read cuneiform Akkadian, but they did not possess the Old Babylonian texts, and they did not know the Sumerian language at all.

Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton (1851-1906) was twenty-one years old when a British Museum assistant, Mr. George Smith, spoke before the Society of Biblical Archaeology on December 3, 1872, and made public a literary work that caused immense excitement in England, on the Continent, and in the United States, a work that continues to fascinate us today. What George Smith called “The Izdubar Legends” and Hamilton called Ishtar and Izdubar, The Epic of Babylon, is, of course, our Gilgamesh.

What gave “The Izdubar Legends” such explosive force in mid-Victorian times was obvious at a glance: lines that described a great Flood. Smith is said to have become so excited as he read what is now the famous Tablet 11 that he began peeling off his clothes—in the British Museum. When he published his translations of Gilgamesh and the other Akkadian texts that had been recovered, his 1876 volume became The Chaldean Account of Genesis.

Perhaps no single text from antiquity had seemed as capable of shaking biblical faith in its foundations and with it, so it seemed, the very basis of Western Christendom. After seeing biblical literature exist for so long in a kind of historical vacuum, radicals and conservatives both, the devout and the skeptical, would have to account for this Mesopotamian document unearthed, literally, from the ruins of the ancient city of Nineveh.

The Flood was but one part, though, of a much longer work, a heroic poem that dealt with an ancient and great king of Erech (the biblical rendering of the Mesopotamian city Uruk, as we have seen), Gilgamesh, or as he was known then, Izdubar. When Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton, a widely traveled Boston attorney, scientist and businessman living in San Francisco, set about to write an epic poem, other considerations of the story of Gilgameh/Izdubar had come to completely overshadow story of the controversial Flood.

“We claim the poem as our own,” Hamilton maintained in the “Proemium” to the first edition of the epic that was the result of at least three years of very difficult work. Ishtar and Izdubar, The Epic of Babylon (1884) was that claim. In scope and ambition beyond what anyone had attempted before in dealing with ancient Mesopotamian materials, Hamilton’s epic should first be seen as something uniquely personal. Although Wordsworth and Whitman had brought the personal voice into modern epic-length poetry, Hamilton knew that the long history of epic literature in the West—from Homer to the contemporary English and American poets he so admired—favored the impersonality of the epic poet, with its dignified and detached admiration of the hero. Walter Houghton claimed that for all its hold on the Western imagination, hero worship is a nineteenth century phenomenon. At no other time were the models of the great man quite so prominent; at no other time did heroic myth and legend appear to defy the dilemmas of “modern man” in the intellectual crises of the age. Hamilton joins this
movement when he claims that “the earliest nations have all pointed with pride to their
national heroes and remote origin, and clothed with poetical romance their early history.”

Still the poet, though he does not intrude his own personal concerns in the process, is an
important part of the process. Indeed, he may be the only genuine cultural hero left for
the difficult modern age. The Romantic exaltation of the “bard” is a manifestation of this,
an idea Hamilton was well aware of: “and thus the oldest of all literature comes to us as it
was sung by the bards who stand amid the mists that sweep back over the illimitable past.”
To write of the past and to claim the poem as one’s own is possible in the paradox of the
“bard.” Fortunately, there is the voice of the poet in the epic, the voice of one who in the
poem’s “invocation” calls upon “Love! my queen and goddess,” whose “soul shall never
cease to worship thee.”

And there is a poet within the narrative, the seer, Heabani (our Enkidu today), whose
thoughts and feelings need not refer specifically to the Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton who
produced the work. The “bard” transcends the narrowness of the past. “While singing of
their own origin,” Hamilton comments on the “bards,” “they have mingled the longings
of a united humanity for that era when grief failed to darken the face, and tears knew not
their fountains;—the golden age, when joy and happiness flooded the soul of man, and
misery dwelt not upon the earth, for sorrow was yet sleeping in the bosom of eternity.”

Hamilton was fascinated that *Gilgamesh* was older by far than any work known in his
day, and that the mythology of the Babylonians was “the oldest of all history, and forms
the basis of the Roman and Grecian mythology.” Today one might challenge Hamilton
on both points, but it should be kept in mind that the ancient story had more than
antiquarian interest for him. The “bard” links the poet, struggling to bring his work to
light while working in San Francisco in the 1880s, traveling to New York and Boston and
abroad to London, examining the tablets in the British Museum, arranging details of
publishing his work, and the voice within the work, transcending time and revealing
humanity’s oldest thought.

It is well to keep this in mind, for Hamilton’s claiming the poem as his own has another,
more obvious reference. The trickiest part of Hamilton— and by the way, the justification
of the extensive annotation in this edition of his work—is his connection to and
dependence upon the Akkadian texts known in the 1880s. *Ishtar and Izdubar* is a
translation of *Gilgamesh* (and a great many shorter poems as well), a translation that is
doubtless more daring than any in Hamilton’s own day and outrageously daring in our
own, as can be seen in a comparison of any of a hundred passages in Hamilton with a
contemporary translation. We are fortunate in that Hamilton was quite clear about what
he used in composing his work, and that nearly all of that material is recoverable, as his
extensive notes show.

The cumbersome method used to reveal Hamilton’s translation was necessary because of
some peculiarities in the early work on the *Gilgamesh*. George Smith was the discoverer
of the tablets and their first translator, but others, most notably W. H. Fox Talbot, were
busy translating and commenting on the work at the same time. Hamilton drew on more
than one translator’s work. Unfortunately, the death of George Smith, that excitable and fascinating person still regarded by Assyriologists as a “genius” and sometimes a “martyr”—since he died on his third expedition to Mesopotamia, in 1875—came before Smith could prepare a publication giving the cuneiform texts and his transliteration of the cuneiform signs.

The cuneiform text was published for the first time just before Hamilton published his poem, too late for Hamilton to do anything more than admire Paul Haupt’s Das Babylonische Nimrodepos (Vol. 1, 1884). (Haupt believed, as some others have, that the biblical Nimrod is another name for Gilgamesh.) The publication of that work changed the face of Gilgamesh studies and, unfortunately for Hamilton, made Ishtar and Izdubar immediately obsolete as a scholarly work.

To complicate matters further, Hamilton did not use the first edition of George Smith’s The Chaldean Account of Genesis (1876) but a revised version of 1880, a revision by the foremost English Assyriologist of the day, Rev. A. H. Sayce. Sayce admitted that he did not have enough time to revise all of Smith’s work, and some of his revision is sketchy, some of it very full; he adds a few fragments and apparently could not find all of Smith’s tablets.

Hamilton’s use of a vast array of non-Gilgamesh poems was a very bold maneuver in his own day. No one else attempted then (or now) to combine “in one connected story...all of the sacred literature of Babylonia.” Certainly the scholar today shrinks from writing a poem that attempts “as far as possible to give a connected view of the customs, follies, religion, mythology, temples, palaces, and luxury of the great Babylonian nations.” But Hamilton attempted just such a synthesis in Ishtar and Izdubar.

There is a vast gap between that work as it is now read and Hamilton’s poem. Characters, episodes, and themes are transformed in Hamilton’s attempt to provide a unified story. The characters are probably the most obvious changes. In some cases an older reading of the name of a character causes an initial but minor problem: Enkidu is “Heabani,” Gilgamesh is “Izdubar,” and the monster Humbaba is “Khumbaba.” Such problems disappear readily. The sheer number of names that a modern reader is unlikely to recognize would seem to present a problem, but in spite of the great number of god names and spirits, Hamilton’s poem has few major characters. The great goddess Ishtar, the sun-god Shamash, the hero Izdubar, his companion Heabani and a small number of figures who appear in episodes and disappear, are presented by Hamilton in a coherent and unified narrative.

Of the lesser figures (Samkha, Kharimtu, Mua, Siduri and Sabitu, the god Tammuz, Khasisadra, and the enemy, Khumbaba), all were thought to be characters in the story, and some of the most (to us) amusing problems Hamilton faced concerned those figures that modern scholarship has since banished from the epic. Samkha and Kharimtu, for example, are not separate personalities but different terms for the temple woman who seduces the wild man into civilization. Shamhat, the harimtu. When Hamilton saw in the text two separate figures, he had to assign them different roles and different personalities.
(He even had to figure out what the more philosophical one, Kharimtu, might have been doing while the sensual one, Samkha, entered the “cave” of Heabani and made love to the “seer.”) Today the pairing of two titles that refer to classes of women in the service of Ishtar is still something of a puzzle. Hamilton was probably right in seeing that one had greater prestige than the other. The harimtu is sometimes thought to have been like the Greek hetaera or Japanese geisha, a refined and possibly educated companion, while the shamhatu was closer to a common prostitute. Translators today often resolve the problem by taking Shamhat (Hamilton’s Samkha) as the name of the woman who is a harimtu.

Similarly, the figure named Siduri, who appears in Tablets 9 and 10, is given the epithet sabitu, the owner of a tavern (some think of her as a barmaid)—better seen as the owner or manager of a tavern—but Hamilton followed George Smith and A. H. Sayce in again seeing two different women in the text. Again Hamilton faced the problem of dividing roles and personalities between them.

The Elusive Midannu Beast

There are even two conspicuous examples of characters (if a beast can for the moment be called a character) who appear merely because of a misreading of cuneiform signs. Hamilton has his hero fight the “midannu”-beast, supposedly the “pet” of Heabani. The “midannu”-beast disappeared from the epic when another fragment of the text came to light and showed that George Smith had simply read across the signs in the wrong way. Today Andrew George reads the line and the one above it in this way:

\[
\begin{align*}
  a-na-ku & \text{ lu-ug-ri-šum-ma da-an} \ x \ x \ x \ x \\
  [\text{[lul-tar?] - ri-ih ina libbi}(\text{šà}) \ uruk^\text{ki} & \ a-na-ku-mi da-nu \ (\text{Tablet 1.220-21})^\text{446}
\end{align*}
\]

Simo Parpola reads the lines in a slightly different way.

\[
\begin{align*}
  a-na-ku & \text{ lu-ug-ri-šum-ma da-an-} [\text{niš}] \ lu-qab-[bi] \\
  [\text{[lu-štar?] - ri-ih ina ŠÅ UNUG}^\text{ki} & \ a-na-ku-mi da-nu \ (\text{Tablet 1.203-204})^\text{447}
\end{align*}
\]

This is a fairly typical situation where, as often happens, some of the cuneiform signs in a line are missing and may or may not be recovered. Where George and Parpola have brackets, they have suggested filling the gaps in reasonable ways. Parpola suggests something for the end of the first line, while George leaves the gap in the text with some indication of the number of signs that would fill out the line: \(x \ x \ x \ x\). They number the lines a bit differently. Where George provides a transliteration of the phrase, “into the heart of Uruk,” \(\text{ina libbi uruk}^\text{ki}\), Parpola supplies only the signs themselves, one for “heart” and another for “Uruk” (the UNUG sign).

Even though George and Parpola disagree on a few readings, they both read the lines differently from George Smith’s reading.

Today there is agreement on the essence of these two key lines. The lines are very important in the development of the character Enkidu. Shamhat the harimtu has seduced
Enkidu. Sex between them has given him “reason” and “understanding,” even though it had weakened his ability to run with the herd he was living with. They run away from him, and he returns to the harimtu. She speaks to him, noticing his “beauty” (damqata), which is god-like (1.207). She describes the city, its temple and the gods Anu and Ishtar—and then Gilgamesh, who is “lording it over the menfolk like a wild bull,” as George translates the passage.448

Enkidu’s “heart,” now “wise,” is already seeking a “friend” (ibru).

It is probably important that Enkidu can think before he speaks, but the lines that produced the “midannu-beast” when George Smith read the text for the first time are now read as Enkidu’s first speech-act.

Enkidu’s brief speech includes a boast, the very essence of self-awareness and self-esteem, which is reinforced by the emphatic use, twice, of the person pronoun anāku. The personal pronoun is already understood in the verb form, so its presence indicates considerable force: “I, myself” will challenge Gilgamesh. I will boast that I am the mightiest one in Uruk and will change things are.

In a way, Enkidu is right. He may not actually defeat Gilgamesh in their wrestling match, but he will change his and Gilgamesh’s destiny.

George Smith saw nothing of this. He placed the fragments in Tablet III

A. H. Sayce’s edition of Smith’s book used the cylinder seal impression of a hero wrestling a lion as his frontispiece.

This seal impression was thought to be just one of many representations of a heroic human being holding, wrestling, or killing a lion. Whether any of these figures represent Gilgamesh has been much disputed. The tradition of heroes mastering lions is certainly older than the historical Gilgamesh.

More important for Hamilton’s reconstruction of the epic is the woman called “Mua,” who provides a love interest for Izdubar at the end of the work. “Mua” is the curious consequence of reading cuneiform signs that today are read as the beginning of a formulaic phrase, “When something of dawn appeared,” not as a character at all.

For Hamilton the hero of the story establishes his fame by rescuing the city of Erech from its enemies and fighting the “rival giant,” Khumbaba. Like epic heroes in The Iliad, Jerusalem Delivered, or The Faerie Queene, Izdubar--whom Hamilton identifies with both the biblical Nimrod and the Babylonian lawgiver, Hammurabi--was thought to be a real historical figure, one whose actions decisively change the imperial history of Babylon. (It was over this point that the first important conflict in interpretation of the Izdubar story occurred, with George Smith arguing for a historical figure behind Izdubar and Sir Henry Rawlinson seeing him as a solar deity.) Humbaba today is seen as a monster of the mountain wilderness, not as a rival warrior. And the perceived connection between Gilgamesh of Uruk (in the southern Sumerian lands) and Hammurabi of Babylon (a place of no importance at all in the time of the historical Gilgamesh more than five hundred
years before the rise of Babylon) soon disappeared from Assyriological scholarship. The Gilgamesh-Babylon connection today exists as a shorthand for the dialect of Akkadian thought to have formed Standard Written Akkadian, i.e., Standard Babylonian.

Like Perseus and St. George, he fights beasts and monsters. Izdubar is not simply the heroic warrior, though. He has a philosophical side as well. He searches for the meaning of existence, for the secrets beyond the grave, though it brings him incredible suffering. In The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic Jeffrey Tigay presented the evidence that the Standard Akkadian version of Gilgamesh added the emphasis to Gilgamesh’s search for wisdom by fronting an older, Old Babylonian Period narrative with a new prologue that explicitly named Gilgamesh as one who not only searched the world but found a bitter “wisdom” and wrote about his experiences.

Odysseus and Aeneas, of course, share much of Gilgamesh’s restless search that carries the hero beyond the waters of death, but one looks to medieval Eastern and Western love literature and more modern heroes for the third aspect of Izdubar, his interest in romantic love. From the very start, the love goddess troubles him. The love interest weaves in and out of the narrative, culminating in Izdubar’s final dilemma. At the end of the story he must choose between his love for Mua, the semi-divine daughter of the seer Khasisadra (now read Utnapishtim)—a woman who cannot bear to see the sufferings in the real world and decides against journeying back to Erech with Izdubar—and his duty as king, which requires him to rejoin the city.

The other major character who appears strikingly different than his twentieth-century counterpart is Heabani, companion to Izdubar. Because he felt he was on solid ground in assuming that Heabani (our Enkidu) was a seer, Hamilton expanded the role beyond anything to be seen in modern readings of Gilgamesh. Instead of a wild creature who must learn the ways of civilized man through a sexual initiation and then must win the affection of the hero in a hand-to-hand fight with the hero, Heabani rather is presented as a sophisticated poet/seer, a man rich in years of practical experience and deep in philosophical contemplation. Heabani voluntarily exiles himself from the world of men, from the city, and like a Romantic poet sings the praises of Solitude and Nature. He is capable of the heroic deed, though: witness the fight with the Bull of Heaven or with the dragons of death. It is Heabani even more than Izdubar who gives the poem its philosophical dimension. It is the profound poet who gives explicit utterance to the ambiguities of man’s fate. More like a Victorian “bard” than a Babylonian poet, perhaps, Heabani articulates the search for a faith that often resembles the cry of a Tennyson or an Arnold in a world of uncertainty.

In addition to different characters there are whole episodes in Ishtar and Izdubar that have at least a suggestion in the scholarship of his day but are wholly absent in the modern versions.

The heroic struggle against the Elamites is a case in point. In his “Proemium” and in numerous notes Hamilton, largely following the work of George Smith, presents evidence for the historicity of Izdubar and by extension the epic rescue of Erech that brings Izdubar
him fame. Khumbaba is drawn into the conspiracy against Izdubar by a further extension of evidence that is now out of favor entirely. Fights with the “midannu”-beast and with the dragons of death, Izdubar’s confrontation with Mam-mitu, or Fate—and even the narration of Heabani’s death as a consequence of the dragon fight—are additions which Hamilton made to the story, mainly to give the piece a unity that could not be established with any certainty given the fragmentary condition of the text in his day. He is characteristically bold in his additions, going far beyond the tentative suggestions of his contemporaries, but in even these cases the episodes had some suggestion in the text itself.

Immortality, the nature of the Otherworld, and Love are thematic concerns that dominate Hamilton’s poem, much as they dominate the work of many a late Victorian composer or writer. If the conclusions to these thematic concerns appear strikingly unlike Gilgamesh as we have come to know it—we see it as a poem of profound pessimism, its wisdom that of facing a world where is no permanence, a poem terrifying in its pictures of the world facing humans beyond death in which the joyless creatures eat dust and cannot see in the darkness—if Hamilton’s conclusions seem far too cheerful and optimistic, at least his sense of ambiguity and struggle seem close to the mark. The 1880s saw the struggle among the scholars to understand Assyrian and Babylonian ideas of justice, holiness, virtue, and especially the problem of immortality and the possibility of a glorious life hereafter for the good man. It was not until the 1890s that agreement came on these matters. If anything, Hamilton is more cautious, more searching and less ready to accept personal immortality than his contemporaries among the Assyriologists.

W. H. Fox Talbot was the one most insistent upon the fundamental optimism of the Assyrians and Babylonians on these matters. Others followed, like William St. Chad Boscawen, who used the very texts modern scholars use to show Mesopotamian pessimism in order to show how fully systematic and hopeful the Babylonians were. Hamilton was by no means the last to develop the question. He saw the philosophical positions reflected in the narrative, far beyond what his contemporaries had, though. Again and again his hero and companion fall into despair only to be rescued by the “light.” He even interpreted Papsukal, a messenger god mentioned in “The Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World,” as a personification of Hope—and introduces Papsukal into the hero’s descent into the world of death.

