Chapter Five

The Sun’s Path to Humbaba

Protecting the Heroes

The role of the Sun God Shamash is, as we have already suggested, greatly expanded in *Gilgamesh* beyond the role he plays in earlier versions of the Gilgamesh stories. The expansion of the role reflects the growing importance of Shamash in Mesopotamian religious thought. The holy city of Sippar largely supplants the earlier religious center, Nippur. To a great extent the rise of an upstart Babylon is largely responsible for the transformation. Semitic elements generally are strengthened and combined with Sumerian traditions. (This trend had already begun with the rise of Agade/Akkad in the empire formed when Sargon the Great defeated the Sumerian south.)

In addition to a large religious literature the exaltation of Shamash brought new roles—especially for women—at least temporarily in play. Rituals involving purification, healing, and offerings (or statues, for example) gain prominence as kingship increasingly impinges upon temple matters. The transformation of kingship, especially under the famous Hammurabi of Babylon, had a profound, if not perhaps always intended, impact on Uruk. The Old Babylonian period of the early 2nd millennium BCE was in many ways a Golden Age of both the new literature written in Akkadian and the older Sumerian literature—as the Sumerian language was dying off.

Utu/Shamash, Sumerian and Akkadian, was always a factor in the Humbaba episode. Enkidu reminds Gilgamesh that if he wants to launch a campaign against the protector of the Cedar Forest, he must inform the Sun God of his intentions. (The Sumerian stories tend to emphasize that the real object is to obtain precious lumber for Uruk, and the heroes are accompanied by a number of young men who help to cut down the trees.) Akkadian versions of the story increase the aid given by the Sun God to the heroes, and *Gilgamesh* expands the assistance even further.

Since the tendency of the *Gilgamesh* poet is to foreground new material, we have already seen in Tablet 3, through Ninsun, the most radical change in the story: the motivation. Where earlier versions open with Gilgamesh’s desire to make a name for himself (as a hedge against the inevitable—that humans must die), the *Gilgamesh* poet plants the impetus for the action in Shamash’s desire to destroy the evil Humbaba represents. Shamash initiates the action, according to Ninsun, by inspiring and energizing Gilgamesh to seek and destroy Humbaba. The full implications of this twist in the story are only clear in later parts of *Gilgamesh*, but they are becoming evident in by the fourth and fifth tablets.

The Humbaba episode is much longer and more fully developed than The Bull of Heaven episode that follows it in Tablet 6. It is already clear in Tablet 1 that Gilgamesh wants to challenge Humbaba. The influence of the Sun God extends into Tablets 6 and 7, so it is
safe to say that in the major revision of the stories *Gilgamesh* the Sun God has come to dominate the first half of *Gilgamesh*. We first look at Tablets 4 and 5 and then suggest some of the historical and cultural changes that influenced this great revision of the story.

**Fragments of a Story**

Tablets 4 and 5 complete the story of Humbaba begun in Tablet 2. Tablet 4 narrates the difficult journey to the Forest of Cedars; Tablet 5 describes the conflict with Humbaba. The two tablets correspond in many ways to the Sumerian “Gilgamesh and Huwawa,” but the many gaps in the tablets are usually filled in by Akkadian versions of the story from Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian sources.

One major difference between the Sumerian versions of the story and Akkadian versions is the keen interest in the interpretation of dreams. In all versions the heroes appeal to the Sun God for help in the endeavor, but the dreams that are so prominent in Tablet 4 are not in the Sumerian accounts. (In one version Enkidu has a dream, but no details are given; in another, Gilgamesh has a terrifying dream, but Enkidu’s interpretation is missing. In either case the motif is not as prominent as it is in Akkadian versions.) The very number of Akkadian texts that preserve the dreams indicates the increasing popularity of the motif.

The actual encounter of the heroes with Humbaba preserves many motifs in the Sumerian versions.

Tablet 5 completes the story of Humbaba with, as expected from Tablet 3, the death of the giant. There are some gaps in the text, but in the slightly more than 300 poetic lines only a few lines are given over to the battle between the heroes and the giant. Some lines at the beginning of the tablet to a description of the awesome mountain covered with precious cedars. Among other things, the mountain is a dwelling of the gods, and one deity in particular has a throne there: Irnina, another name for Ishtar. It is a sacred grove with Humbaba set as its guardian by the King of the Gods, Enlil, himself. Much of the preparation for battle is usually filled in from other Akkadian versions of the story, and those are rather different from the Sumerian version. In all versions, one objective is achieved: cutting down cedars. In the Sumerian poem, Gilgamesh succeeds by tricking Humbaba. The emphasis in Tablet 5 is on the help Shamash provides the heroes, with the thirteen winds that stun the monster. Since earlier we have read about another object, ridding the world of “evil” hated by Shamash, another aspect of the story is given particular prominence. When the heroes have Humbaba in their grasp, he asks for mercy. Enkidu now is adamant. Gilgamesh should not listen to Humbaba’s pleas. In the Sumerian story, Enkidu is the one who kills the giant. Here, as in other Akkadian texts, it is Gilgamesh who stabs Humbaba with his knife. (Visual images of the scene were popular, and show a giant forced to his knees, the heroes on either side of him, and Gilgamesh making the fatal blow.)

Since the gods in council, especially Enlil, will ultimately decide which of the heroes is guilty of this outrage, the emphasis on Humbaba’s (deceptive?) plea for mercy and the
debate by the heroes, which ends up in Gilgamesh taking the decisive action, transforms a simple battle scene into an ethical dilemma for the heroes.

Once Humbaba is slain, the men cut timber. Enkidu makes an elaborate door from the lumber. They make a raft, place the cedars on it, and travel downriver to Enlil’s home in Nippur. Gilgamesh carries the head of Humbaba to Enlil.

**Who Killed Humbaba?**

This should be the easiest question to answer. Tablet 5 is full of gaps, but the text is clear in one important respect: Gilgamesh makes the first move, striking Humbaba in the neck. Enkidu somehow pulls out the lungs (5:263-65). An older (Old Babylonian) version has Gilgamesh taking up his ax in one hand and his knife in the other (Ischchali 21’-22’), as Gilgamesh is being urged on by Enkidu.  

The Sumerian versions appear to tell a different story. Both “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” versions (today labeled A and B) appear prominently in the Decad, a literary catalog from Nippur that provided a curriculum for the Sumerian scribal schools. As is typical of the *Gilgamesh* poet, the episode is set in a much larger context, largely by fronting or foregrounding material. The Sumerian material, for example, opens immediately with Gilgamesh’s intention in seeking out Humbaba. (Huwawa is the older form of the name.) Humans cannot escape death. What he can do is set up a name for himself. The older versions generally emphasize the political and economic reason for Urukeans entering the mountain lair of Humbaba, that is, to secure timber for the south. Good wood was scarce in the floodplain and was so valuable that the wooden rafts built to transport lumber were themselves sold at end of the journey. The rationale is not absent in *Gilgamesh* Tablet 5, but it is muted there. Enkidu is careful to craft a “door” of precious lumber for Enlil in Nippur. The heroes will get into trouble for killing Humbaba, since he has been protected by Enlil. Tablet 7 will take up the complexities of Enlil’s wrath (and Enkidu’s subsequent cursing of the door). *Gilgamesh* may even have ignored the motif that the people will rejoice when they see the gigantic door, a detail present in Old Babylonian version of the story.

W. G. Lambert has studied nine visual representations of the killing of Humbaba. All nine show Humbaba as a giant brought to his knees by the heroes. In several the scene is witnessed by another person. In all cases, Humbaba is at the center, with Gilgamesh on one side of him (mainly the left side) and Enkidu on the other. In eight of the nine the heroes face Humbaba, but Humbaba faces the viewer, a motif that suggests the terrifying head of the ogre. Lambert noted a particularly important change in the representation of the event. From the early 2nd millennium to the 1st millennium, the honor of finishing off the monster changes from Enkidu to Gilgamesh.