If Hamilton's cultural progressivism and the search for the perfect poetic form is apt to make Hamilton a man of his time, one feature of his work is certainly close to interests that are especially intense in American literature today: the use of myth. In his own day Hamilton was closer to the English poets, especially the Pre-Raphaelites in the thoroughgoing use of mythic motifs, than, say, to the American realists of the 1880s. Hamilton's use of the Tammuz myths is the most important in Ishtar and Izdubar. Long before Sir James Frazer determined to show the ubiquity of Venus and Adonis stories and rituals in the ancient world, Hamilton took the bold step of seeing the Tammuz/Adonis myth as the chief unifying feature in the epic of Izdubar. The reason for Ishtar’s descent to the Underworld, which was thought to be an integral part of the Izdubar story, was not
clear to Hamilton's contemporaries. George Smith had thought she had entered the world of the dead, not to bring back her lover, Tammuz, but to seek vengeance against Izdubar for refusing her love. Only Hamilton continued Ishtar's story in a beautiful song on the power of love as the redeeming feature of the work, and only Hamilton related the descent so clearly to the search for immortality.

Even more shocking is Hamilton's subtle transformation of Izdubar's story to approach the condition of Tammuz. In an advertisement announcing a so-called “second volume” of *Ishtar and Izdubar* (also mentioned in the “Proemium”), Hamilton hinted that what is implicit in the ending of *Ishtar and Izdubar* would become explicit in the “second volume.” Izdubar would once again have the occasion to refuse Ishtar's love, and he would be sent to the Underworld where he would become, like Tammuz, “King of Hades.” The final transformation would be a reconciliation with Ishtar and a “translation” from Hades to the world of bliss, which he would share with Ishtar. The cleansing of Izdubar by Khasisadra and the love between Izdubar and Mua are the elements of the pattern of Tammuz's descent into the Underworld and his rescue by Ishtar's love. There is a personal survival of Izdubar promised in his final “translation,” though, that goes beyond the Tammuz story.

**The Tiger**

George Smith and A. H. Sayce placed the *middanu*-beast in Tablet III. They knew that Gilgamesh (“Izdubar”) had sent a woman to entice Enkidu (“Heabani”). Actually he had sent *two* women to urge the sage Heabani to leave his cave. The early translators knew that Heabani ate food with gazelles and drank with beasts and “creeping things of the waters,” but since they had not imagined Heabani as a “primal” human, a creature of the wilderness, they saw him more like the wise Green One of the Qur'an Sura 18, a figure more sagacious than the greatest of the biblical prophets, Moses. And since the translators thought there were two women, one a seducer, “Samkhat,” and the other a companion and advisor, “Kharimtu,” they developed a scenario in which Gilgamesh schemed to bring Enkidu into the city.

(When John Gardner and I translated *Gilgamesh* the prevailing notion was that the text referred to one woman who was identified by two professions. She was both a *shamhatu* and a *harimtu*, something like a “voluptuous” one and what Americans call an “escort.” It is difficult to find modern non-pejorative terms for the classes of women in the service of Ishtar. The first term, which is still considered a lower class title, more like “whore,” is now thought to be a personal name, Shamhatu (now generally read Shamhat). That still does not clear up the question of combining the personal name with a rank that was considered higher than *shamhatu*.)

For Smith and Sayce the first woman does entice Heabani out of his cave. (They were too much the Victorians to actually translate the sex scene, noting only that certain lines were devoted to “the actions of the female Samkhat and Heabani.”) And Kharimtu does escort him to the city.
Because Smith and Sayce did not see Enkidu as the primitive creature who would challenge Gilgamesh in the city, they read the last line of column iv, “I will meet him and see his power,” as anything but a boast of Enkidu’s power. Since they envisioned him as an old wise man, they saw nothing special in Enkidu speaking, which we now emphasize because it is his first use of language. For Smith and Sayce there would have been no reason to educate Enkidu.

The key line opens column v. “I will bring to the midst of Erech [Uruk] a tiger.” The rest of the column was too broken for Smith and Sayce to see how this turned out.

[See “Illustrations”: Fig. 29: (George 2003 columns iv and v, Plates 45 and 44).]

Gilgamesh Oppresses Uruk

The “evolution” of the Gilgamesh story can be glimpsed in one simple example. The people of Uruk cry out for relief from the “oppression” of Gilgamesh (lines 1.63-91). What this “oppression” consists of is much debated. One of the gods hears the complaints and takes action. (The gods will create Gilgamesh’s rival and friend, Enkidu.) Unfortunately for us the name of the god cannot be read on the tablet. “The god [     ] listened to their complaint” (1.76). In the blank, where a word is missing, almost everyone fills in the name, Anu, the sky god. An earlier version even includes a four-line speech that may be the response of Anu. (The god in not named in the four lines.) For whatever reason, Gilgamesh drops those lines. While it is reasonable that the high god Anu would intervene, it is still possible that another god is responsible for the response. If we keep in mind that the city, Uruk, in the Standard Gilgamesh is identified as the city of Ishtar, and earlier versions sometimes identify the city as the dwelling of Anu and Ishtar, it is possible that our Gilgamesh is effacing Anu from this episode. We await more discoveries to decide the case.

After the two prologues in Tablet 1, which establish the major themes of the story as a whole and describe Gilgamesh as a great hero and king, the narrative begins (in line 63) with what is usually called The Oppression of Uruk. Gilgamesh is the problem and, ironically, develops a plan that will bring about a solution.

Exactly how the king oppresses his people has been a matter of much controversy. Gilgamesh keeps the young men of the city exhausted with unending contests of some sort. The young men are kept from their fathers. At the same time Gilgamesh does not allow the young women to return to their mothers (and possibly the married women to their bridegrooms). This suggests that Gilgamesh tyrannizes over the people by exaggerating his roles as a military commander and as the “lord” (en) who sexually initiates brides before they cohabit with their bridegrooms. While the details of the oppression of Uruk are not entirely clear, this version differs from the earlier, Old Babylonian, versions of the story.
Gilgamesh in Action

After two prologues that characterize the hero, the narrative begins in earnest with a very brief view of Gilgamesh active in his city. The passage is surprisingly short and unspecific given that the consequences for the story are so great. No sooner is he introduced but Gilgamesh is seen as oppressing his people. They cry out for relief. The gods hear their pleas, and soon Enkidu is brought into the story.

He is renowned for his beauty (1.59-62). Anticipating lines that will describe Enkidu, Gilgamesh is said to have locks of hair growing thickly like the goddess Nisaba. One small detail does not appear in the description of his friend: Gilgamesh is bearded.

In Uruk, though, he goes about “the sheepfold,” the epithet that characterizes the city in the Standard Version of Gilgamesh, but he is, in Andrew George’s phrase, “lording it like a wild bull, [head] held high.”

Immediately there is a problem. The exact details have vexed scholars from the beginning. I suggest that it is a problem that involves more than anything else, his gargantuan libido.

The passage in question is supported by two texts. Andrew George reconstructs the Akkadian in this way.

\[ i-na \, su-pu-r[u] \, šá \, uruk^{ki} \, šu-ú \, it-t[a-na-lak?] \]
\[ uγ-da-áš-šá-ár \, ri-ma-niš \, šá-qu-ú \, re-[e]-[šú] \]
\[ ul \, i-ši \, šá-ni-nam-ma \, te-bu-ú \, giškakkū \, (tukul) \, [meš-šú]\]
\[ ina \, pu-uk-ku \, te-bu-ú \, ru-ù'[u]-[šú] \]
\[ [ú-ta]-ad-[da]-ri \, etlūtu(guruš)\, meš-šá \, uruk^{ki} \, ina \, ku-k[i-ti] \]
\[ ul \, ú-maš-[šar] \, [d]GIS-gim-maš \, màra(dumu) \, ana \, ab[i(ad)-šú] \]
\[ [ur-r']a \, ū \, [mu-š]i \, i-kád-dir \, še-r[iš] \]
\[ [dGIS-gí]m-maš \, š[arru(lugal)]?(…) \, niši \, rapšāti?] \]
\[ [šu-ú] \, re'[ùm(sipa)-m]a!? \, šá \, uruk^{ki} \, su-p[u-rí] \]
\[ [ul \, ú]-ma[š-šar \, [dGIS-gí]m-maš \, màrtà \, ana] \, [ummi(ama)]-[šá] \, (1.63-72) \]

The brackets enclose cuneiform signs (and parts of signs) that have been restored even though they can no longer be seen on the tablet. In the “sheepfold” that is Uruk Gilgamesh goes about like a wild bull, his head raised high. He also raises his weapons. (Note again the pattern of high/low figures.) The men of the city are “raised” as well, as George puts, “kept on their feet.” Why? They have something to do with a pukku.

The meaning of pukku is still, as we shall see, much debated. George takes it as a ball. George envisions the men (“heroes”) vexed because they are being forced to play a game
Incessantly. And they are kept from their fathers. Gilgamesh will not allow them to go free—to their homes.459

There are several gaps in the text, and a key line is reconstructed by George to read, “Day and night he behaves with fierce arrogance.” There is consensus among scholars that, even if this line has to be adjusted somewhat in light of textual evidence that may appear in the future, Gilgamesh is acting in an arrogant and capricious way. And he is not only king but—picking up an old metaphor for “king” appropriate to the city which is a “sheepfold”—he is also a “shepherd.”

Balancing the ill treatment of the young men is Gilgamesh’s treatment of the young women of the city. Gilgamesh will let no daughter go free to her mother.

The people react by appealing to the gods. As the charge against Gilgamesh is repeated, in at least one instance the treatment of the women appears to change: Gilgamesh will not allow a girl to go to her bridegroom (line 91 and possibly line 77).

The gods will create Enkidu as a rival to the tyrannical Gilgamesh.

The references to fathers and mothers allows for the possibility that there is conflict between the traditional family and the roles men and women play as “citizens” of Uruk. Much of the text writes out the Akkadian words, but some signs (logograms) use Sumerian words that are meant to be read in Akkadian. Among them is the sign read _dumu_ (offspring, with no indication of gender), to be read as _māra_, that is, “sons.”

Other logograms in the passage are the terms used for king, _lugal_ and _sipa_ (“shepherd”); for father (aad) and mother (ama); for the able-bodied workers who were periodically called into military service (_gurush_); and the weapon wielded by Gilgamesh (_tukul_).460

**How Gilgamesh “Oppressed” His People**

The description of Gilgamesh and his city given by the _harimtu_ to Enkidu as he is being civilized casts light on the issue of the king’s oppression of his people that gave rise to the birth of Enkidu in the first place. Neither the Standard Akkadian _Gilgamesh_ nor the earlier Old Babylonian versions provide enough details about the way he oppressed his people, and so much is made of the close parallel in the Sumerian story, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and The Netherworld.”461

The “Pennsylvania” Old Babylonian version (P) is fragmented at the point where the _harimtu_ seems to be pointing out Gilgamesh’s oppression of the people (P213). A man running by tells Gilgamesh that the king cohabits with the woman before the husband does (P217), and Uruk is in the midst of a festival in which like a god Gilgamesh embraces the goddess of weddings, Ishhara. The Yale Old Babylonian text ignores the first of these characterizations. There the _harimtu_ appears to be telling Enkidu that in Uruk Gilgamesh will embrace Enkidu like a wife, and they will love each other. The man who is running by is hastening to a festival in the city where, similarly, the king will cohabit with the bride before the bridegroom has his chance.462
Gilgamesh, then, is consistent with the Old Babylonian tradition in portraying an oversexed king whose conduct is alarming to at least some of his citizens.

The closest Sumerian parallel, on the other hand, sets the oppression in a different context and suggests a rather different problem facing the community. In “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” (which provided the text for Tablet 12 of Gilgamesh) helps the goddess Inanna by ridding her favorite tree of several creatures that had attached themselves to it: a snake in the roots, the dreaded Anzu bird in its branches, and a young demoness that had taken up residence in its trunk. Gilgamesh cuts down the tree and gives the wood to Inanna. The trunk is made into the two pieces of furniture that are found in the literary tradition as having been positioned in the most sacred part of her temple, the storehouse: a bed and a throne. Gilgamesh retains the roots and branches, from which he makes two implements, a pukku from the base or roots and a mekkû from the branches.

The nature of these two objects has been debated for many years. The details are not that important for our analysis here. Douglas Frayne considers them a ball and stick used for playing a game in the city square. Whatever the activity may be, Gilgamesh obsessively drives the young men of the city to distraction. Frayne sees Gilgamesh riding piggyback on the young men from dawn to dusk, then taking up the game again the next day (134). The people complain, and as a result the two objects are lost to Gilgamesh: they fall to the floor of the Netherworld. More seriously, Enkidu, who offers to bring them back, is captured by the Netherworld itself, a portrayal of his death that is quite different from what we read in Gilgamesh 7—but described in the Akkadian translation of the Sumerian in Tablet 12.

What is most significant about the Sumerian version of the story is that it shows Gilgamesh violating the most sacred and traditional duties of a Sumerian king. The victims of this crazy play are not, as they are in Gilgamesh, young men and women in incessant partying. Rather they are specifically orphans. They groan under (literally) the weight of the king upon their backs. The men who have a mother or sister are partly spared, since they have someone to provide them with bread and water during the day. The orphans, however, have no one. Significantly, two groups complain about the situation, widows and young girls.

Even if this were somehow to be construed as a euphemism for sexual activity, the emphasis falls on Gilgamesh oppressing the very people who in a kinship-based society are in greatest need of protection: widows and orphans.

In contrast, the Akkadian versions show a Gilgamesh who loves to party, and whose activities, though they alarm the parents of young men and women, are attractive to the harimtu and, presumably, to Ishtar. The problem is not so much the kind of behavior that Mesopotamian society may have sanctioned during the religious festivals of the year; rather it is the compulsive, excessive, and, dare I say manic, behavior of Gilgamesh, not his violation of the norms of kingship that causes the gods to bring relief to the people.
The “oppression” of Uruk is prelude to the two heroic activities that made Gilgamesh and Enkidu famous, their defeat of the monstrous Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven. I shall skip over the details of these adventures, which take up fully four and a half tablets of our eleven (or twelve) tablet poem. It is worth mentioning, though, that Gilgamesh, fresh from his wrestling match with Enkidu, at whose conclusion they become the best of friends, is excited about the possibility of his making a name for himself by defeating Humbaba. Enkidu, who knows about Humbaba, is cautious, as are the elders of the city, but Gilgamesh is not to be denied. Once the dangerous journey to the mountain begins, however, Gilgamesh increasingly loses his excitement and at every stage seeks out the will of the gods in the form of dreams sent from the deity who has prompted the adventure and who protects him along the way, the Sun God, Shamash. By the time the men actually engage Humbaba, Gilgamesh has to be prodded by Enkidu to kill the monster. The ethical dilemma facing Gilgamesh is a very important part of the story, but I want to mention the other side of it. Gilgamesh has lost the inner fire that propelled him to the moment. And the victory over Humbaba is striking in giving no account of the joy the heroes might have been expected to express.

The expression of joy, indeed the moment of greatest joy for Gilgamesh comes in the brilliant account of the victory over The Bull of Heaven. This occurs at the very center of Gilgamesh.

Both the oppression of Uruk and the solution to the problem involve a view of sexuality and its importance to an Urukean understanding of “civilization,” ideas that to many seem very foreign to the modern West.

When the women of the city complain to the gods, the gods listen to their complaint and devise a solution to the problem: the creation of Enkidu.

The Creation of Enkidu

Women complain and goddesses respond, indicating empathy for the youths who are dominated by the “wild bull” Gilgamesh (1.92-104).

Unnamed gods call upon the Mother Goddess Aruru to create a human being in “his” (presumably the Sky God Anu’s) image. The idea is to have the creature, Enkidu, fight with Gilgamesh in order to bring peace and quiet (lishtapshih) to Uruk. This Aruru accomplishes by bringing the image (zikru) of Anu into her heart. Note that the creative process involves a masculine and feminine element. Anu and Aruru, male and female, contribute to the new creature. Aruru then washes her hands, pinches off clay, and throws it down into the wilderness.

Enkidu as Everyman

How useful is it to think of human beings as they must at first have emerged, or as we might say, evolved. Medieval England had a notion of “Everyman,” and wrote plays about the first humans. Of course, being Christians, they thought the first man was a person named Adam, as he is named in the Old Testament. There were plenty of stories of Adam
and his partner Eve, of their formation and life in the Garden of Eden, of their Fall and Original Sin, as the famous thinker St. Augustine described it. They paid more attention to these stories from Genesis than they did the first references to the new creature in the story of Creation that opens the first book of the Bible.

God said, “Let us make man in our own image (tselem), in the likeness (demuth) of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts, and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth.”

God created man in the image of himself,

In the image of God he created him,

Male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:26-27) 465

The idea that humanity was created somehow in the “image” of God has been interpreted over the centuries in more ways that can be identified in a short book, let alone a few pages on the character in Gilgamesh who most approaches the First Man, Enkidu. The Hebrew word for image here, tselem, is used almost exclusively in a negative way in the Hebrew Bible, since it usually refers to the “idols” that were forbidden. But taken in a positive way, as something that links humans and the divine by an essential resemblance, the “image” of God was of great interest whenever the Bible as taken up—and still is.466

Most thinkers ignored the ambiguity in that the first “man,” that is, human being (adam) is said to be both “male” (zakar, but not ish, in this part of the story, ish being the usual term for an individual male) and “female” (neqebah). The more familiar story, the one even today told to young children, of God putting the man into a deep sleep and taking the woman (ishshah) out of him (ish) (Genesis 2:23). A similar ambiguity appears in the older Mesopotamian traditions of a First Human.

In the older versions of Gilgamesh stories, the companion of Gilgamesh, Enkidu, is first a slave, then later a companion of the great hero. (If the “Amaushumgalanna Hymn” is about Gilgamesh it may be noteworthy that in the very earliest references to Gilgamesh no companion to his adventures is mentioned.)

In this later Gilgamesh Enkidu is not only the one who becomes the great friend and companion of the hero, the one so mourned by Gilgamesh when Enkidu dies, but he is described interestingly enough as “human” and the very essence of primordial humanity. The Akkadian poet borrowed a term from Sumerian, lú-ux-lu, that is, man (lú) as he was in the beginning, and he even reinforced it by inventing a compound, lullû-man. (A Sumerian balag composition, BM 86535.Obv.112 refers to the primal humans, na-âm-lú- lu₆, in a context where humankind appears to be coveting the me-ti, the me “of Life.”) The second part of this compound, amēlu, is the normal Akkadian term for human being, humankind. Hence Enkidu is from the start of the poem what the medieval West knew as Everyman, or Mankind.