The change from Enkidu to Gilgamesh reflects the change from the Sumerian texts to Akkadian texts. “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” (A) preserves the episode in its entirety. In the Sumerian versions, Utu helps the heroes, providing them with “The Warriors” who hold Humbaba fast. But Gilgamesh resorts to a trick to get close to the giant. (The text
has Gilgamesh desiring to see the giant “face to face.”) Humbaba is protected by seven terrifying radiances. Gilgamesh gets Humbaba to give up each one in turn as Gilgamesh promises to give him many valuable objects. (The most valuable are Gilgamesh’s “older sister,” Enmebaragesi, and his “younger sister,” Peshtur). When Humbaba gives up his protection, he can be taken. Humbaba complains that Gilgamesh has put a halter on him, “like a captured wild bull.”

At this point Gilgamesh is triumphant. Humbaba, however, is upset at the trick, and he appeals to the Sun God Utu. He begs for mercy.

This is where the versions become very different. In the Sumerian stories, Gilgamesh is “noble” and shows it when “his heart took pity on him.” He will let Humbaba go free. This display of empathy, however, infuriates Enkidu. In a long speech Enkidu tries to change Gilgamesh’s mind. Humbaba charges Enkidu with speaking “evil words.” When he hears this, Enkidu, full of rage and fury, severs Humbaba’s head.

Humbaba had upset Enkidu by referring to him as a hired man, who should be following his leader. This may account for the twist that the story takes at the moment when the two heroes put the head of Humbaba in a leather bag and take it to Enlil and Ninlil. Now Enlil, far from being grateful, is angry. He blames Gilgamesh for killing Humbaba. He asks Gilgamesh why he has done such a thing. He should have sat with Humbaba, eaten bread and drunk water with Humbaba.

Enlil then takes the seven terrifying radiances that had been Humbaba and distributes them to field, river, lion, woods, palace and even to the goddess of dungeons, Nungal. The last of the seven radiances he takes for himself.

It is often tricky to put any emphasis on the final lines of such texts, since they turn from the narrative to a quick regard for a deity. In the case of “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” (A), the last two lines honor Gilgamesh and gives praise to the wise goddess Nisaba—this, just after Enlil has blamed Gilgamesh (not Enkidu) for the unwise act of killing Humbaba. Gilgamesh Tablet 5 is, of course, very different.

A Hittite Version of the Story
Ruggero Stefanini thinks that, in wrapping the head of Humbaba in a bag, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are “joyous and exultant” as they take the head to Enlil in Nippur. It is true that the people in the Sumerian “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” (A) may find joy in Enkidu’s gift of the door. An Old Babylonian version (IM 28-29) has Enkidu hoping that the door will bring rejoicing to the people of Nippur and delight to Enlil, but even this bit of hope, which may indicate Enkidu’s joy in the triumphant over Humbaba, is radically compressed or missing altogether in Gilgamesh. In contrast to the treatment of The Bull of Heaven in Tablet 6, where the two heroes and the people of Uruk rejoice in the victory and celebrate the event, the end of Gilgamesh Tablet 5 has little room for joy. Possibly this reduction or omission of the motif is significant in light of the Gilgamesh poet’s emphasis elsewhere in the “joy” and “woe” of Gilgamesh and Enkidu.
Stefanini attempts to understand why, in the Sumerian version of the story, the two heroes are confident that Enlil will accept the killing of Humbaba: perhaps Enlil, not the Sun God had been the one to commission the deed in the first place.

A Hittite version of the Humbaba story is regularly seen ed into Gilgamesh Tablet 7, where the Akkadian text is missing. This is a big loss, since the beginning of Gilgamesh 7 would clear up the terrible mystery: why is Enkidu selected for death while Gilgamesh is spared? The question is key to the second half of Gilgamesh, where the story turns tragic. Gilgamesh makes it clear that the Sun God had motivated Gilgamesh to destroy Humbaba. This may be a good point to present something of the Hittite material.

The Hittite text, from the Hittite capital of Hattusha, dates from the latter half of the 2nd millennium, roughly the time Gilgamesh may have been composed. The Hittite version is a very compressed story of Gilgamesh in three short tablets. Tablet I tells of the fashioning of Gilgamesh by three gods, Ea, the Sun God of Heaven, and the Storm God. Gilgamesh wanders until his comes to Uruk. There he overpowers the young men of the city.

The Mother Goddess is upset with Gilgamesh and fashions Enkidu, who eventually grapples with and then kisses Gilgamesh. The woman sent out to seduce Enkidu is called Shanhatu, and it is Shanhatu who tells Enkidu that Gilgamesh demands that the women given in marriage sleep with Gilgamesh before they sleep with their husbands. (So both part of the Oppression of Uruk are present in the Hittite version.) The preparation for the expedition against Humbaba (Huwawa, as elsewhere) is, sadly, very broken up in the text, but it does not include, apparently, the motif that the Sun God has initiated the action. The Sun God does, however, help the heroes, providing them with the eight winds that will help them defeat Humbaba. Humbaba asks for mercy, and Enkidu objects. Unfortunately, the killing itself is not clear from the broken text.

**Seeking Help in Dreams**

The better part of the long (approximately 260 line) Tablet 4 is taken up by dreams Gilgamesh receives on the way to the encounter with Humbaba. Nightmares are more like it. On at least five occasions Gilgamesh dreams and Enkidu interprets the dreams. While the dreams themselves are terrifying, Enkidu consistently interprets them as favorable to the heroes as they seek out the monster.

Before considering the specifics of the dreams, it is worthwhile noting that long before Sigmund Freud the ancient world was fascinated by dreams and their interpretation. The standard work on the interpretation of dreams in Mesopotamia is by A. Leo Oppenheim. Oppenheim documented the importance of dreams. They were often messages from the gods. They were then “sacred” and dangerous. They had to be removed from the dreamer and interpreted by someone other than the dreamer. There were religious specialists who interpreted dreams just as there were specialists who examined the organs of sacrificed animals and the behavior of seeds in oil and such like. Collections of dream omens have survived from Mesopotamia. Unlike Freudian analysis,
which saw dreams as the royal road to the unconscious, Mesopotamian analysis saw them as divine messages, often about the future and insights into other worlds.

This was not just a storytelling device. Kings reported highly significant dreams they had received from the gods. Assurbanipal, for example, tells of a dream received from Ishtar, who encouraged him to fight an enemy in a situation that appeared he would surely lose.

Gilgamesh’s dreams are particularly important since he sought them out. At each stage in the journey from Uruk to the Cedar Forest Gilgamesh prays for a dream and Enkidu prepares a “House of the Dream God,” with a door to keep out the weather. Inside the “house” Enkidu draws a circle and has Gilgamesh lie down inside the circle. Enkidu then “falls flat like a net” (George’s translation, 30ff.) and lays down in the doorway. The poet even describes the posture of Gilgamesh as a falls asleep: he rests his chin on his knees, i.e., the fetal position that even Freud would not fail to appreciate.