The compound, lullû-amēlu, is very unusual. It appears to be a “literary” word, shows up only in Gilgamesh (and there only twice, in 1.168 and 10.323; elsewhere in the poem
Enkidu is called simply *lullû*, 1.86.1, 1.161, 175). The only closely related term is found in
the important Akkadian poem usually called “The Creation Epic,” *Enuma Elish* (VI.7).

“The Creation Epic” narrates the formation of a creature to relieve the great gods of their
labor. The word *lullû* itself is unusual in Akkadian literature. In addition to *Gilgamesh*
and “The Creation Epic,” it has been found so far only in the other great poem about the
creation of humankind, *Atrahasis*.

Before we look at the connection between Enkidu and Everyman in *Gilgamesh*, it is worth
seeing the way the *lullû* is formed in the other two poems.

*Atrahasis* is a story of repeated attempts by the King of the Gods, Enlil, to destroy
humankind. First Plague, then Famine, and finally the great Flood are sent to completely
wipe out the human race. At the beginning of the poem, before humans were on the scene
at all, the gods themselves had their problems. The high gods ruled over the lesser gods
with an iron fist. The lower gods were forced to work digging and maintaining the canals
without which the gods would not be fed. Even today in Iraq the canal engineer is often
the most important person in the town or village, for the distribution of water, especially
from the Euphrates River, is essential for survival. At any rate the gods worked night and
day in backbreaking labor for 3600 years before they rose up against Enlil. The great god
is furious, of course, that the rabble was threatening him.

The rebellion is crushed, but the crafty god Ea (or Enki, his Sumerian name) comes up
with a plan to save the rebels—as he later will when Enlil sets about killing human beings.
The plan is to create a mortal who will bear the work of the gods. Whatever else the
Akkadian poets and theologians may have thought of humanity, they agreed that, quite
Unlike the biblical stories of creation, where humanity is the capstone of the creative
process and is established on earth to be masters of the animals, Mesopotamia considered
humans essentially as mortal and as formed for the specific purpose to doing the work of
the gods, so that the gods might live in leisure (and peace).

The process turns out to be complicated. The high gods turn to the Mother Goddess
(called variously Belet-ili, Mami, and Nintu) to create human offspring. She defers in the
task to Ea, the god “who makes everything pure.”467 She will do what the gods wish if Ea
gives her the clay to do it. Ea sets up a purification ritual on the first, seventh, and
fifteenth of the month. One god will be slaughtered, and “the gods can be purified by
immersion.”

“Nintu shall mix clay
with his flesh and his blood.
Then a god and a man
Will be mixed together in clay.
Let us hear the drumbeat forever after [the heartbeat?],
Let a ghost come into existence from the god’s flesh,
Let her proclaim it as his living sign,
And let the ghost exist so as not to forget (the slain god).”468
Ea’s plan is rather tricky in the details. In addition to the heartbeat, humans will have an \textit{etemmu} or spirit that will live on after death. As we shall see, the persistence of the \textit{etemmu} will not encourage the Mesopotamian people to think of death as an escape from one life into a better one. The images of the afterlife for humans are almost universally dreadful. One does look with favor on the dreaded, if inevitable fate.

Still, the spirit attests to the origins of humankind in a combination of the divine and the human.

The gods do as Ea orders. They slaughter one of their own, a certain Geshtu-e, a god “who had intelligence.” His flesh and blood are mixed with clay by the Mother Goddess. When she reports the successful completion of her work, the Mother Goddess reiterates that she has relieved the hard work of the gods by forming the creature, but she adds—in a way that seems the gods do not notice—that the gods have “bestowed noise” on humankind. For her part she has “undone the fetter and granted freedom.”

The gods take this to mean that they are now free of their anxiety, and they kiss her feet. Even her name will be exalted as the Mistress of All Gods. Her last words will, however, come back to haunt them. There is still a great controversy about what the “noise” the gods have given to human beings might be. But the “noise” will bring on repeated attempts to wipe the creatures out. The word \textit{rigmu} does mean “noise.” But it also has a range of meanings from “voice” and “sound” to “thunder” and “complaint.” It is also used for the wailing and lamentation for the dead. No doubt the Akkadian poet was exploiting the multiple meanings of this key word.

The process of creating humankind is not, however, complete at this stage. An elaborate ritual is described. Into a “room of fate” Ea and the Mother Goddess gather certain “womb-goddesses.” In the presence (apparently) of the Mother Goddess Ea “trod the clay” while she kept reciting an incantation. Then she “pinches off clay,” seven pieces on the right, seven on the left. Between them she puts down a mud brick. She makes use of a reed to cut the umbilical cord. Seven males and seven females are born. The appear, two by two, before her.

The Mother Goddess then establishes rules for childbirth. Among the rules are one that the mud brick will be put down for seven days. A midwife will play an important role in the process. The mother of the baby will sever herself.

The detail is quite interesting, especially in view of the possibility that the author of \textit{Atrahasis}, Nur-Aya, may have been a woman herself and interested in the many complicated relationships between male and female in Mesopotamian society—as people are today. Interestingly, the Mother Goddess lays down a rule not only for childbirth but a principle that must have been as important in Old Babylonian times as it is today. It is mentioned twice, for emphasis: “A wife and her husband choose each other.” Since we tend to assume that marriages in the ancient Middle East—and in the Middle East today—were usually arranged by the families, the emphasis on the consent of women and men is
of a piece with the careful pairing of male and female. What was united in the new *lullû* emerges as double (and presumably equal) in its complete transformation.

In “The Epic of Creation” the great god Marduk—who becomes King of the Gods for his courage in defeating the ultimate force of evil in the universe, Tiamat—communicates a clever idea to his father, the crafty Ea. His plan is to “put blood together, make bones too.” The “primeval man” will change the ways of the gods; they will live at leisure, and they will be united, though they exist in two camps.

To form such a creature, Marduk’s father Ea suggests that they find a person guilty of a crime against the gods, execute him, and create humanity from him. A certain Qingu, offspring of Tiamat, is accused of starting the war against the gods. He is found guilty and his blood is “cut off.” Humanity is created from Qingu’s blood.471

[See “Suggested Illustrations”: Fig. 29: Schematic “Life of Enkidu”]

**Miniatures**

The first sign of “civilized” life in ancient Mesopotamia is the large brick building constructed on a high terrace also made of brick. The city-states that are the hallmarks of Sumerian culture in what is now southern Iraq were very visible because of these central structures. By convention we call them “temples,” although it is not altogether clear that they operated like the temples we know from antiquity, especially Israelite and Greek buildings. Mesopotamians called them “houses.” Even a very large city like Uruk survived for many centuries without the defensive city walls that provide a second obvious sign of civilization, i.e., organized warfare and warlords in their “Great Houses” or palaces.

Elsewhere the genius of the Sumerians is evident in things done on a small-scale. I think in particular the great achievements in art, especially in the cylinder seal, which appears to have been invented in Uruk. The hand-held clay tablet, which the Sumerians themselves boasted of inventing—writing “wedge-shaped” characters with a stylus on clay—was a much greater achievement than its modern counterparts, ipods, PDAs, cell phones, and especially tablet computers that allow us to tap into the Internet, watch movies, play video-games, listen to music, and communicate with people all over the world—not to mention the reading of books.

I do not know if the medium determined it, but much of Mesopotamian writing is in what I would call miniatures, small forms like the ubiquitous invoices that are found almost everywhere, poems, ritual texts, and stories. As the centuries rolled on, the miniatures were collected into works that sometimes ran to hundreds of tablets: lists of officials, catalogues of omens, astronomical observations and the like. We usually like to call *Gilgamesh* an “epic,” as if it were written on the scale of the *Odyssey* (though not the *Mahabharata*), but no Mesopotamian called it that. When the different short stories of *Gilgamesh* were collected into a standardized “series,” it was not altogether obvious that
they constituted a coherent, unified story like the so-called “Babylonian Creation Epic,” Enuma Elish.

A great many careful readers of Gilgamesh in our own era have found the different stories to cohere very beautifully. I will argue that its architectonics are surprisingly rich, and the more we look at the work the more complex, though ordered, it appears. But I want to emphasize that we are often dealing with miniatures that have been tied or bonded together.

There is a moment in the Sumerian story of the Bull of Heaven, a version of which I will argue has been carefully placed in the center of our Akkadian Gilgamesh, where a poet/storyteller/“minstrel” (as the translator Douglas Frayne refers to the nar in the court of Gilgamesh) picks up his lyre and sings a song. The whole “epic” runs to a little more than 180 lines of poetry. The nar, whose name is Lugal-gaba-gal, sings a 9-line story:

The goddess Inanna has brought down the Bull of Heaven from the sky,
It eats up the green plants of Uruk,
It drinks up the water of the Agilu canal.
Though the Agilu canal reaches a double league in length,
Its thirst is not quenched.
It eats the green plants and strips the earth bare,
It crushes with its teeth the felled date palms of Uruk.
As the bull stands there, it fills Uruk.
The fearsomeness of the Bull of Heaven fills Kullaba.

We do not know if this is typical of a court poet in Sumerian times. Even the scop or “maker” inside Beowulf tells longer tales. We know that oral storytellers in many cultures are in such control of the “shape” of their stories that they can expand or contract them depending on the circumstances. When my wife and I lived in Morocco, we observed storytellers slipping into crowds at festivals and even in the public market, and depending upon the interest of the people they attracted, they developed their stories or curtailed them and moved on. There is an Egyptian specialist in the “epic” story known as the Sirat Banu Hilali whose recorded retellings of the story ran anywhere from one or two hours to more than twenty-four hours! (The record seems to be 96 hours, but that is just what has been recorded on tape.)

Lugal-gaba-gal’s short poem is actually an almost identical repetition of lines from the Bull of Heaven story in which he is a character.

**Two Views of Enkidu: Tablet 1, Lines 105-112 and 113-133**

Mesopotamian poetry often makes use of repetition. When the repetition is exact, the poetry, even in a language other than Sumerian, echoes the patterns that are very prominent in Sumerian poetry. This may be a conscious way a poet writing in Akkadian emulates—showing respect for—a very ancient literary tradition. Or it may be a more or less unconscious reflection of a technique that is common in ancient oral compositions.
The birth of Enkidu provides the narrator, implicitly the hero Gilgamesh himself after he has gained wisdom through his difficult ordeals, with a first glimpse of the rival and friend Enkidu. A second view of Enkidu follows immediately upon the first, though. Enkidu, in the wilderness, is observed by a trapper, whose livelihood is threatened by the massive figure.

Keith Dickson emphasizes the differences in the two views. The first is a view of him from the outside, from the point of view of an omniscient observer. The second is the far more emotional response of a minor character in the work. Dickson raises the important question, why there should be two different views, and fits the issue into larger questions about the gaze in the narrative working-out of the story.

**Enkidu in the Wilderness**

Our first glimpse of Enkidu, a *qurādu*, a warrior, a hero—quite unlike the gentle sage of a George Smith—offers a subtle characterization of the one who was created by the gods and tossed into the wilderness. Following the narrative as Enkidu is “born,” lives with animals, is humanized and progressively “civilized,” is not difficult to do. But the narrative is constructed of set pieces that build up an episode but do it almost by fits and starts, more like Elizabethan poetry and prose than the linear progression of many modern stories.

The first description of him provides a good example of Akkadian poetic techniques. Much is packed into a few lines. The description is strikingly different from the hunter’s view of Enkidu in the lines that immediately follow these.

Enkidu is a *qurādu* in the fashion of the fierce Warrior God, Ninurta. It is possible, given what follows in the description of Enkidu (Tablet 1. 105-112), that the dual nature of Ninurta is already suggested: he is not only the fierce warrior but also a god of agriculture, a farmer with his plow.

Enkidu is seen in two neat poetic triplets as a beautiful field of grain and as an equally beautiful and playful animal: reflecting the Mesopotamian world of agriculture and animal husbandry. Rather like stanzas of Elizabethan poetry, the triplets are separated by a couplet that provides a transition between the two sets of three lines.

- His whole body was matted with hair,
- The tresses of his hair done up like a woman’s.
- The locks of his hair grew thickly, like the goddess Nisaba’s.

- He knew nothing of people or homeland.
- He was clothed in the clothing of the god Shakkan,

- Feeding with gazelles on grass,
- Jostling with the herd at the water-hole,
- Joying in the water with the animals.  

(1.105-112)
The translation picks up the main themes of the poem, I hope; but it obscures the intricacy of the original.

Akkadian, like other Semitic languages (and like Latin), is a highly inflected language. Since much of the meaning is carried by grammatical prefixes, infixes, and suffixes, word order can be very flexible and thus can be employed to maximize effects, both in sound patterns and in emphasis. (Shakespeare and Milton provide many fine examples of manipulating English, with its emphasis on word order, into reflecting a Latinate syntax.)

The first triplet clearly emphasizes the hair of Enkidu. Perhaps the poet is seeing Enkidu as heroes are sometimes represented on cylinder seals, with long ringlets (and the acolyte that follows the en in early Uruk seal impressions). But many have noticed that Enkidu’s hair (shartu), tresses (peretu), and locks of hair (itiq pērti) is likened to a woman’s hair. It also grows luxuriously like the goddess Nisaba’s hair.

Schematically, the three lines elegantly develop parallel images:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>HAIR</th>
<th>all over his body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>HAIR</td>
<td>like (kīma) a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIR</td>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>like (kīma) the goddess Nisaba.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each “hair” term is a variant of the previous term. Each verb is a variant of the other, while changing emphasis. The connection between the hair of a woman and the hair of the goddess Nisaba points not only to the similarity that both are females; the hair grows abundantly like grain in the field. Nisaba was traditionally the goddess of grain. The beautiful imagery anticipates a later development in the story, where both grain and wisdom are associated with a woman in the service of Ishtar. Nisaba, in addition to the force behind luxuriant growth, was also traditionally a, perhaps the, major deity associated with wisdom.

The second triplet, on the other hand, emphasizes a different aspect of Enkidu and his relationship with the natural world. Here it is not grain but (wild) animals. For a figure, Enkidu, who will terrify the hunter who has penetrated this wilderness, the depiction is remarkably pleasant and joyous.

Once again, my translation captures, I hope, the relationship between Enkidu and his fellow animals, especially the gazelle. Schematically the triplet looks like this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>itti (with)</th>
<th>ANIMAL</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>grass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>itti (with)</td>
<td>ANIMAL</td>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>watering-hole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>itti (with)</td>
<td>ANIMAL</td>
<td>Verb (“raise”)</td>
<td>his “heart” waters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The animal terms are variants of one another: gazelles (štātātim), the herd (bulim), and animals hurrying about (nammashshē). There is nothing fearful about them. The particular animal, the gazelle, was long a symbol of beauty and grace, even in early
Sumerian poetry. The transitional couplet prepares us for the image of the gazelle. The god to whose skin Enkidu is likened is Shakkan (Sumerian Sumuqan), god of the herd. Jeremy Black and Anthony Green make the important observation that the open countryside of Mesopotamia had a great variety of quadrupeds: lion, cheetah, wolf, jackal, hyena, wild cattle, oryx, wild pig, wild cat, lynx, beaver and mongoose, as well as the gazelle. The mountains saw deer, wild goat, ibex, wild sheep, even leopard and bear. The protector of all these animals was Shakkan, the god himself imaged as cattle. The phrase, “clothed in the clothing kīma Shakkan,” with the comparison of Enkidu with Shakkan the way earlier lines had compared him kīma the woman and Nisaba, connects the two realms of grain and animals.

The couplet makes the important point that Enkidu in the wilderness knows neither “people” nor their way of understanding the “land” as organized territory. And just as Enkidu’s luxuriant hair covers his head and indeed his whole body, his skin is likened to that of the cattle god.

The lines allow another important transition, to the “interior” of Enkidu. Where the earlier lines dealt with Enkidu from the point of view of the body, the later ones have him feeding on grass, “jostling” (in George’s translation) with the animals at the watering place, and enjoying the waters with the animals moving around and with him. George points out that the phrase that ends the sequence, itib libbashu, is literally, “his heart grew pleased.” Both “heart” and the “joy” within the body will figure in the episodes to come. Recall that the first line ended with “his body.” The sequence ends with “his heart” and makes explicit an association with the interior life, a life of joy. Note the “growing” or “rising” of the heart.

Akkadian Miniatures: A Preview of the Hero’s Distress

Readers of Gilgamesh have noticed a striking similarity between a passage in the first of eleven (or twelve) tablets and a later passage. The stalker (ṣayādu) who suddenly comes upon Enkidu in the wilderness (1:113) is called a hābīlu-amēlu, something like “hunter-man.” The first of these terms is rather unusual. The first, ṣajādu, appears to be formed from the root that means roaming about, restlessly. A feminine form, ṣajāditu (CAD 16.66), is also unusual, but it shows up in both Shurpu and its counterpart for more dangerous (psychotic) conditions, Maqlu, where she is a demonic being who roams about. The second, hābīlu-amēlu, is one of the compounds unique not only to Gilgamesh stories but to this version alone. According to the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, the few times hābīlu by itself appears the term refers to an evildoer roaming in the desert (CAD 6.16) or to a hunter using snares.

When the hābīlu-amēlu sees Enkidu, he stands, in Benjamin Foster’s translation, “stock-still with terror.” Enkidu goes back to his “lair” (literally, “his house”). While Enkidu goes home with the animals with whom he lives, the stalker remains, again in Benjamin Foster’s words,

Aghast, struck dumb,
His heart in a turmoil, his face drawn,
With woe in his vitals,
His face like a traveler’s from afar. (1:118-21)

The key word in this list is the one we have noticed before, *nissatu*, grief, worry, depression: sadness entered his heart (I.ii.49).481 John Gardner and I preferred “Woe entered his heart” when his face “grew dark.” We also opted for a slower and more deliberate translation of the last line. “His face was like that of one who travels a long road.” By itself may be a bit jarring, but when we consider that it is a line repeated again and again to describe Gilgamesh in his mad roaming of the wilderness later in the story, we see that the miniature about the stalker prefigures a much larger and more important aspect of the hero’s quest. He recognizes his *nissatu*, the sorrow in his belly, as he begins his search and enters the wilderness (9:4-5).

The line is repeated yet again as Gilgamesh searches for the meaning of life. When he encounters the tavern owner, Siduri, she recognizes the signs in him, the sorrow in the belly and “his face like that of a man who goes on a long journey” (10:9). She uses the same couplet when she questions him (10:42-43). She provides him with advice on dealing with his condition. He responds in the same language. He presses on. Twice he uses the line when he encounters the figure who will take him across the dangerous waters, including the Waters of Death, the boatman Urshanabi (10:115-16, 122-23). At the end of the line, Utnapishtim, the Noah-figure, sees Gilgamesh approaching and uses the same language to describe him (10:216-17). ( Appropriately, Utnapishtim, whose epithet is “the faraway,” sees him while he is still a distance away.) Gilgamesh once again is the man who has traveled the long road (10:223-24). The motif is a variant of Amaushumgalanna in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” (and in the representations of the *en* on early cylinder seals?), where the hero’s travels are seen initially as a positive contribution to Uruk’s prosperity. The tragic turn comes when the Plant of Rejuvenation is lost.