We should also mention that the Sun God, Shamash, is prominent in the story once again. Where Ninsun had prayed that Shamash would protect Gilgamesh on his journey, his protection of the heroes persists even during the night. Shamash is frequently associated with dreams. As Enkidu interprets the dreams, Shamash makes his appearance, especially in the fourth and fifth dreams, where Shamash defeats the terrifying Thunderbird and, appearing as a Wild Bull, offers his help to Gilgamesh. (Gilgamesh’s father, Lugalbanda, also appears in the fifth dream, giving water to his son.) It is possible that Shamash appears in one form or another in all five dreams. Much of Tablet 4 is missing, and the text is fragmentary. Assyriologists normally fill in the details from other texts. What is noteworthy is that the figures that appear—the mountain falling, bulls, the Thunderbird—all seem like monsters that can hardly be defeated by mere mortals, but, as Enkidu interprets them, are either defeated or themselves symbolize Shamash as the protector of the heroes. In this interpretation Enkidu, as we shall see, proves to be correct.

**Dream 1:** A mountain falls, suggesting that Humbaba will collapse on the heroes. Enkidu interprets is as the mountain itself falling—a victory for the heroes.

**Dream 2:** A handsome man saves the hero. A mountain throws him down, but the mountain is not Humbaba.

**Dream 3:** The heavens cry out; earth trembles; darkness, lightening and fire. A battle is fought, in which an old man appears. Enkidu interprets the dream as Gilgamesh successfully fighting Humbaba; the old man is Gilgamesh’s father, the famous Lugalbanda.

**Dream 4:** A Thunderbird appears in the sky. A man in a strange form defeats the Thunderbird. Enkidu interprets the man as Shamash.

**Dream 5:** A wild bull appears to attack. Someone gives Gilgamesh a drink from a waterskin. Enkidu sees the wild bull as Shamash, who will help the men. The water is given to him by father Lugalbanda.
For all the positive interpretations of the prophetic dreams, as the heroes approach to mountain with its forest of cedars, Enkidu once again falters. Gilgamesh encourages Enkidu to forget Death and seek Life. At the entrance to the mountain the heroes fall silent and halt their progress.

**Big Day and The Kushu**

“The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” contains a reference to crushing (kun) a kúshu, actually a kúshu a-nim (A.iii'.12), that is a kúshu of/in “standing water.” Douglas Frayne, who edited and translated the poem takes the creature to be an aquatic monster. The hero, Amaushumgalanna, crushes the beast. The lines that follow reinforce the setting of the event. There is a reference to a boat “spread with white gourds” and something brought to the shore of the engur. Following this is a “glimmering flood,” and a “cleaver of (hard) stone,” presumably epithets describing the hero.

This would seem to be the earliest literary reference to a figure better known in its Akkadian translation, the kusarikku (usually Sumerian alim or gud-alim). The venerable alim and even the gud-alim seem to be related to mountains. In the Inanna-Dumuzi literature, he carries Dumuzi into the mountains. (Possibly this reflects an older view of kur as the place of the dead.) The kusarikku is a mythological beast, a bison, sometimes depicted as a bison with a human face. He is associated with the Sun God. While he is often a peaceful figure, he is fought by Ninurta, Ningirsu and later Marduk. The place where the kusarikku is defeated in, curiously enough, the sea, according to J. S. Cooper. As with many monsters and enemies, when defeated they become protective spirits. Bison heads, some which appear like the later heads of Humbaba, are thought to have been apotropaic figures.

Frayne has noted that Old Akkadian cylinder seals represent a bull-man and a six-locked curly bearded man slaying lions and bulls. He identifies the heroes as Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

Old Akkadian seals often combine the Bison-Man locked in combat with the Sun God juxtaposed with another combat scene. In that scene the Sun God subdues a giant. The giant and the Bison-Man are not being slain, it appears, but restrained. I would like to hazard a guess that the juxtaposed scenes represent (daily?) threats that are held back by the sun on his journey above the earth and below the earth. (Note that the underworld journey of the Sun God in a boat has a figure that combines the bison and lion, presumably protective spirits at that point.) The giant, I think, represents Big Day, otherwise known as Big Weather Beast (u₄-gal, Akkadian ugallu). The older Sumerian figure, according to Wiggermann, is specified only by its stature. While later impressions show Big Day as a lion, even there he is sometimes shown with human feet. Mythologically he is the personified Day. I would guess that he is a Big Day because of its destructive potential, perhaps as an apocalyptic figure. He may be related to the Sun God in a version of the “appointed time” of the Flood, a time signaled by the Sun God Shamash in *Gilgamesh* (Tablet 11.91, 118). He is restrained by the sun and transformed into a protective spirit.
A cylinder seal now in the Louvre (A.141) is a clear representation of the Sun God (second from right). The god, with a distinctive horned cap (representative of a divine status), brandishes a mace. The rays emitted by his upper torso identifies the Sun God. He holds in check a gigantic figure seated on a mountain. That figure, also with a horned cap, may be Big Day (or Big Weather Beast). The similarity between the two figures is striking, but the one who is restrained is far taller. The conventional posture allows the similarity in status—one does not stand above the other—at the same time indicating the huge size of the one who is being restrained. (Another version of the scene is shown in the Preface, Fig.8.)

As is often the case, the scene includes another. Here a goddess, with her shoulder exposed and wearing a long dress, also holds a mace and appears to be restraining a male from whose body rays of light are emitted. The figure behind her, an attendant, may provide a clue to the identity of the goddess. Visual representations of Inanna’s attendant, Ninshubur, often combines both male and female emblems. Here the figure has a long beard but is wearing a goddess skirt and is exposing his/her shoulders. Inanna frequently appears with a mace.

In both parts of the scene a god restrains (but does not kill) the opponent.

A third cylinder seal in the Louvre collection (A.131) sets the scene of a mainly nude figure retraining a Bison Man in the center of three related scenes. Left of the Bison Man is a giant brought to his knees by a similar (or identical) mainly nude figure. Once again a tiny figure, possibly with a bow (?) participates in the scene. He is the only one who does not wear the horned cap of divinity.

The scene to the right has been interpreted by Douglas Frayne as an episode in the Birth of Gilgamesh. Note the being crushed under the feet of the goddess.

The pairing of images on Old Akkadian cylinder seals suggests an approach to interpreting Gilgamesh that may prove useful. Amaushumgalanna killing The Bull of Heaven in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” may or may not be paired with the equivalent of Humbaba, who is depicted as a giant on 2nd and 1st millennium cylinder seals. The lengthy preparation for the battle with Humbaba and the encounter itself in Gilgamesh is not matched by the length of the episode with The Bull of Heaven. The two heroic adventures are, however, paired frequently in references to Gilgamesh and Enkidu later in the poem. Sometimes the pairing seems strained. But the visual representations of Gilgamesh and Enkidu present the two adventures as if they are somehow equivalent.

Old Akkadian seal impressions of the giant and the Bison-man associate both with the Sun God. That itself is an anomaly. Whatever the symbols may point to—cosmic disasters, threats to the birth of a special child or the empire’s struggles with barbarian outsiders—traditional motifs that are associated with the warrior god Ninurta (and
Ningirsu) are twisted into references to the emerging Sun God in this period, and only in
this period.

Certain figures on the Old Akkadian cylinder seals are certainly gods, since they carry on
their heads the horns of divinity. Not all conflicts between deities and their opponents
end in the destruction of the enemy. Perhaps the way beasts and monsters are mastered
by the gods rather than destroyed points to the god’s ability to transform them into
protective spirits—without losing their fearsome powers.

If the giant and the Bison-man are adopted later as visual representations of Humbaba
and The Bull of Heaven, the outcome of the events has surely changed. Gilgamesh and
Enkidu are certainly responsible for killing the two enemies, and one of the heroes will
die for their actions. The Sun God has little to do with The Bull of Heaven episode in
Gilgamesh. It is somewhat surprising to see Gilgamesh and Enkidu taking a moment
after killing the bull to present themselves to the Sun God. Older versions of the story do
not include such actions on the part of the heroes.