**Focalization: On Enkidu**

The way characters look at one another, or focalization, has become very important in literary criticism and in criticism of the other arts, especially film.482 Keith Dickson, in “Looking at the Other in *Gilgamesh*,” has, as we have mentioned above, analyzed two important moments in the poem where the Gaze is very striking: the first descriptions of Enkidu, especially the perspective of the Hunter/Stalker, and Siduri’s view of Gilgamesh at the opening of Tablet 10.483 Dickson does not consider the way Tablet 10 ends with Utnapishtim’s gaze, but he looks very carefully at the earlier episodes.

Quite unlike the perspective of a detached narrator—as Enkidu in the wilderness is first described to us—is the view the Hunter/Stalker has. As Dickson points out, the narrator’s is dominated by sight, where the trapper’s view is mainly *his* inward feelings. All but two adjectives used to describe Enkidu “refer to affective and thus no directly observable states.”484 The Hunter/Stalker is terrified by what he sees. Dickson sees the implications clearly. “Through the literary device of embedded (and interrupted) focalization, we gain
Chapter Two: Sex for the City

a kind of affective vision, or better, the vision of an effect. What we see on the surface, the rigidity of the expression, the clouding of the face, reveals what lies within. This device in turn reflexively turns on us too, since by its means we are also implicitly led to reassess our own initial response to our first view of Enkidu just a few lines earlier.

This is a particularly useful narratological form of empathy.

The description of the trapper’s response, the fact that right after having seen Enkidu we are now directed to look at another who has also just seen him, prescribes specific affective content in response to that sight. It fills in a blind spot in our extradiegetic view of Enkidu. What was missing or indefinite and unspecified in our own experience when we looked from the narrator’s viewpoint is now supplied to us when we are asked to look from the viewpoint of the trapper. His response, in a sense, is offered as a template for ours, and possibly even as a mirror. Seeing the trapper after he has seen Enkidu forces us to take a look at ourselves as well.

Dickson follows Gilgamesh on his travels and also notes a sorrow in the heart of Enkidu as he is transformed into a civilized being. Dickson suggests that “the sorrow that results from the sight of otherness is a sorrow closely linked to self-consciousness and to awareness of death.”

With Siduri’s Gaze that the implications of Dickson’s analysis will become particularly important.

To anticipate the story told in Tablets 9 and 10, Siduri sees a wild creature, “a man dressed like a lion,” whose animal skins contrast strikingly with the veils and hoods that give us a brief glimpse at what she looks like. She, as others who have seen him on his terrible journey have done, notices Gilgamesh’s face, wasted by sorrow and exhausting travel. Dickson makes a most significant observation, that the one who used to see others is now the one who is observed by others. A great “switch in focalization” has taken place. Where in the First Prologue, Gilgamesh is the one with vision, who was able to “see everything,” in his encounter with Siduri he is seen from the outside, “the one who is radically and even repellently other, both alien and alienating.” Like Enkidu had once been, Gilgamesh is a “savage.” Gilgamesh “is clearly an interloper” in the world he has now entered, and he will soon fail the Sleep Test and lose the Plant of Rejuvenation.

The Humanizing of Enkidu: Tablet 1, Lines 122-300

In rapid succession, the Stalker seeks advice from his father, who sends the Stalker to Gilgamesh for a plan to deal with the dangerous Enkidu. Gilgamesh sends a woman, a harimtu, in the service of Ishtar to seduce the savage in the wilderness. The woman is now thought to be named Shamhat, one of two words to describe her role in the service of Ishtar.

The Father’s advice is rather like the exchange in “Ea/Marduk” or “Divine Dialogues” that proliferated in the Old Babylonian period. The Son describes the terrifying Enkidu, mighty, powerful like a lump of rock from the heavens (1.124-25). The creature roams the land and feeds on grass with the herd. He fills in the pits the Stalker has dug and uprooted
the snares he has laid. He fears the creature and is unable to do the work of the wilderness.

The Father, like the god Enki/Ea, tells the Son what to do. He should go into the city, where Gilgamesh will send him back into the wilderness with Shamhat the harimtu. She will expose herself, revealing her vagina. The creature will “go up to her,” and the herd will be estranged from him. (The Father does not reveal details of the sex act itself.)

The Son follows the Father’s advice. He repeats what he has said to Gilgamesh exactly as he had told the father, and Gilgamesh responds exactly as the Father had told him. Gilgamesh, also, does not reveal details of the sex act.

The advice of Father and Gilgamesh reveals, of course, their wisdom. The Stalker follows their advice precisely. It takes them three days to arrive at the water-place. On the second day of waiting for Enkidu, the creature arrives with the herd.

When the Stalker is sitting with Shamhat, he adds his advice to her: to strip before Enkidu, spread her clothing on the ground and have the beast embrace her.

The scene that followed shocked George Smith and A. H. Sayce. They merely mentioned her actions, in passing. It is not likely to shock readers today, except that it gives no hint at all that immorality is involved. There is no moral dilemma facing Father, Son, Gilgamesh or Shamhat.

The Harimtu in Gilgamesh: Tablet 1, Lines 188-94

When the Shamhat sees the “murderous” (shaggâšu, 1:178) Enkidu emerging from the heart of the wilderness, she shows no fear at his approach. A voice tells her what to do and what will happen: the animals with whom he lived will abandon him. The lullû-amêlu, humanity as it was in the beginning, will emerge in the encounter with the Shamhat. Since it is the most sexually explicit passage in Gilgamesh—possibly in Akkadian literature—the passage has created problems for translators. (One even adopted the pious dodge used in Victorian texts when the subject matter was too hot for the unlearned to handle. He translated the Akkadian into Latin.) Our ambivalence creates the problem. An Akkadian audience would, I suspect, find little to be uneasy about.

Shamhat, now taken as the name of a person, is introduced as “the harimtu, Shamhat” (1.162). It is difficult to translate the term harimtu, especially since shamhatu, like harimtu, is the title of a woman in the service of Ishtar. Such women could be dangerous to marriages, as we will see when Enkidu curses them, and there is a tendency today to call them “prostitutes” and “whores.” The harimtu apparently had a higher status in the temple than the shamhatu. Probably the Greek term “hierodule” is appropriate for this woman. The harimtu is the title most often used in Gilgamesh for the women who served Ishtar. Shamhat is virtually the earthly embodiment of the goddess, and she possesses in full Ishtar’s kuzbu.
In one sense the passage is plain and straightforward. The Shamhat strips before Enkidu, exposes her genitals (ūru) to his gaze, spreads out her garment, and he “sleeps” with her. (Or rather “over her,” elī-sha is)lal. While we might expect the familiar English euphemism here, the metaphor probably has more resonance in this text, since Gilgamesh is at one point the “sleepless” one, so full of energy that he exhausts the youth of his city, and at another is challenged not to sleep—a test he promptly fails.) Sleeping aside, the passage, though brief, is filled with force, libido. As she transfers it, with a “woman’s craft,” to the male, he literally becomes Human. We are tempted to say she “made a man of him,” but the text points to a very special “man,” humankind as humans were at the beginning (a lullû).

Enkidu is up to the task. For “six days and seven nights” they copulate. (At least one reader thinks it is a continuous—heroic—mating.) There is nothing in the preparation for this scene or in subsequent events that suggests the sexual activity, which resembles the ancient drama of the en and nin on their mat in the Urukean tradition, that points to mating for offspring. Enkidu is human enough that, after the week of strenuous activity, he is satisfied, tries to rejoin his animal companions, but finds himself literally weak in the knees. The animals flee, and he cannot follow them. He then turns to the Shamhat for advice.

The scene begins and ends with a pun, her dīdū and his dādu. In the first line she takes off a garment that strips her completely naked. It must have been a strip of fabric wound around her hips and between the legs (CAD 3.136). His love-making flooded her.

**The Akkadian Text: Tablet 1, Lines 188-94**

ur-tam-mi  ti-šam-hat di-da-šá
úr-sá ip-te-e-ma ku-zu-ub-sá il-qé
ul iš-hu-ut il-tu-qé na-pis-su
lu-bu-ši-sá ú-ma-s,i-ma elī-sá is,-lal
i-pu-us-su-ma lul-la-a ši-pir sin-niš-te
da-du-sú ih-bu-bu elī šērī-sá
šēššu ur-ri sebišu mušati[mel] En-ki-du te-bi-ma tišam-hat ir-hi

She loosened, did the Shamhat, her dīdū. Her āru she opened, her kuzbu took over. Without fear she took his breath away. Her clothing spread out, he lay with her. She made a lullû of him, a woman’s craft. His dādu worked upon her.

Six days and seven nights erect, Enkidu poured into Shamhat.

**Shamhat Civilizes Enkidu: Tablet 1, Line 195-Tablet 2, Line 64**

Immediately after their immense week-long sexual performance, changes in Enkidu become evident. There are gains and losses. Enkidu loses interest in the harimtu, and then finds that the animals have lost interest in him. They scatter, and his legs are not strong enough to catch up with them. He was weakened and unable to run as he had
before. On the other hand, he gains shâhu and hasîsu (1.201-202). The first is a verb that indicates a growth in size or age, and is usually taken as the ability to reason. The second is the “understanding” gained through the ear.

We have been alerted to the theme of wisdom in the First Prologue. The beginning of knowledge and wisdom comes with the seduction of Enkidu, and continues through the process that prepares him to enter the city. In the city the theme is developed with Gilgamesh, whose oppression of his people provides the measure of progress in his development. The stages of gaining insight, which we think involves empathy, has been analyzed in great detail by Benjamin R. Foster and Tzvi Abusch. The Great Gods, too, must learn from their experiences, as we interpret the poem. Enkidu, as an animal, is weakened, but given “reason,” and “understanding.”

When Enkidu sits at the feet of Shamhat, she addresses him (for the first time), calling him “handsome” (damâqu), and telling him he has become “like a god” (1:207). Both George and Foster prefer “handsome” (used today more of men than of women) to “beautiful,” where both males and females in Mesopotamia were equally admired for their “beauty.” Gilgamesh is exceptionally beautiful, as heroes and rulers were expected to be, since they derive their beauty from the gods. Irene J. Winter has pointed out the care Assyrian rulers took to represent themselves, to protect their “image,” as it were, to show that their perfect form and exceptional size indicated that the gods had taken notice of them and had selected them to rule the land. King Esarhaddon, whose poor health required him to make use of a “substitute king” several times in his reign, has left records of instructions to artists making his images. (In one case he has his full beard, as sign of maturity in Assyrian times, depicted as fuller and longer than the beards of his sons, even as the stele proclaimed that both sons were worthy of succeeding him.)

Shamhat describes Uruk-of-the-Sheepfold to Enkidu as having its “heart” in the sacred dwelling of Anu and Ishtar (1:210). There, again, Gilgamesh is lording over the men “like a wild bull.” Enkidu instinctively knows (i.e., “knows in his heart”) that he should seek a friend (ibru). This already suggests the paradox that will characterize the relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh: friendship, which implies equality, and at the same time competition. The first words the now humanized Enkidu speaks repeats the words he had heard, but adds, “I will challenge” Gilgamesh. The first use of “I” is a boast, which he expands by emphasizing his strength. Indeed, he will show that he is the mightiest in Uruk and will “change the way things are ordered” (1:222), as Andrew George translates the phrase.

At this point Shamhat describes the city—and Gilgamesh—in a most significant way (emphasizing his beauty and libido). Everyday there is a festival, and at the center of her imagining of the scene there is Gilgamesh, the Joy/Woe man.

Another View of Gilgamesh

No sooner has Enkidu found speech when the harimtu provides him with a glowing account of the city and its overseer, Gilgamesh. She has asked him why he would want to
return to the animals in the wilderness. He is “beautiful, like a god” (1.207). She will lead him to Uruk the Sheepfold. He is eager for her to lead him. In the city he will challenge Gilgamesh. “Go,” she says to Enkidu, to Uruk, where

The heroes wear the nēbehu-sash, where every day a festival is held, where drums are always played, and the harimtus have beautifully figures, radiating desire, filled with sexual joy. The Great Ones are kept from sleeping at night! Enkidu, you do not know what it is to live. I will show you Gilgamesh, the joy/woe man. Look at him, study his face: beautiful in his manhood, his upright bearing, his whole body glows with kuzbu. He is more powerful than you are, never sleeping day or night. (1.226-39)

Enkidu is then told to make himself an enemy to his anger. Andrew George translates Shamhat’s advice as “get rid of your sinful intention.” For Gilgamesh is not only powerful and beautiful: the gods have favored him. Shamash loves him; the highest gods, Anu, Enlil, and Ea have given him great wisdom, literally “widened his ear” (uznu).

Shamhat then, once again, displays her wisdom and the wisdom of Ninsun, by giving Enkidu details of two dreams Gilgamesh has had. In one a meteorite fall, in another an axe falls from the heavens. In each case of the prophetic dreams Gilgamesh will come to love the one who falls from heaven, that is, Enkidu. He will love him “like a wife” (kīma ashshate) and will caress and embrace him.

The harimtu thus credits Ninsun with the important ability to interpret dreams. Enkidu will acquire a friend and counselor.

The scene ends with Shamhat and Enkidu once again making love together. She tells Enkidu of dreams Gilgamesh has had, and Tablet 1 ends with the notice that she and Enkidu have once again engaged in intercourse.

“Making love,” our curiously abstract English phrase for sexual experience (urta’mu) is a useful translation in this line, which ends Tablet 1. The final word in the line points to a close relationship, kilallān, Enkidu and Shamhat “together,” an idea that will appear again later, as we will see.

**Gilgamesh’s Two Dreams**

Enkidu listens to Shamhat as she tells him about Gilgamesh and the dreams Gilgamesh had had foretelling the coming of Enkidu (1.240-300). The dreams come to Gilgamesh from the Sun God Shamash. In line with Mesopotamian thought about significant and prophetic dreams, the two dreams are interpreted by someone other than the dreamer, in this case Ninsun, the wise goddess who is the mother of Gilgamesh. (Another possibility
is that the scene has shifted to Uruk, and the dreams and Ninsun’s interpretations are narrated directly.)

**Shamhat Civilizes Enkidu**

The first thirty some lines of Tablet 2 are missing and are regularly filled in with an earlier Old Babylonian text. The civilizing process takes up the first sixty-some lines of Tablet 2. Shamhat will lead Enkidu to Uruk, which, unlike our *Gilgamesh* text and its usual designation of the city as the home of Ishtar, is called the “home of Anu.” In the Old Babylonian version Shamhat strips off a piece of her garment and clothes Enkidu. As the late version takes up the story, Shamhat takes him into a camp of shepherds (a good transition between the wilderness and the city), where the shepherds offer him bread and beer. Where he had eaten grass and drunk water, Enkidu needs to learn human food. Not surprisingly, the men offer him the very items that supported the economy of Uruk. Both were made with barley, a grain that is resistant to the saline soil in Uruk and extraordinarily productive when cultivated in long rows irrigated by Uruk’s water system. Enkidu then acts like a shepherd, guarding the camp, chasing off wolves and lions while the others sleep.

**Ludic or Manic?**

The “tragic” cast many readers feel in *Gilgamesh* owes much to the sorrows of Gilgamesh, and to a lesser extent, of Enkidu in the second half of the story. There is another pole, however, that is glimpsed mainly in the first half of the story. The “joy” is less noticeable than the “woe,” I would suggest, because it is largely exhibited in public. Where sorrow turns Gilgamesh and Enkidu inward, the moments of joy are seen in communal activities, especially rituals.

Even those episodes that do not involve rituals sanctioned by religious tradition often have the quality of ritual acts. We are now used to seeing many characters in *Gilgamesh* as “liminal” figures, “neither here nor there,” involved in “rites of passage.” The stages of Enkidu’s transformation from animal to civilized human provide a good, early example.

While he lives in the wilderness, Enkidu’s heart “delights” (ṭâbu) in the water with the animals. The wild Enkidu embraces the temple woman, the *harimtu*, for six days and seven nights. (Some suggest that it one continuous sexual act!). When he is “sated” with “delight” in sleeping with the woman, he turns back to the animals, only to find that his legs have been weakened and he can no longer return to them.

Sex with the *harimtu* transforms him, however, into a human being, with intelligence and understanding. She speaks to him of Uruk, home of Anu and Ishtar, with its great temple and its “wild bull” Gilgamesh, the most powerful of men in the city (1:211-14). (As a wild bull, he takes on all challengers and maintains his harem.) Even before he speaks his first words, Enkidu knows “in his heart” that he should seek out a friend (*ibru*).

His first words, as we have seen, respond what the woman has told him, and then he adds his first independent thought: he will challenge Gilgamesh (1:220-23). In a motif that
anticipates Jacques Lacan’s “Mirror Stage,” Enkidu emphasizes the first person pronoun, I, and boast that he will be the most powerful and will change the way things have been done. This, of course, sets the stage for the fight between the two heroes—a fight that is followed immediately by their deep friendship.

One stage in his transformation is reached when Enkidu first eats bread and drinks beer (2:44-45). At first he is puzzled by food that has been prepared, i.e., transformed, by humans. As often happens in Tablet 2, there is a gap where Enkidu’s response is expected. The gap is often filled in by an Old Babylonian text. In that version Enkidu eats bread until he is satiated, then drinks beer seven times until his mood becomes free, he begins to sing, his heart grows merry and his face glows. This may seem to be an obvious gag, but it does reflect a reality that ties the characters to the First City, Uruk. barley was the basis of the Uruk Miracle that, by late in the 3rd millennium BCE the economic powerhouse of ancient Sumer. By choosing barley, which is resistant to the salts in the land, and inventing ways to plow and irrigate long rows, Urukeans vastly increased the production of grain. The huge surplus provided the first capital for an economic expansion that allowed Uruk itself to become the largest city in the ancient world (excepting only Rome at its height) and to develop trade relations far beyond its city limits. barley was the first money, before silver and then gold. A great variety of people were paid in barley rations. Bread and beer were the staples of the society. (Beer making destroyed the germs that flourished in water and was therefore safer to drink than water.)

Furthermore, beer and brewers are mentioned in the great religious celebrations in Sumer. The New Year Festival (akītu) in particular was noteworthy in this respect. New Year ceremonies were held in Babylon at the time of the spring barley harvest, about the time of the equinox. A second festival, during the seventh month, also involved elaborate processions from the sanctuaries in the cities to the akītu-temples outside the city proper. The very ancient rituals continued in Uruk into Hellenistic times. A text written in Uruk provides details of the Ishtar procession to the akītu-temple (and may refer to the ceremony in which the en was installed).

The akītu is mentioned in a most ironic way in the Flood story told in Tablet 11. Unlike in the very similar biblical Flood story, the Noah-figure in this version must con his fellow-citizens into building the enormous boat. He rewards their service by butchering oxen and lambs daily and by providing them with “beer and ale, oil and wine,” actually beer sweetened with dates, “like water from a river,” so that they could enjoy a feast like New Year (11:72-74). Once again the beer is responsible for much of the community’s joy.

Probably the most direct expression of Gilgamesh’s intense emotion in his ludic phase comes just after he becomes the friend of his rival Enkidu. In his eagerness to take on the monster Humbaba, he speaks in identical language to, first, the citizens of Uruk (2:265-71) and, later, to his mother (3:27-34). He envisions his return to Uruk in triumph, “glad at heart.”

When he returns home, he will celebrate akītu twice, with festival and merriment. He can already hear the drums resounding in the city. Interestingly, Enkidu and Ninsun are glum
when they hear Gilgamesh’s boast. Enkidu, who is the only one who knows how terrifying Humbaba is, addresses the Urukeans and advises against the campaign. The elders tell Gilgamesh that he is being carried along by his emotions and cannot understand the dangers he will face. Ninsun, for her part, listens to the boast, and in her sorrow seeks the protection of the Sun God Shamash for her son.

The campaign against Humbaba fills Enkidu with sadness. Gilgamesh calls him a weakling for his fears. Ironically, when the two men actually encounter Humbaba, the roles will be reversed. The journey to Humbaba’s mountain is filled with ominous dreams, and at the moment when they encounter the monster, Enkidu will uses identical language to urge the “weakling” Gilgamesh to finish off Humbaba.

The men will, of course, be successful in killing Humbaba. Their return to Uruk, when Gilgamesh predicted he would be glad at heart and celebrating akītu twice over, is, however, not told. Gilgamesh does indeed achieve his goal, a “name” that would survive long after his death, but the poet does not describe Gilgamesh’s emotional response to his victory.511

While there is little direct expression of Gilgamesh’s inner life in the first half of the story, the indirect evidence of the ludic Gilgamesh comes from the woman who seduces and civilizes Enkidu.

Before he is completely prepared to enter the city, that is, before he is “civilized,” Enkidu is enticed by a most interesting description of Uruk “of the Sheepfold.” The harimtu describes the city (1:223-42) as a place of daily festival (isinnu). There the drums beat and the temple women, the shamhati (like the harimtu herself), are beautiful and radiant with sexuality (kuzbu) and joy (rīshtu). They even rouse the elderly from their beds!

She immediately turns to the famous description of Gilgamesh himself. Enkidu is either ignorant of life, as many translators fill in the gap in one line, or has not experienced the joy (hadû) of life (1:233. He should see the hādi-ū’a-amēlu, Gilgamesh, literally the “joy/woe” man. Note that the phrase picks up the hadû of the previous line—who is filled with manly vigor. (The lines may tell us more about the woman and her personal perspective on the city and its hero, but even “manly vigor” and “seductive” beauty of her person do not quite capture the erotic force of her description of Gilgamesh.)

Gilgamesh is stronger than Enkidu, she thinks, and he is sleepless (lašalilu) day and night. Her portrait of Gilgamesh describes a ludic, if not manic, hero, in a city that reflects his pursuit of endless partying.

She quickly follows this aspect of Gilgamesh by telling Enkidu to turn aside his hostility to the hero, for Gilgamesh is beloved by the god Shamash and has been given wisdom by the high gods of the pantheon, Anu, Enlil, and Ea.
**Enkidu vs. Gilgamesh**

The now civilized Enkidu is enticed to go to the city itself, where in a great festival, he will be able to meet his rival. Gilgamesh is about to enter a building, a “wedding house,” where he is to couple with the goddess Ishhara, who as a goddess of love was identified with Ishtar. It appears that Gilgamesh is expecting to participate in what modern scholars call a “sacred marriage” (about which, more below), one of the most important duties of the Urukean en. A “substitute” (pūhu) has been prepared for him, and he is “like a god” in the ritual. The passage in Gilgamesh is compatible with but not identical to an Old Babylonian version. Some scholars think that Gilgamesh would deflower a woman before her husband sleeps with her. This may be the case, but the lines do not say this directly. Mating with nin as “substitute” for the Great Goddess does appear to be the case here.

When Enkidu stops him, significantly at the gate of the “wedding house,” the two men have the much-anticipated fight (2.103-17). It appears that in a very even wrestling match, Gilgamesh prevails. The two men kiss and become friends.

Two versions of Enkidu’s entry into Uruk and the fight between Enkidu and Gilgamesh illustrate the extent to which the “Standard Akkadian” Gilgamesh (1.103-15) continues but also introduces subtle changes into the texts of the Old Babylonian period.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>The “Standard” Version</strong></th>
<th><strong>An “Old Babylonian” Version</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ‘Standard’ Version</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[x x]-[a?] i-bé-eš dan-nu-ti-ma [...]</td>
<td>[x x] i-bé-eš dan-nu-ti ma [x x]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i-tepi-ir um-man-ni eli [šeri-[šu]</td>
<td>i-tipi-ir um-man-ni [eli sēri-šu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ki i šer-ri la-’i ú-n[a-aš-šā-qu šēp[imin-šu]</td>
<td>ki i šer-ri la-’i u-n[a-aq(?) ši-iz-ba (?)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ul-la-nu-um-ma et-šu ba-ni [...]</td>
<td>ul-la-nu-um-ma et-šu ba-ni...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-na DIš-ha-ra ma-a-a-al [x x] ti [x]</td>
<td>a-na Iš-ha-ra ma-a-a-l [mu-ši]-ti na-di-ma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-na ¹GIŠ-gim-maš ki-ma ili šá-ki-[š]-šú pu-h[u?]</td>
<td>a-na GIŠ ki-ma i-li-im ša-ki-iš-sum me-eh-rum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>²En-ki-dû ina bāb bit e-mu-ti ip-[te]-rik šēp[imin-</td>
<td>EN.KLDU ba-ba-am e-mu-ti ip-ta-ri-ik i-na šep-šu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[šû]</td>
<td>GIŠ a-na šu-ru-bi ú-ul id-nam-di-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>³GIŠ-gim-maš a-na šu-ru-bi [ul]-i-nam-di[n]</td>
<td>i-na mu-šî in-ni-[ ]id</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>išab-tu-ma ina bāb biti [e]-mu-ti</td>
<td>is-sab-tu-ma iba bāb bit e-mu-ti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ina sūqi it-te-eg-ru-[ú] ri-bit ma-a-[tu]</td>
<td>ina suqi it-te-ig-ru-u ri-(?)-bit ma-a-tu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[si]p-[pu ir?-ú?]–bu i-gar-[ra I]-nu!-uš[^]³</td>
<td>si-ip-pa-am ih-bu-tu i-gar-rum ir-tu-ud[^]⁴</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

...in the streets of Uruk the Sheepfold  

When he entered the street
...at the show of his strength...
he blocked the road...
The Uruk countryside stood [over him]
the countryside gathered [around him]
the experts gathered [around him],
young men thronging [around him].
They were kissing his feet as they would
the feet of an infant.

From afar a hero had arisen.

For Ishhara the bed [is laid out],
For Gilgamesh, like a god, a substitute
was ready.

Enkidu at the gate of the wedding house
plants his feet,
prevents Gilgamesh from entering.

Of Uruk-of-the-Wide-Marketplaces,
The people swarmed around him.
When he entered the street
Of Uruk-of-the-Wide-Marketplaces,
The young men gathered,
Saying about him:
“He is like Gilgamesh in build.
Though shorter in stature,
He has bigger bones.”
...
Born in the highlands,
The milk of wild cattle
He used to suck.

Now in Uruk sacrifices were going on,
The lords rejoicing:
“A champion has come,
for men of decency,
For Gilgamesh the godlike,
His equal has arrived.”
For the lovemaking goddess Ishhara,
The bed is laid.
Gilgamesh was to join with her
At night...

On comes Enkidu,
They seize each other in the wedding-house gate;
They fight in the street, through the city square;
they break the door-jamb, and the wall shudders.
They fight in the street, through the city square;
they break the door-jamb, and the wall shudders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>stands in the street, barracks the way.</th>
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<td>to Gilgamesh.</td>
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Akitu and the “Sacred” Marriage

Folded into (some) New Year festivals is a “divine marriage.” Scholars have debated almost every aspect of the so-called “sacred marriage.” While there is no consensus yet, it seems useful to distinguish between “early” and “late” sacred marriages. (Other distinctions will follow.)

The “early” pattern is a Sumerian tradition that is best exemplified by humans selected by Inanna to become her lover. The selection raises the person’s status in his city (Uruk and other cities to which the rites spread). The early sacred marriage is co-extensive with the phenomenon of “deified” kings. It was not simply that the kings were remembered, after their deaths, as gods; they were deified in the acceptance of Inanna’s proposal of “marriage.” Such a proposal is offered Gilgamesh at the center of Gilgamesh, in Tablet 6.

For a long time it seemed intuitively obvious to modern scholars that a “sacred” marriage implied offspring (at least the promise of or desire for offspring). Inanna herself complicated the issue. “Sacred” marriages, presumably performed between the ruler and a pūhu, or substitute, for the god or goddess, rarely resulted in offspring. Inanna is rarely considered a mother. (Much later, the Assyrians, who assimilated a Mother Goddess to Ishtar, brought the motherly aspect of Ishtar to the fore.)

The object of a “sacred marriage,” on one level, was certainly “life” in the form of prosperity and fertility (especially of crops and livestock). That would explain the presence of a “divine marriage” in the Akitu festivals, which marked the key moments in the life cycles of barley (and of the herds). But the early form of the “marriage” greatly empowered the male or female selected as the sexual partner of the deity.

Over the centuries, however, the human partner in the rite becomes less a factor in the “sacred” marriage. The model is increasingly a couple like the high gods Enlil and Ninlil, Marduk and Šarpānītu (Zarpanitu), and, very late (at least) in Uruk, Anu and Antum. The marriage could be “performed” by statues representing the divine husband and wife. The statues could be placed in a garden to set the mood.

As the human participant largely disappeared from the rituals, other historical changes reduced the importance of the en in Mesopotamia. The priestly ēnu virtually disappears from records, except in Uruk. At the same time a key king of Babylon—the famous Hammurabi—in what would turn out to be the middle of his long reign withdrew from having himself considered a god.

For Uruk, this further coincides with the loss of its independence. The last powerful en loses out—to the Babylonians.

These events happen during the Old Babylonian period. In the same period a Gilgamesh legend is recorded that indicates that Gilgamesh was headed for a “wedding house” (bit emūti) when he was confronted by Enkidu (2.111). The Standard Version of the story adds an important detail: that a pūhu was provided for the goddess Ishhara as Gilgamesh
prepared to enter the building “like a god” (2.109-10), as if Gilgamesh were another Dumuzi.

This has the look of a traditional Sumerian “sacred marriage.” It would appear that Gilgamesh is on the verge of accepting a proposal from the goddess, who herself is an avatar or substitute for Ishtar. Such a proposal will be given to Gilgamesh in Tablet 6, by Ishtar herself.

But Enkidu’s challenge at the gate changes everything. The fight and friendship turn Gilgamesh immediately away from the Ishtar-centered Uruk and toward a different role as king—the warrior. That role was already an aspect of Gilgamesh in the Enkidu-less “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” where the role co-exists with his special relationship with Inanna.

The tension between roles splits the narrative, only to explode in the centerpiece of Gilgamesh, Tablet 6.

Ironically, the great adventure Gilgamesh devises is resisted by his mother Ninsun, Enkidu, and the elders of the city.

The Name of the King

The winner of the match between Gilgamesh and Humbaba in Tablet 2 is not entirely clear in Gilgamesh because there is a large gap in the text. The older (Old Babylonian versions fill in the action. Gilgamesh kneels, with one foot on the ground (P 229), and he calms down. Enkidu recognizes him as a unique person, son of the wild cow Ninsun—and destined for kingship by the high god Enlil (P 240). Although kingship, at least the title king (lugal), probably arose in Uruk’s neighboring city of Ur, as kingship grew in importance in the 3rd millennium BCE, the political center of Sumer had shifted farther north to city of Nippur. Its major god, Enlil, was considered King of the Gods. So it is appropriate that a Babylonian Gilgamesh text would link kingship with Enlil. When the heroes defeat Humbaba, Enkidu makes a door out of the wood they have cut. The two make a raft. Enkidu takes the door and Gilgamesh carries the head of Humbaba to Nippur, as gifts for Enlil.

Gilgamesh’s plan to fight Humbaba is formed immediately after the match with Enkidu. An Old Babylonian version preserves Enkidu’s response to the plan: why would Gilgamesh want to do it. Such a feat had never been done (Y 14-16). At this point the two men kiss each other and form the friendship that will dominate the rest of the story.

It is in this context, with both Enkidu and Ninsun saddened by the plan, that Gilgamesh makes explicit his reason for the heroic adventure: to make a name that will live forever (Y 187).

The idea that a name will preserve a person after death turns out to be an important impetus to inscribing a king’s name and keeping written records of his significant deeds. The long Mesopotamian tradition of writing royal inscriptions begins with inscribing names on precious objects in Early Dynastic times. The tradition allows us to see the
evolution of kingship. (As in the evolution of living species, there are gaps in the record.)
Uruk celebrated its combination of *en* and *lugal* at least until it lost independence and
was dominated by kings whose capitols were often far away.

Just as Assyrian kings had continued a long tradition of presenting images of themselves
as “beautiful,” they maintained the old Sumerian tradition of the king’s “name.” Irene J.
Winter describes the importance of royal “images,” which included the “names,” in the
following way.

Through the very act of representation, they [statues functioning “within the elaborate
'sign-producing symbolic system' of the state apparatus”], made manifest, and hence
worked to construct, *the institution of kingship* itself, giving concrete form to underlying
concepts of divinely-sanctioned rule and the ideal qualities of the ruler.  

**Enkidu Introduced to Ninsun**

After the fight, Gilgamesh introduces Enkidu to his mother, the goddess Ninsun (2.162-
77). Gilgamesh briefly describes Enkidu to her in words that recall an earlier passage.
Enkidu is mighty, like a lump of rock from the heavens, tall and majestic. The few lines,
perhaps six in all, give Ninsun’s response, but the lines are too broken to be restored.

A line drawn across the best tablet indicates that a new episode begins at this point.

Suddenly Enkidu and Gilgamesh are speaking of the first great adventure in *Gilgamesh*,
the journey into the wilderness where they will confront the giant guardian of the forest,
Humbaba. This adventure takes up the rest of Tablets 2, 3, 4, and 5. The sudden turn in
the narrative intrudes upon the introduction of Enkidu to the household of Gilgamesh.
The story that brings Enkidu into the protection of Ninsun is again taken up in Tablet 3.
In effect the adoption of Enkidu in Tablet 3 completes the civilizing of Enkidu.

**The Decision to Fight Humbaba**

Suddenly Enkidu is filled with fear. His eyes fill with tears, and his arms fall limp.
Gilgamesh holds him tight. Although Humbaba is under the protection of the powerful
god Enlil, Gilgamesh persuades Enkidu to join him in the quest, which will establish the
name Gilgamesh forever. The Council of Elders advises against the adventure, but
Gilgamesh remains confident (2.178-303). (Much of this section is filled in with earlier,
Old Babylonian versions of the story.)

**The New Year in Uruk**

In his excitement over his plan to fight Humbaba, Gilgamesh twice explains what he will
do to celebrate his victory. The occasion, he tells the young men of the city, will be one of
the famous festivals in Mesopotamia, the *Akitu*, and Gilgamesh will celebrate it *twice*
(2.268-70). He repeats the plan to his mother, Ninsun (3.31-33). We do not know what
the young men think about the plan. His new friend Enkidu is already upset at the
prospect. The elders of the city advise against the expedition against Humbaba. (They tell
Gilgamesh his “heart” has been “carried away” in his enthusiasm.) And Ninsun listens
to her son’s speech in pain (3.34). The speech prompts her to act in an extraordinary way, the details of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Those who know what the adventure entails—the wise mother, the elders of the city, and Enkidu (who knows of Humbaba from his days in the wilderness)—are understandably worried. It is the wild scheme of one who, as the elders put it, does not understand what he is saying.

Gilgamesh will, of course, persist. Tablet 2 ends with the elders cautioning Gilgamesh against the plan. Tablet 3 opens immediately with a continuation of the elders’ speech. They ask Enkidu to accompany Gilgamesh and help him. The expedition will take fully three tablets, about 900 lines, to narrate. It will end in victory for Gilgamesh and Enkidu, but there is strangely little talk of celebration. The Akitu is not mentioned again in *Gilgamesh* until the crafty Utnapishtim cons his community into building the great ark by offering the workforce beer, ale, oil and wine “like the waters of a river,” as if they were celebrating the Akitu festival (11.73-75).

The Akitu festival is, then, not described in *Gilgamesh* other than as a time of community celebration, with beer and ale the main libations. (The reference to “wine” probably means beer sweetened with dates.)

The Akitu or New Year festival has been studied extensively. Like so many aspects of Mesopotamian life, many details are known, but as many remain hidden to us. The ease by which it can be referred to in passing suggests that the activities in the community would have been so well known that, like Mardi Gras in New Orleans, there would have been no need to describe the scene. All that Gilgamesh needs to tell the Urukeans (or the reader) is that it will be a time of “merriment” (*nīgūtu*), yet another term for joy. He adds that drums will be beaten before Ninsun.

Drumming was an important part of many rituals. The detail that Ninsun will be honored is intriguing, though. The Akitu in Babylon is the best known of the New Year festivals in Mesopotamia. Scholars today are finding significant differences between practices in Babylon and in other places, especially in Assyria and Uruk during the 1st millennium BCE. The differences reflect ideologies of kingship especially. In Assyria, where, as we will see, the king was also the high priest, one of the more remarkable aspects of Babylon’s New Year festival seems to have been out of place. Everywhere the festival involved very elaborate processions from the temples of the high gods to a place outside the city, possibly representing the wilderness, where a separate structure had been built, the *akitu*-house. The withdrawal of the gods from the city must have had enormous symbolic significance. The 11-day festival ends with equally impressive processions into the city, where the gods return to their rightful places.

In Babylon, the powerful king himself was humiliated in the temple; stripped of his symbols of authority; forced to confess that he had not sinned; and beaten by the priests before he was once again reinstated as king. (If the king wept from the beating it was considered a good omen.) The universe could return to normal for another year.
Chapter Two: Sex for the City

It appears that barley was important from the earliest days of the festival. Actually, there were, in Babylon and Uruk at least, two festivals, that is, two New Years, one in spring, the other in fall. One involved the reestablishment of civil authority. The other was the renewal of the year in religious terms, in many ways like Rosh Hashanna. The events, on one level, celebrated the sowing of barley in the autumn, in the month of Tashritu, and the cutting of barley in the spring, in Nisannu. The “civil” New Year, in Nisannu, was not exactly what we would call a “secular” event; “secular” and “religious” are difficult to distinguish even in the festival that marked the renewal of kingship; but the New Year in Tashritu had less to do with kingship than with the renewal of the agricultural year. Many details of the two New Year festivals in Uruk is known for Seleucid times—centuries after Gilgamesh had been given its standard form—but is complicated in two ways. In the Seleucid period, kingship was situated in the north, near Babylon, in the capital, Seleucus-on-the Tigris, not in Uruk. How much the Persian capture of Babylon and, later, the Seleucid takeover of Mesopotamia had altered what is essentially a Babylonian understanding of kingship is hard to know. It would appear that in the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE the ideology of kingship is probably the best reason for modern scholars to call Gilgamesh a “Babylonian” work. The post-Gilgamesh texts that speak of Ishtar’s place in Uruk usurped by an outsider and later restored also claim that the “rites of Anu” were restored along with Ishtar. How much the “restoration” was actually the establishment of a Babylonian-style domination of the Uruk, with the divine couple Anu and Antum reflecting Babylon’s domination by Marduk and “wife” S)ārpanītu, is also difficult to establish. But by Seleucid times the great new temples for Anu and Antum dominated the cityscape.

Ishtar was by no means diminished in Seleucid Uruk. Indeed a massive new temple was built for her, and her Eanna continued to be used for some services. Both New Year festivals in Uruk had Anu as the primary focus: his departure from and then return to Uruk provided the central focus, as Marduk’s did in contemporary Babylon. Even in the Nisannu festival, which coincided with the beginning of the civil year and the coronation month of the king, Ishtar had an important part to play.

The more religious Tashritu included a procession of Anu’s statue. The procession was accompanied by high priests, āshipus reciting incantations, singers and musicians (nārus), “temple enterers,” and brewers (sīrāshūs). The exorcist-healers, singers, and gala-performers are prominent in the New Year, whether in fall or spring. Mentioning the brewers in particular is not surprising because the ritual text calls for a great deal of food and “songs of jubilation” during the festival. In addition to roasted meats several types of beer (“all sorts of fine beer” and several kind of “fine mixed beers”) are highlighted.

Some New Year festivals included the performance of “divine marriage” (hashādu). The autumn festival in Uruk mentions “rites of the divine marriage” in a Nanaya temple, probably part of Eanna. The chapel and bed-chamber are both named in the ritual. The text does not specify the participants in the divine marriage.
Gilgamesh's father, Lugalbanda, and his mother, Ninsun, are both mentioned in the text. Early on, they are robed. At the very end of the eleventh day the gods wait for Lugalbanda and Ninsun to enter the assembly area, Ushukkinaku. The final meal is cleared; libations for Lugalbanda and Ninsun (and other gods) are given. And the long festival comes to an end. Ishtar has “clothing ceremonies” on Day 7, as have Anu and Antu. Otherwise it is not clear from the text how much Ishtar and her Companions feature in this Seleucid period ritual.

On the other hand, the more “civil” and “kingly” New Year festival in Nisannu gives even more prominence to Ishtar and her Companions. The seat of Anu is even located in the cella of Ishtar in the great temple Urugal. Most of Ishtar’s Companions participate in the rituals as well.

The presence of beer, celebration (music and singing especially) and the goddess Ninsun in the Akitu festivals mentioned in Gilgamesh is, then, worth noting. For whatever reason the extant Akitu texts from Uruk do not place Ishtar and Ninsun together in the rituals. They both are associated in one way or another with Anu.

The two goddesses are separated in Gilgamesh as well. Ishtar is prominent in the First Prologue, but otherwise does not figure (explicitly) in Tablet 1. Ninsun is a wise dream interpreter to whom Gilgamesh presents his new friend Enkidu. And Ninsun has an important role to play in Tablet 3. Her dwelling is a palace; Ishtar’s is a temple. The two places and the two goddesses gradually pull Gilgamesh in different directions. In many ways they represent the tension between the traditional role of the Sumerian en in Uruk and the strong (Babylonian) king.

The one figure in Tablet 1 who provides a link between Ninsun and Ishtar is the harimtu. Not surprisingly, it is the harimtu, Shamhat, who describes Uruk in terms of almost continuous celebration, as if everyday were an Akitu festival.

The Meaning of “Civilization”

The earliest modern Western use of “civilization” has been traced to the Marquis de Mirabeau, perhaps as early as 1757 CE. A few years later (1766) he offered a definition of the term.

The civilization of a people is to be found in the softening of manners, in growing urbanity, in politer relations and in the spreading of knowledge in such ways that decency and seemliness are practiced until they transcend specific and detailed laws…. Civilization does nothing for society unless is it able to give form and substance to virtue. The concept of humanity is born in the bosom of societies softened by all these ingredients.526

While this is an idealized view of “civilized” life, calling for polite manners as well as “decency and seemliness,” it does touch on matters that came to be important in Mesopotamia as the Sumerian city-states like Uruk developed. The Marquis de Mirabeau does not make explicit the connection between “city” and “civilized,” but he would have
known that the terms themselves reflected the ancient city, especially Rome. “Growing urbanity” captures something of the connection, for in the 18th century Paris would have been Europe’s model of the sophisticated center of high culture.

Before we see in a little more detail what “civilization” meant for the Sumerians, it is worth recalling that festivals like the Akitu New Year festivals provide a glimpse of what the people, high and low, valued in their society. Food and drink, processions, sports, music and singing (including, of course, pieces filled with tragedy, for the cosmos collapsed before it was reorganized) over eleven days remind us that agriculture and animal husbandry supported the community, and that the economy cycled through the temple, which itself owned much of the cultivated land and many of the herds.

One of the oldest written texts in history comes from Uruk in the 4th millennium BCE. Much of the text, written with Proto-cuneiform signs that still retain the early pictographic forms, cannot yet be read. Enough of the signs, carefully written together in “cases,” provide numbers that relate to different professions and groups. Names of gods, especially Inanna, can be seen on the tablet. We learn that there are different assemblies, including an assembly of women, and the text hints at a hierarchical society. Three large signs at the bottom of the tablet, separated from the cases, identify the content of the text: Daily-Bread-Beer.

A Proto-Cuneiform Text about Bread and Beer

[See above, Fig. 17, “Daily Bread and Beer”]

Today the text, known as W 9168, ḫ+n+? in the Staatlichen Museen in Berlin, may be considered the written exemplar of Uruk society in microcosm. The tablet is shown rotated 90° from the way it has been published. This view shows the signs as they were written on the earliest texts, when the numbers on such “economic” texts—the large dots and semicircles—related to the signs below them.) This is one of the thousands of tablets dug up at the site of Eanna. The tablet is divided into sections, which are called “cases.” The deeply-indented circles and bowls-on-their-sides forms to the left of the most of the cases are numbers. We can recognize in very neat depictions the shapes of fish, plants of some sort, stars, bowls, heads of animals, as well as several signs made up of vertical and horizontal lines. Several signs repeat themselves. Some signs are drawn inside others. Though the writing is some of earliest in world history, it even then seems to be carefully-done and represent a well-organized society.

Recall that the areas cropped from the tablet show, from the lower left, two structures, one that includes an en sign, and another includes a bowl. The area from the bottom right shows three sal signs (public triangles indicating females). The sign above sal on the farthest right case is a sign for Inanna.

The three signs include a bowl (partially seen on the left) that gives a standard measure of barley or bread; a vessel for liquids; and a rising sun. Recall that barley was the product that provided both healthy food and a drink that was free of dangerous antigens. The tablet neatly enumerates daily rations for groups in the Uruk city-state.
It is not entirely clear that the larger the sign or the case indicates a difference in status. One of the more striking signs is a large *en* in what, once the writing system was rotated 90°, looks like a structure, a hall or building. It may attest to his high status. (See detail.) The earliest drawing of the sign, however, suggests something quite different: a field that is made productive through irrigation.

**Civil Society Reflected in Mesopotamian Proverbs**

Hundreds of years after “economic” texts like W 9168 “literary” texts begin to appear. We have noted that “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” and “Divine Dialogues” are among the earliest texts to be written. The earliest proverb collections come from this Early Dynastic or Presargonic period. As is often the case, proverbs provide an insight into a kind of down to earth “wisdom” often at odds with high end literature.

Proverbs are known from the earliest literature in 3rd millennium Mesopotamia. Since proverbs that are actively used provide a glimpse of cultural values and activities that are often ignored in high-end, official literature, they offer an invaluable tool for portraying the ordinary life of a people.

Ben Franklin’s collection of Poor Richard sayings may still resonate among Americans who are far removed from the agrarian society of the early Republic. “There are no gains, without pains” fits a society of high-achieving individuals as well as a more community-conscious village. The various sleeping foxes, cats in gloves and barking dogs Poor Richard reminds us of are as accessible to the citizen of a megalopolis as to the farmer. Ben Franklin must have been collecting the old saws as much for amusement as for practical advice, but it is easy to see that the collection as a whole reinforces the values of hard work and shrewd dealings. We may still tell our child to keep his nose to the grindstone though we would be hard pressed to explain what a grindstone is. “Tis’ hard for an empty Bag to stand upright” speaks to poverty, spirit and virtue as it did in an earlier age. “A Ploughman on his legs is higher than a Gentleman on his knees” would have tickled Chaucer. “Be industrious and free; be frugal and free” reflects rather a more democratic view of individuals.

Overall, Franklin’s collection portrays a society struggling to free itself of some traditional constraints and find itself in a world that was that changing. It is a little too obviously the conscious work of a shrewd, practical man who knew the value of teaching through entertainment. Some of the most innovative uses of proverbs today are aimed at persuading us to buy products. After all, “It pays to advertise” has been a business slogan since the beginning of World War I. The conscious manipulation (and production) of “wise” and persuasive sayings reminds us proverbs may not be as naive as they sometimes sound. It also should remind us that the purpose of making collections of proverbs may be driven as much by ideology as by a disinterested attempt to amuse or to preserve traditional wisdom.

It appears that knowing proverbs and, more importantly, how to use them at just the right time to clinch an argument, were important in Mesopotamia as they still are in Arabic-
speaking world today. Munir Ba‘albaki’s prestigious English-Arabic Dictionary, Al-
Mawrid, for example, includes smack in the center of a hefty volume “The Lamps of
The collection runs to 95 pages printed with blue highlighting on pale blue paper. It
includes favorites from Poor Richard, but most are traced to much earlier sources, some
as far back as Thucydides. (“History repeats itself.”) Proverb collections have been prominent in the
Arabic tradition for centuries.

To use proverbs in arguing often very sophisticated points requires that the proverb be
not only witty but transparent. Unfortunately, most collections assume the reader is
cultural insider and understands the context. It is often hard for an outsider to
understand proverbs. It is often easy to guess what a saying means from its form; but
form is at best a rough guide. A case in point is provided by Edward Westermarck in his
1930 Wit and Wisdom in Morocco: A Study of Native Proverbs. Westermarck’s very
unusual approach involved not only providing the sayings in Arabic with an English
translation but also providing transliterations to show how the sayings sounded in the
local dialect. (Since Modern Standard Arabic is so different from the many spoken
dialects of Arabic the preservation of an oral tradition requires something more than
writing out a proverb in Standard Arabic.) More importantly, Westermarck provides
clues to the meaning of proverbs in the contexts where they are appropriate. Many times
the meaning can be puzzled out by the form. “He who has no daughters, the people will
not know when he died” (Li ma ‘addu bnat ma i’arfuh n-nas imat mat [#164]), for
example, would probably be as true in ancient Shuruppak as in modern Fez. Daughters,
not sons, are more likely to mourn at a man’s death. (The followers of Inanna, often
reduced in modern times to “prostitutes,” were what we would consider professional
mourners, who are employed even in our own time—while daughters are considered the
more reliable mourners in the family.)

Two closely related Moroccan proverbs are less transparent to the outsider. “He who is
riding on a camel is not afraid lest the dogs should bite him” (#257), and “He who rides
on a camel is not afraid lest the dogs should bite him” (#432) would appear to say much
the same thing. According to Westermarck, the first is said of a person who belongs to a
small but good family: he need not fear “low-bred people with a large family.” The second
suggests a rather different context: it is said of a “person who is the friend of a person in
high position: he has nothing to fear from other people.”

Of course those sayings work by analogy, and the astute reader or hearer could probably
interpret them when they came up. The same may be true of “Fire underneath the straw”
(N-nār that et-tben [#336]). It is used when a person makes a show of friendship but
hides enmity in his heart. What, though, would one make of “Give birth to a male and
throw him into the sea?” In Arabic the typical punning points to its being a proverb:
Weldu dkar u siybu fl la-bhar (#166). According to Westermarck, Moroccans will say
this when a married woman is giving birth to a child. It means that a boy will save himself
even though he is thrown into the sea.
One of the best introductions to Palestinian Arab culture is by Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, an anthropologist and a scholar of literature, who collected oral folktales, not proverbs. Like proverbs, folktales provide a “portrait,” not exactly a reflection, of a culture. But in introducing an outsider audience to what the authors (and storytellers) know from the inside, Muhawi and Kanaana often resort to popular proverbs in the area. “The household of the father is a playground, and that of the husband is an education” (13) is one example. “Girls are kind,” is another. “Daughters will help you in your old age: they will take pity on you” is related to it (21). The ones chosen by Muhawi and Kanaana are often quite transparent, as these are. But when they are not, the authors provide the context.

**Sumerian Proverb Collections**

Proverbs are known from the earliest period when Mesopotamian literature can be recovered, the Early Dynastic period of the 3rd millennium BCE. Significantly, as soon as proverbs appear, they are organized into collections. For many years Bendt Alster has studied the structural principles of the Sumerian proverbs collections. Alster discovered some striking features of the collections as they were expanded in the Old Babylonian period of the 2nd millennium. The earliest collection, from Abu Salabikh (ca. 2500 BCE), that is, the Early Dynastic period, is framed by a Father-Son relationship. The father passes along his wisdom to his son. *The Instruction of Shuruppak* is envisioned as a talk from one of the pre-Flood rulers of a Sumerian city to his son, Ziusudra (or Ziusura). Old Babylonian stories of the Flood, in Akkadian, designate the hero who allows humanity to survive the Flood as Atrahasis, a name that means “incredibly wise,” or Utnapishtim, the name of the Noah-figure in *Gilgamesh*. Ziusudra is known from the fragmentary remains of a Sumerian flood story. There were local variants to the effects of the catastrophic Flood. In Uruk, for example the Flood marked the moment when Inanna brought her “House of Heaven” to earth. In most other versions of the story, the Flood changed human history when the institution of kingship “descended” from the heavens. Before the Flood humans were instructed by sages (*apkallus*), sometimes thought of as fish-like creatures who emerged from the Deep, the Abzu, like the Seven Wise Ones in the First Prologue of *Gilgamesh*. In the new order after the Flood humans came to be taught by the experts (*ummânu*s) among them, humans, like the authors of famous scientific and literary works. It is not immediately clear if the wisdom Suruppak imparts to Ziusudra in the proverb collection is connected with the Flood, but the theme of wisdom may be the link between the two traditions of Suruppak.

It may be significant that the earliest magical texts are also known from the Early Dynastic period, and one important type, Enki/Asalluhi texts (“Divine Dialogues”), is also framed as a passing on of wisdom from Father Enki to his son, Asalluhi. (Later, when the city god of Babylon was assimilated to Asalluhi, the father of Marduk, Ea—the Akkadian equivalent of Enki—is the one who transmits wisdom to the King of the Gods.)
Civilized Life and Family Relations

Two themes of the proverb collections are greatly strengthened in the expanded Old Babylonian versions of the very early collection. The Father-Son frame recedes at the same time that a related theme, Family Relations, is expanded. The early collection hints at a contrast between Civilized Life and Barbarians while the later collections turn this theme into something like a central focus of the collection.

Furthermore, the theme of Family Relations becomes interconnected with Civilized Life vs. Barbarians. Our term “civilized” retains traces of a connection with the civis, or city life, an association that would have been obvious to the inhabitants of the Sumerian city-states. The barbarous outsiders are largely envisioned as nomads.

As Alster points out, in what he calls the “Classical version” (Old Babylonian), a civilized community is marked by a concern for family and work. Civilized persons help one another, respect family relations, and work hard. The nomadic barbarians, in sharp contrast, are disorganized. They have neither concern for others nor respect for the family—and they are lazy.

A Sumerian narrative poem, “The Marriage of Martu,” makes a similar claim about the nomads. A certain Adnigkidu has fallen for the powerful wrestler, Martu, a nomad from northern Sumer, who is looking for a wife. A friend of the woman tries to dissuade her from marrying him because of his uncivilized ways.

“He who dwells in the mountains...
Having carried on (?) much strife with the kur, he know not submission,
He eats uncooked food,
He has no house while he lives,
He is not interred when he dies,
My friend—how is it you would marry Martu!” (lines 134-42)

In spite of these cautions, Adnigkidu, who lives in the city-state of Ninab, still wants to marry Martu. The story ends happily with the wedding of the two culturally different individuals. The story is a myth. Martu, like other figures in the poem, are deities. He is a representative of the nomads who live in the area around the city, and the myth may reflect an historical alliance of two groups. But it discloses an attitude that had become quite pervasive by the 2nd millennium.

In his careful reading of the Sumerian proverbs as the collections were expanded, Bendt Alster noted that the family is an increasing concern. The oldest version, from Abu Salabikh, does contain a few references. The frame—a father giving advice to his son—is one obvious feature. Marriage is better for a man than being unmarried: “The married man (dam tuku) is well equipped; the unmarried man (dam nu tuku) sleeps (?) in a haystack” (III.11-12). “Love maintains a family; hatred destroys a family” (IV.4-5).
A somewhat later (ca. 2400 BCE) collection from Adab adds a few other proverbs related to family life. “Do not have sexual intercourse with your slave girl: she will call you ‘Traitor’” (III.12-13). Proverbs warn against raping a man’s daughter (and bragging about it) and against challenging the father. Within the household the elder brother “is indeed a father,” and the elder sister “is indeed a mother” (23-24). The even longer version (ca. 1800 BCE) add more advice for a stable family. “Your successor (ibila) is for your house; your daughter (dumu-mí) is for her woman’s house (ama₃)” (40-41). Increasingly the advice is directed to mistakes made when choosing a wife or purchasing slaves. One should not choose a mate (dam) during a festival (ezem) (46-47). A series of related proverbs warns against beating a farmer’s son (“he will beat your irrigation canal”), buying a prostitute—“it is horrible (?)”—a house born slave, a free man, or a slave girl from the palace: the results in any case will be terrible (42-43). A greater number of proverbs warn against behaving badly, controlling anger, and taking care against liars and other treacherous persons. But the household is centrally important, and the collection emphasizes the need of the master of the house to conduct his affairs successfully.539

The Marks of Civilization

The successful master of the house must know how to deal with strangers, especially from outside the city. While it is not good practice to buy a slave girl from the palace, as we have seen, bringing down a slave from “the mountains” (kur) can be quite useful, since the slave has no connection either to home or to a city.

After you have brought down a foreign slave (sag kur-ra) from the mountains,
After you have brought a man from his unknown place,
My son, even to the place where the sun rises,
He will pour water for you, and walk in front of you.
Not having a house, he does not go to his house.
Not having a city, he does not go to his city.
--He does not favor it more than you,
he does not appreciate it more than you. (42-43)

The uncivilized place, though, is fraught with danger. Immediately after these lines we read,

My son, towards the East,
Do not travel alone.
A countryman (lú-zu-a) does not enslave you (?)
When you are among known persons, you can rely on (?) a man.
Do not pile up a mountain in the mountains.
Fate is a slippery bank
Which makes a man slide. (44-45)

Here the East—the place where the sun rises—is connected with the high mountains of Sumer’s neighbors, strangers who could not be trusted.

Even the strangers who appeared periodically in and around the Sumerian cities represented a threat. Nomads (mar-tu) provided a foil for city-dwellers. Often the
proverbs seem quite transparent. A cake made of gunida-wheat instead of honey confuses the nomad who eats it. The nomad does not know what it was made of (3.140). The building of cities—especially their walls that protected the civilized from the outsiders and the temples that marked the center of the city—was the special boast of rulers of the city-states, as many royal inscriptions make clear. The First Prologue of Gilgamesh is a later example. In the classical proverb collection the nomad is lazy while the civilized person is industrious. His life is defined by work. With the rise of kings the building of cities then becomes the mark of the most civilized person of the community.

A rather long proverb satirizes a fictional king, Nanne, the eternal loser (literally), who failed in this royal duty.

Nanne held his old age in high esteem.
He built Enlil’s temple, but did not complete it.
He built a wall around Nippur, but...
He built Eanna, but after it had fallen into neglect he carried it away.
He captured Simurrum, but did not [destroy its wall].
He never saw mighty kingship (nam-lugal-kala-ga)
Thus Nanne was carried away to the netherworld with a depressed heart. (3.31)

Another proverb turns on the leadership of Uruk.

The en decides in Uruk,
but for him the Lady of Eanna decides. (3.59)

The wordplay in the proverb turns on the real power behind the throne, that is, Inanna. The en of the city is the one who makes the important decisions—but it is actually the nin of the city who runs the place. As is often the case, the traditional English equivalents of en and nin fail to capture the power of these Sumerian terms, but “lord” and “lady” do today carry something of respect for civilized life.

Uruk appears again in a very complicated proverb. The proverb is one of a long series of proverbs that feature the fox (2.58-70), who functions much the way he does in European lore, where the fox (ka₅) is renowned for cunning, self-conceit and his ability to lie. He outfoxes his own mother (2.60). He can lie even to the god Enlil (2.58). Unable to build his own house, he comes to his friend’s house in the guise of a construction worker (2.62), apparently planning to take over the house for his own use. Urinating into the sea, he claims grandly that, “All of the sea is my urine” (2.67).

Most of these are one and two-line proverbs. The culmination of the series, though, is not only considerably longer, but also quite puzzling. Bendt Alster sees it as the grandiose plan to take over the whole city of Uruk. The plan is foiled when the fox retreats upon hearing the dogs howling in the city. Alster takes the allusion to a “slave-girl of Tummal” as a reference to the fox’s wife in the first line. Alster takes her to represent cowardice par excellence.

The fox said to his wife,
“Come! Let us crush Uruk with our teeth like a leek.
Let us strap Kullab upon our feet like sandals.”
Hardly had they come within a distance of 600 nindan (100 miles)
from the city,
before the dogs began to howl from the city.
“Slave-Girl-of-Tummal, Slave-Girl-of-Tummal,
come with me to your place!
All kinds of evil is howling from the city.” (2.69)543

Secular or Religious Figures?
One of the Sumerian proverb collections opens with a stirring appeal to cosmic justice
and the god who had come by the Old Babylonian to embody Justice, Utu/Shamash:

Who compares with Justice? It creates life.
If Wickedness exerts itself, how will Utu succeed? (1.1-1.2)544

Justice (nig-gi-na) creates life (nam-ti), while wickedness (nig-érim) frustrates the order
of the sun’s proper rule. The collection continues with several lines in the same vein,
emphasizing destruction and death rather than life. The deity mentioned, Ningishzida,
lives in the underworld.

Don’t cut the neck of that which has had its neck cut.
Don’t say to Ningishzida, “Let me live!”
Let me not pass through his gate!”
That which bowed down its neck (in submission)
puts its breast (forward in defiance).
To destroy something is in the power of God. There is no escape,545

(1.3—1.7, after Alster)

This heavy emphasis on Justice and its opposite, on life and death, sharply contrasts,
however, with the main body of proverbs in the Sumerian collections. Alster concludes,
properly, that the collections exhibit a “completely secular attitude toward social
behavior.”

As a further indication of the overall secular nature of the proverb collections, the early
versions Instructions of Shuruppak barely mention the Sun God Utu at all. The “classical”
version, from the Old Babylonian period, does mention Utu and wickedness many times,
in keeping with the larger role Utu (and his city Sippar) came to play in the religious life
and thought of Babylon. Still, Alster’s conclusion holds. Like many other proverb
collections, including those included in texts that were—or came to be—considered
sacred, as in the Bible, the Sumerian proverb collections are rich in the details of ordinary
life, with shrewd observations of the follies and errors that make survival, let alone
prosperity, difficult under quite ordinary circumstances of life. It is a world far removed
from the heroic narratives, myths and hymns that reflect the power of temple and palace.

We would not expect, then, that the religious specialists who are frequently mentioned in
the high-end literature of Mesopotamia would show up very often in the proverb
collections. Even when we emphasize, as we have throughout this study, that “the sacred” was not restricted to the temple, its officiants, and their rituals. What Uruk shows in its times of greatest prosperity is that virtually all nameable—classifiable—occupations and activities could be considered “sacred.” Or, perhaps more accurately, any goods and services that flowed through the temple or depended upon the temple as the organizing center of the community were simply part of the temple community. Activities of fishermen, farmers, canal-inspectors, textile-workers, clerks, shepherds and boatmen (better: boatpersons), and brewers, as we have seen in an Urukean Akitu festival, were as “sacred” as they were “secular.” At least in the earliest periods of Uruk’s history, our modern and distinctively Western distinction between the holy—what is kept separate by definition—and what exists outside the charmed circle obscures the networks that organized a community of specialists.

Some of the religious specialists do, however, show up the proverb collections. But even when a professional title is clearly connected with the temple, the proverb does not give much information about religious rites that might be involved. Only one proverb mentions the sanga (Akkadian shangû), in this case the head of Enlil’s temple. “Enlil’s temple is a summation of accounts. The administration-priest is its foreman” (3.91). Alster’s translation of sanga, “administration-priest,” reflects the usual activity of this powerful official. As chief administrator of the temple, the sanga is as often as not the Chief Financial Officer of the place, overseer of the temple’s books. What cultic duties he may have had is not evident in the proverb.

In the early part of the 2nd millennium BCE proverbs were taught in schools. Not surprisingly, the literate scholar, the dub-sar (Akkadian ṭupsharru), is the one encountered most frequently. Among the administrative reforms of the Ur III kings the number of schools increased as the need for bureaucrats and standardized forms increased. It would appear that many occupations that had not required what the schools provided—at base, literacy—then had need of the scribes if at least for record-keeping. Perhaps the most surprising feature of the Sumerian schools, which must never have educated the greater part of the population, was that the curriculum was not reduced, as we might have expected, to simple functional tasks. The long and difficult task of mastering cuneiform was accomplished through a variety of literary texts that anticipate the Western notion of “liberal arts.” Many important documents from Mesopotamia are known from “school texts,” which show the marks of inexperienced scribes and even erasures on the tablets that indicate the student’s struggle with the material.

Given the emphasis on literacy in the schools, then, it is not at all strange that the dub-sar would appear often.

One collection contains a sequence of more than twenty proverbs about scribes (2.36-2-57). The sequence opens with the student’s nightmare, a scribe who could not write his own name: “You’re a scribe and you don’t know your own name! Shame on you!” (2.36). This is quickly followed by encouragement: “When the scribe knows every entry, when his hand is good, he is indeed a scribe!” (2.37). Some proverbs point specifically to the
Sumerian language (*eme-gi*), which of course had to be mastered by scribes, who may well have been bilingual even in the earliest schools. “A scribe who does not know Sumerian, what kind of scribe is he?” (2.47). Another points to translation from Sumerian into Akkadian: “If the scribe does not know Sumerian, how will the translator succeed?” (2.49).

The proverbs provide a glimpse of student life, which, it appears, has not changed much in five thousand years. The student who thinks about his stomach will not pay attention to his writing (2.53). The chattering scribe is guilty of a great offense (2.52). Even the student who is a specialist too early comes in for criticism: if he masters counting, his writing is deficient; if, on the other hand, he masters the stylus, his numbers suffer (2.50).

Some scribes are praised. If the hand can keep up with the mouth, the scribe is indeed competent (2.40). “You’re an outstanding scribe, (by no means) are you a lowly man” (2.44). By an large, though, the scribes in this collection are not lavished with the praise that one finds in other cultures—and in other literary works in Mesopotamia (written, of course, by just those few individuals who had mastered the scribal art). The sequence of proverbs in this collection, rather, provides a glimpse of the everyday life of schools in Mesopotamia. Samuel Noah Kramer included first among the thirty-nine “firsts” he had found in Sumer the world’s first known schools. And he followed this with a chapter on the first case of “apple-polishing,” where a student who is having trouble with his teacher is advised to have his family invite the teacher over, give him a good meal and provide him with a fine garment and a ring. The teacher then predicts that the young man will become an enthusiastic master of learning.549

The sequence on scribes hints at interesting connections between the *dub-sar* and other occupations. The singer (*nar*, Akkadian *nāru*) shows up on five occasions. Like the scribe, the singer is praised when he knows every song and performs well (2.39). When the singer does not breathe properly, he is a fool (2.40). The singer without a voice is like a scribe without a hand (2.43). The parallels between scribe and singer suggest that the training of scribes was linked with musical training.550

The longest proverb in the sequence on scribes is a poem that ties the scribe to different occupations, most of them not related to the schools. The poem, which suggests a ranking of occupations according to their prestige in society, is interesting not so much in implicitly boosting the position of the scribe as it is in showing that even in this rather academic framework the scribe and other social roles are linked, not separated. The list of occupations in the myth, “Inanna and Enki,” makes the same point: writing is a craft like others. The proverb also shows how difficult it is to separate “religious” and “secular” occupations, a distinction that makes sense to us but which would puzzle Mesopotamia. It wittily pursues the fates of persons who have “disgraced” (*pe-el-lá*) their professions.

A disgraced scribe becomes an incantation priest (*gala*).
A disgraced singer becomes a piper.
A disgraced lamentation priest becomes a flutist.
A disgraced merchant becomes a twister (?).
A disgraced carpenter becomes a man of the spindle.
A disgraced smith becomes a man of the sickle.
A disgraced mason becomes a “clay dagger” (?). (2.54)
The last of these may mean that the mason becomes a hod-carrier. The list—scribe-incantation priest-singer-piper-lamentation priest-merchant-carpenter-smith-mason—may be ordered hierarchically from high to low (and specifically religious to what we would consider “secular”) but it resists rigid division into classes or castes. Only one proverb in the sequence on scribes even hints at such a division, since it connects two occupations that were apparently widely separated in the community. “A barber who knows Sumerian” (2.55) would be a paradox, since Sumerian had become an academic language, much as Broadcast Standard American English or Received Pronunciation were reinforced by generations of teachers in American and British schools in the 19th and 20th centuries of our era.

Similar questions could be asked of occupations such as the woodworker (nagar), the smith (simug), and the brewer (kurun, Akkadian sirāshû). The three are connected in one proverb that identifies their respective tools (UET 6/2 307). We would certainly think of these as secular occupations, but the first two were very important in the production of divine images, and the brewer maintains a central importance in the religious life of the community—including his participation in rituals—throughout the history of Mesopotamian religious institutions. The carpenter is associated in a different list with the reed worker (ad-kub), the smith, and the singer in a proverb that does not have any explicit religious overtones (3.87).

One short collection contains sequences on the proper regard for the god Enlil, on temples, and palaces. Along with the pieties of the farmer and herdsman, who raise their eyes toward Enlil and ask for deliverance of a city that has been cursed by the god, is a potter (bahar), who implores Enlil’s aid in identical language with the others (14.3-5). The potter is less often associated with the temple than are the carpenter, smith and others. (The potter does play an important role in the ritual killing of “The Mother of Sin” in Uruk.551

As we have seen, human occupations, both high and low, religious and “secular” (if such a distinction can be drawn at all) are mentioned frequently in the proverb collections. The occupations themselves are not ridiculed or satirized. One rather important figure does, however, seem to attract negative comment even when his activities are those of his office.

Of the clearly religious specialties, only the gala (Akkadian kalû) rates extensive treatment. In the proverb discussed earlier (2.54), the gala, translated as “lamentation priest,” is listed in rather neutral terms along with the scribe, incantation priest, singer, and merchant. The gala was a performer of laments, most notably in the mysteries of Inanna and Dumuzi. There is evidence that he was a sexual invert, perhaps castrated, and his ambiguous sexuality appears in the background and sometimes the foreground of several proverbs. Alster sees him “notorious as a self-conceited sponge” (II, 371). Several proverbs make reference to the gala and a “field,” the significance of which is not clear,
but suggests a sexual double entendre. Wedged in a series of animal-related sequences—
fox, donkey, ox, and dog—is a sequence devoted to the gala (2.97-106).

> For a lamentation priest, a field lies close to a house.
> A lamentation priest is the bottom (?) of a ship.
> A lamentation priest hurled his son into the water:
> “Let the city build like me, let the people live like me!”
> A lamentation priest wiped his anus and said,
> “I must not stir up that which belongs to the Queen of Heaven, my lady.”
> A lamentation priest, after he had met a lion in the desert, said,
> “Let him come! In the town..., at Inanna’s gate, oh dog, chased away with
> potsherds, what is your brother doing in the desert?”
> Although the lamentation priest’s grain boat sank,
> he came up on dry land....
> This is the bread of a lamentation priest:
> In bulk it is large, but its weight is small.
> A slave of a lamentation singer keeps howling in the streets,
> “My food ration, it is large in built, but its weight is small.
> Let me tell about the bulkiness of my food-ration.
> (It is) a lance (that) penetrates the city quarters.”
> A lamentation priest whose incantations don’t sound sweet,
> an...incantation priest is he! 

Three other proverbs in another collection associate the gala with cargo, barley, and a
field. Only one of the three has been (almost) completely restored.

> A lamentation priest [went to] steal barley on a man’s field.
> The owner of the field caught up with him.
> “My good head got confused, it got totally bewildered.
> Let me straighten it out. Let me [regain] my consciousness.” (21 Sec. D 3)

That the gala had a reputation for venality and pomposity seems clear from the proverbs.
One would not be far off to see in these proverbs a pervasive theme of unusual sexuality
that might unlock these rather obscure sayings.
Rulers in Proverbs: sipa, lugal, en, nin and gashan

Since there was a movement in the 3rd millennium that transferred power from temple to palace, it may be that some degree of secularization—distancing from the temple center—took place. Was the shepherd (sipa) a “secular” occupation? As a term that had clearly religious significance, as in the famous shepherd, Dumuzi, lover of Inanna, and political significance—sipa as one with lugal and en as designation of the community’s leadership, the term crosses the sacred/secular boundary. Even in, as we might think, purely economic terms, the “shepherd” who actually tended flocks in the fields and the “shepherd” whose capital was invested in the flock and who remained in the town or village were two parts of the economic process.

The proverb collection is peppered with references to these “royal” titles. The shepherd is sometimes a metaphor for leadership. “If the shepherd is intelligent, the people are (well) governed,” says one proverb (YBC 8929). It occurs in a context of leaders, judges and kings. One of these specifically praises the king who is both a scribe and a “mighty bond” blocking a river (YBC 8937). In the same context is a proverb that connects palace, king, and goddess by analogy with a forest. “The palace is a forest, the king is a lion. Ninegal covers men with a huge net” (YPC 9871).

Mainly, though, the sipa is the actual nomad, who is associated with his fellow in the settled community, the farmer. “The early working shepherd, / the early working farmer,/ the young man who got married while he was young,/ who compares to them?” (19 Sec. G 7). The proverb clearly commends dutiful, hard-working men—and links them with the man who early in life takes up his duty to support a wife and produce offspring. A variant appears in “The Song of the Plowing Oxen,” where the farmer and cowherd are likened to the youth who takes a wife and raises sons. More interesting is the shepherd who neglects his duty. “A shepherd his penis, a gardener his hair./ An unjust heir who does not support a wife, who does not support a son,/ is not raised to prosperity” (3.9). The proverb occurs in a context of very homey sayings about the failures of ordinary life. “Because the shepherd departed,/ his sheep did not come back into his custody” (3.10) is one. “Because the clever shepherd became confused,/ his sheep did not come back into his custody” (3.11).

Metaphorical extension of shepherdship seems almost inevitable, though. One proverb warns that a person should not attempt what is unsuitable. “Those who get excited should not become foremen./ A shepherd should not become a farmer” (1.97). On occasion the metaphor opens to the “Good Shepherd” image so well-known to the West.

A man’s personal god is a shepherd who finds pasturage for him. Let him lead him like sheep to the grass they can eat. (3.134)

The Sumerian proverb collections largely reflect the ordinary life of ordinary people. But kings are mentioned frequently. Sometimes the king shares the fate of his people. “When you are expelled from a city, that city and its king are carried off (as captives as well)” (1.69). And they are not always praised. A proverb dismisses cities, kings and queens altogether: “No Good At All’ is their name” (1.75). We have seen the unlucky king Nanne,
a failure in whatever he attempted. He failed to see “mighty kingship” itself (3.31). The sun—the god Utu, the great judge—is implicated in the assigning of kingship: “By sunrise decisions are made./ When the sun is up, kingship is assigned.” (3.83). (The luckless Nanne also appears in 14.16 for destroying the temple Ebabbar, which had been built by the famous king Mesilim. The reason, apparently, was that Nanne retaliated for having his offspring “cut off.”)

Some roles, even when they are traditionally performed by temple personnel, were in the process of becoming honorific or of measuring the distance that separated persons of importance at the top of society from those at the bottom.

The en, a human (originally either male or female depending on the gender of the deity who selected the en) who in the 3rd millennium had a position as exalted as the king, is mentioned a number of times in the proverb collections. Sometimes like the nin the term en designates the opposite of a slave, that is, en as “lord,” later the usual, if rather amorphous term, as in “Build like a lord, walk like a slave!/ Build like a slave, walk like a lord!” (2.137). A rather tricky saying may play on the to us familiar “power-behind-the-throne” theme: “The lord decides in Uruk, but for him the Lady of Eanna decides” (3.59).

The “lord” (en), who could be the god An himself but is more usually Inanna’s en in Uruk, may appear to make the decisions, but the Lady of Eanna (Inanna) is really the one who decides. More obscure to us is the proverb about the en, “The high priest rejected fish, he rejected leeks, / and he also rejected cress” (15 Sec. B 7). For cultic reasons the en was forbidden to eat certain strong smelling foods like fish, leeks, and garlic. The joke here may be that he would even object to the less-offensive cress.

On the other hand, just as a goddess like Inanna could be called nin and gashan, gods could be called en. In a proverb that identifies certain objectionable behaviors, the Sun God Utu is seen as the god who “tears out wickedness.” Utu is the “lord who loves justice” in the proverb (UET 6/2 289).

Another title that was originally used of men and women alike, nin (and its Emesal equivalent, gashan), come increasingly to be used only of women—or goddesses. Inanna, for example, is mentioned in proverbs under the title gashan, but gashan as often as not is translated as “lady.” The nin is sometimes (as in 1.75 mentioned above), the queen, for her title is paired with thelugal. Elsewhere, e.g., in 1.118, which deals with the proper care for a woman’s hair, “lady” seems to fit. After a proverb about rags being torn, another, perhaps related proverb, uses gashan instead of nin. “I am a lady who wears large garments./ Let me cut my loincloth” (1.176). Alster supposes that it “ridicules a woman who is so proud of her fine clothing that she scorns her own underwear, a characteristic attitude of anhomme nouveau” (II, 357).

Often the gashan is used in sharp contrast to the “slave girl,” or géme. There are a large number of proverbs that deal with the mischievous slave girl. “After (the lady) had left the house, and (the slave girl) had entered from the street, (away from) her lady the slave girl sat down at a banquet” (3.41) is one example. Usually the slave girl presumes upon the prerogatives of the lady. “Let me pluck!” is parallel to “Let me go!” in an Akkadian
translation of the Sumerian proverb, “I, a slave girl, I have no authority over my lady./My husband, [let me pluck!]) [sheep] (19 Sec. 10 11).

Even when the gashan is the Lady herself, Inanna (gashan-an-na), Lady of Heaven, the slave girl may be mischievous, not respecting the goddess. “The slave girls took out a harp. / The Queen of Heaven remained seated in the lowest dike” (21 Sec. A 10). (Another interpretation is that the slave’s playing the balag, an instrument used regularly in laments, indicates that the high goddess herself, like other deities, are dependent upon humans to perform necessary rites.554

Wise Females in Gilgamesh

In the first two tablets of Gilgamesh the two prominent females, the human Shamhat and the goddess Ninsun, are credited with exceptional wisdom. The device of having Shamhat relay to Enkidu the dreams Ninsun interpreted for Gilgamesh ties the two females together. To these we should add the women of Uruk who complain to the gods about the mistreatment of their daughters by Gilgamesh and the goddesses who take up their case—especially the Mother Goddess Aruru. Later in Gilgamesh we will see Siduri and the wife of Utnapishtim provide wisdom. And in the background is always the complicated goddess Ishtar. A modern reader might object that the females in Gilgamesh are secondary to males. Since the action scenes focus on Gilgamesh and Enkidu (and to a certain extent, Utnapishtim), the prominence of men in a heroic narrative in expected. Gilgamesh, however, preserve a long tradition of Sumerian literature, no doubt influenced by an aesthetic of oral composition, that narrates action largely through the speeches of the characters. Just as thought is expressed through speech, including interior monologues, action is filtered through speech. Speech tends to capture “wise” action. Behind this may also lay the long tradition that considers the word as having power. The Sumerian concept of the me, conceived as concepts governing the universe, is another expression of this idea.555

It is true that Gilgamesh largely portrays females as “dwelling” and sitting (the way deities are often portrayed), establishing themselves as centers of force. They can, on occasion, take action and move around. The harimtu Shamhat is the most obvious case in Gilgamesh, but we will see Ninsun on the move in Tablet 3. And Ishtar will have her moments of decisive action in later Gilgamesh narratives.

Notes to Chapter Two

441 Austen Henry Layard, Nineveh and Its Remains, 2 vols. In one (New York: George P. Putnam, 1852), II.44.

442 This is actually a detail from a more complicated cylinder seal, BM/Big number 89147, a brown and white quartz chalcedony cylinder seal, ca. 2400-2200 BCE, with an inscription of a sanga and his scribe; used with permission of the British Museum. The cylinder seal actually shows two heroes wrestling lions. See Dominique Collon, Near Eastern Seals (Berkeley and London: University of California
The partial reproduction of the seal impression was used as the frontispiece to *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*.


444 Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton, *Ishtar and Izdubar, The Epic of Babylon* (London/New York: W. H. Allen, 1884). The book has been republished several times, including online publication, without, alas, Hamilton’s extensive critical and interpretive notes.


451 CAD 17.i.311-12 sees *shamhatu* as a “prostitute, a woman connected with the temple,” whose title is derived from a term meaning “luxurious,” “lush,” and “prosperous,” *shamhu*; *harīmtu*, on the other hand, is a “prostitute,” possibly related to *harāmu*, “to separate,” CAD 6.101-102.


453 Smith and Sayce, 211.

454 Smith and Sayce, 212.

455 Now see George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, Plate 38 (MS B col. v) for the many fragments now joined to reconstruct much (though not all) of Tablet 1, column v. The handcopies are from George, Plates 45 and 44 (MS P).

456 The line is broken, but the simile is reconstructed from the parallel describing Enkidu, 1.107.

457 For transliteration and translation, see George, *The Standard Babylonian Epic*, 540-43.

458 F3d1 in George, *The Standard Babylonian Epic*, 542-43 (1.60).

459 There is still a question of about the status of the young women involved. George and Foster disagree: in this section, George (4) thinks Gil will not allow the women to go to their *bridegrooms*, where Foster (6) thinks it is a repetition of previous section, where women cannot go to their *mothers*. Parpola (71-72) thinks both sections refer to the bridegrooms (*hā’iru*, which can be either “husband” or “lover”).

460 The superscript elements in the passage are silent phonetic indicators that a person is a god (d for *dingir*); a place (*kt*); something wooden (*giš*); and plurality (*meš*).

461 See George, 183, for “Gilgamesh and the Netherworld,” and Douglas Frayne’s translation of “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld,” in Foster, 134, for the key lines in the Sumerian story.
For the Yale text, see Morris Jastrow and Albert T. Clay, *An Old Babylonian Version of the Gilgamesh Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), 64, 66. George clearly marks the different versions used in his translation, 8-, 14-17.


Could the singer/poet, together with a harp-like instrument, have been represented in the many cylinder seal impressions of Banquet Scenes, e.g., Pierre Amiet, *La Glyptic Mésopotamienne Archaïque*, Plates 88-91?


Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 142-43. The ambiguity may even have been picked up in one version of Enkidu’s creation by Aruru; where the zikru or “image” of Anu is impressed on the clay Aruru uses to construct Enkidu, an alternative is the image of Enlil, a god as important as Anu but imagined as far more warlike than Anu (as he is portrayed in *Gilgamesh*). See George, *The Standard Babylonian Epic*, 544-45. Enkidu is an “offspring of silence” (George), but another text reads the even more ominous “offspring of death.”

For Nisaba (or Nissaba), see Black and Green, 143.

Black and Green, 172.

The expression “rising of the heart” is used in the collection of potency incantations for an erection. See CAD 18.303-20 for the wide range of metaphors using *tebû*, esp. 18.317-18. The verb is used for Enkidu’s arousal when Shamhat strips before him.

For details, see Ackerman, 118. She acknowledges the groundbreaking work of Jeffrey Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, in this regard, 273. The passages are I.103-104, I10.4-5, and 10.8-9, 43-44, 117-118, 124-125, 216-217, and 223-224.
George, *The Standard Babylonian Epic,* points out the literal reading of the line, 544-45. The line must have given the earliest translators their cue that Enkidu lived in a cave “with his animals,” which would have included the “pet” *midannu*-beast.

Gardner and Maier, 68. Throughout our translation we followed earlier editors who divided the tablets into columns, a practice now abandoned since texts other than the main K-texts from Nineveh are used to reconstruct the poem. The main text used here, in George’s edition “P,” ends column ii with the Stalker’s reaction and emphasizes the point by drawing a line below the text. (A similar line follows the first twelve lines of column iii, when the Stalker reported to his Father.) See George, *The Standard Babylonian Epic,* Plates 42-43. Some of this material appears in Maier, “A Mesopotamian Hero for a Melancholy Age,” 33.


Dickson, “Looking at the Other in *Gilgamesh,*” 173.

Dickson, “Looking at the Other in *Gilgamesh,*” 173.

Dickson, “Looking at the Other in *Gilgamesh,*” 173.

Dickson, “Looking at the Other in *Gilgamesh,*” 175.

Dickson cites Jean Bottéro’s suggestion that the hoods and veils indicate that Siduri is married, “Looking at the Other in *Gilgamesh,*” 176.

Dickson, “Looking at the Other in *Gilgamesh,*” 177.

The brief episode includes many plays on the UP/DOWN metaphor, beginning with the woman stripping and Enkidu looking up to see her. Face-to-face frontal sex is represented in archaic cylinder seal impressions, e.g., Amiet, #1202, 1203, and Legrain, #365-67; where a bed is represented, plaques still show the couple as if they were upright and facing each other.

After George, *The Standard Babylonian Epic,* 548.

Compare our earlier translation, Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh,* 77.

For the first of these, see CAD 17.i.107. Scholars increasingly emphasize the growth of wisdom in Gilgamesh and Enkidu through the stories; see especially Thorkild Jacobsen, “Second Millennium Metaphors. ‘And Death the Journey’s End’: The *Gilgamesh Epic,*” *The Treasures of Darkness,* 193-20.


See Tigay, 198-213. George (8) translates *shâhu* (CAD 17.i.107, to grow in size or age) and *hasîsu* (ear, understanding) in the key lines (1.201-202) as “reason” and “understanding,” both of which terms are weighted heavily with traditions in Western philosophy; Foster is somewhat more cautious “he had gained [reason] and expanded his understanding” (9).
Chapter Two: Sex for the City


499  George, Gilgamesh, A New Translation, 9.

500  George, The Standard Babylonian Epic, notes the way different manuscripts identify Uruk, as the “sacred temple, dwelling of Anu and Ishtar,” in one version, and “the sacred temple, dwelling of Anu./ […] into Uruk the Sheepfold,/ [to] holy [Eanna], the dwelling of Ishtar,” in another, 551. See Gardner and Maier, 81-85.

501  The nēbehū is a sash or belt (Sumerian iberna), highly valued, worn by gods as well as humans, mentioned several times in Gilgamesh. In 8.48 it is a garment for “my joy,” that is, a kind of sexual attractiveness (lalū); the same line provides a variant, a “garment for my festivals” (CAD 11:144).

502  “Desire” (or libido) here, kuzbu, is written with the Sumerogram hi-li. “Sexual joy” translates rīshatu, which is often paired with hidātu and other expressions of joy (CAD 14.380).

503  That is, Enkidu does not know “life,” balātu.

504  George, The Standard Babylonian Epic, prefers the reading in B, to Px, which reads hadi’u’a amēlu, in the formula used in Gilgamesh where a “human” is of a certain type, here one who is characterized by both “joy” and “woe.” George translates the variant as “a man so merry.”

505  Like “joy/woe” and his immense sexuality, kuzbu, Gilgamesh is so full of libido that he cannot sleep, la s[lalulu].

506  George, The Standard Babylonian Epic, 553.


509  Marc J. H. Linssen, The Cults of Uruk and Babylon, 238-244.

510  George, The Epic of Gilgamesh, 90.

511  As George, The Epic of Gilgamesh, 46, points out, the main text is badly damaged at the end of Tablet 5. He fills in the missing lines with an Old Babylonian text, but even there the narration shifts to Enkidu, who appears to rejoice in the victory over Humbaba. Enkidu builds a door out of the timber that is cut, a door destined, together with the head of Humbaba, for Enlil’s Nippur (not Ishtar’s Uruk). One could argue, however, that Gilgamesh’s rejoicing is simply deferred to the end of the second great adventure, the killing of the Bull of Heaven, which begins immediately upon the hero’s return to Uruk (in Tablet 6).

512  Black and Green point out that the worship of Ishhara may have originated in Semitic traditions and entered Sumer from the Middle Euphrates region, 110. She shared many features with Ishstar, including an association with the underworld (if the Anatolian and Syrian goddess of the same name was identical with the Mesopotamian Ishshara); but she was also a mother goddess and in one tradition may have been considered the wife of the god Dagan.

513  Transliteration after George, The Standard Babylonian Epic, 562.

See Julex Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legimitation in Mesopotamia* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 104-105. While Bidmead concentrates mainly on the festival in Babylon, she includes much material about Uruk, e.g., a text from Uruk that appears indirectly to a sacred marriage and mentions Anu. Bidmead’s work appeared at the same time as Linssen’s, below.

Notice, however, the “priestly” functions of the shangu of Uruk in the Akītu festivals; normally an “administrator,” but sometimes seen as a “high priest,” the shangu in Uruk appears to have taken over roles that may have been performed by the ēnu. For the important roles played in Uruk by the asšinnu and kurgarrū, singing, dancing and playing musical instruments, see Bidmead, 120-21. The āshipu (mash-mash) plays a particularly important role, as he does in Babylon, but in Uruk he is not “banished” but stays through the entire ritual, 122.

Winter, “Art in Empire,” 377.

For the libba nashika of 2.289, see George, *The Standard Babylonian Epic*, 570-71.

See Bidmead, 5, 98.

Bidmead, in her chapter on the “Phenomenology of the akītu Festival,” 39-106, details the rituals in Babylon especially, 39-106.

Compare the rēsh shatti, CAD 14:285. The akītu shunnum, “sowing of barley,” took place in the autumn, and the akītu shekinku or “cutting of barley,” in the spring. See “Akītu,” en. wikipedia.org, for a description of the festival in Babylon, 1-11 Nisannu; and Bidmead, 42.

For the two festivals in Babylon and Uruk in Seleucid times, see Marc J. H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, 72-78.

For repairs to the temples in Uruk, see Bidmead, 69, 134; and the new Seleucid Akītu buildings in Uruk, 117.

Linssen, 77. See also his edition of KAR 132; The Tashritu texts are TU 39-40 and BRM 4, 7; 184-214.

Linssen, 188, 192.


My thanks to Richard A. Henshaw for this material. Henshaw points out that the four signs in the summary of the text, U₄ ASH KASH and what looks like GAR (and could be read NINDA) but may be GU₇, i.e., a person drinking, perhaps meaning comestibles), a sign that is broken but may not have included a head, are frequently found in Uruk III and IV texts. In his survey of extant Uruk texts from these early periods (now considered ca. 3500-3200 BCE), Henshaw discovered that GU₇ is often carried in GA-vessels or GA-ZATU753 vessels. (Note that the “priest-king” is shown on at least one cylinder seal from the period carrying vessels in the form of animals.) KASH, on the other hand, does not appear often. Titles of officials SANGA, EN, SHITA, NAM₂ (if it is an official), and NUN are often found in the 39 texts Henshaw examined. They do not normally appear in the last (summary) case, but in the body of the text. The GA container and ASH-U₄ (“one day”), SHE (grain), BAR and BA also appear frequently in the summary case. The tablets do contain a miscellaneous content, and one wonders who holds the varied material together.


Suruppak, Shuruppak, or Shuruppag, as variously transliterated, is a name derived from the Sumerian city that in some versions is considered the place where news of the Flood is leaked to the king (alternatively, priest) who allows humanity to survive the flood. The king’s name is read variously Ziusudra, Ziusura, or in Akkadian versions Utnapishtim, Utu-naishtu, or Ūt-napišti. For the last, see Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 189.


For the variety of *abgal/apkallu*, see 73-77, 185-87. The sages of Suruppak and some other Sumerian cities, known as *ūmu-apkallū*, and some other Sumerian cities complemented the fish-*apkallu* of Eridu and certain other cities, 75.


Proverb numbers refer to Alster’s 2-volume collection. Comments on specific proverbs appear in the second volume.

Alster notes Piotr Michalowski’s suggestion that the satire of Nanne may have applied to the rulers of the Ur III dynasty, II.380.

Alster cites Falkowitz for the interpretation that this is the “woman behind the man,” and suggests that the “lord” is the god An, while the lady of Eanna is the goddess Inanna, II.383. Julye Bidmead points out that by Seleucid times only one woman, a queen, takes part in the Akitu festivals, and only then in a small part, 122.

Alster, II.367.


1.3—1.7, after Alster.
The Sumerian proverb collections include some 23 references to the *dub-sar*, far more than any other occupation; see Alster, *Proverbs*, “Glossary,” II.501-48. 


The translations are from Alster, *Proverbs*, I. For commentary on the proverbs, see *Proverbs*, II. 


Maier, “Gender Differences in the First Millennium,” 350-51. 


The purest example is the myth of “Inanna and Enki: The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization from Eridu to Erech;” see Kramer and Maier, 57-68.