The Sun God is essential to the story of Humbaba in Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh’s mother
reminds Shamash that he has placed the restless heart in her son and is directing
Gilgamesh and Enkidu to defeat the “evil” hated by the Sun God. She asks for, and
receives, the protection of Shamash on the adventure. Along the way even during the
night, when Shamash is, of course, not visible to the heroes, the Sun God sends messages
in the form of dreams. And when the battle with Humbaba takes place, Shamash provides
what is necessary for the men to complete the task.

Shamash is complicit, then, in the destruction of Humbaba (and may have some part in
The Bull of Heaven). From the point of view of Shamash the defeat of Humbaba is not a
matter of restraining the Big Day; Humbaba has become a symbol of what must be
removed from the world. What makes this move so interesting is that it leads, in
Gilgamesh, to a most interesting ethical question. Once restrained, Humbaba pleads for
his life. He is willing to do what Gilgamesh requires to keep himself alive. The decision
to kill Humbaba—and the hero who actually does the deed—are elements in the
Gilgamesh tradition that provide an ethical dimension lacking in the purely mythological
versions of such conflicts.

There is something of a parallel in the episode involving The Bull of Heaven. Gilgamesh
responds to Ishtar’s proposal by pointing out her transformations of her many lovers and
her inability to protect humans more generally. This infuriates Ishtar, and when she
brings The Bull of Heaven down upon the city, whatever the Bull symbolizes, the heroes
have no choice but to kill it. There is no question of taming it and turning it into a
protective spirit.

In both Gilgamesh episodes the human heroes have little or no choice in destroying the
enemies. Symbols used earlier for the gods and their opponents are rightly translated
into the human sphere.
Facing the Other

Turning what we would consider monsters and demons into protective figures is a bit difficult for the West to understand. Mesopotamia had a long tradition of placing images not only in temples and palaces but also in gates and rooms of ordinary houses to ward off demons. Figures were fashioned of clay and wood, and rituals were performed that involved such apotropaic monsters. Gargoyles protecting medieval cathedrals are as close as the West came to these ancient and widespread practices. Christian theology considers satanic forces as irredeemably evil and encourages the depiction of them as terrifying creatures. Such thinking discourages the idea that a hero, in defeating a monster, can absorb the enormous energy and craft of the opponent. Even in Old English poetry, when Jesus is depicted as a hero running toward his encounter with the cross, he would not have been a “wild bull” any more than Mother Mary, with a long litany of attributes, would be a “wild cow.” Considering evil forces as protectors is an even greater stretch.

Mesopotamian figures like Humbaba and the demon Pazuzu could, however, be turned into guardians that could ward off the very things they represent. The Lamashtu Plaque (seen earlier, Fig. 54) shows a hostile demon, Lamashtu; but the head overlooking the frame of the plaque is Pazuzu, who is providing protection for the scene as the healing of the patient is taking place. (For Pazuzu and other demons, the enemy is disease, usually epidemics.) In both text and visual images Humbaba’s head (eventually cut off and offered to the god Enlil) is even more terrifying than his gigantic strength. No sooner does Gilgamesh gain a friend in Enkidu than he turns to the heroic adventure of challenging a creature whose “voice is the Flood,” whose speaking is “fire,” his bread “death” itself. W. G. Lambert has traced the visual image of Humbaba not only through Mesopotamia but also into ancient Greece, where it serves as the model of the dreaded Medusa. Again and again this image of Humbaba is reinforced as Gilgamesh and Enkidu make their way to the Cedar Forest. When he actually speaks to the heroes, Humbaba is ironically quite humanlike. His appeal for mercy, an attempt at finding sympathy if not empathy in the heroes, raises an ethical dilemma for Gilgamesh. This may account for the curious absence of joy and celebration in killing the dreaded Humbaba. (Killing The Bull of Heaven, in contrast, sets off wide celebration in the city and joy in both Gilgamesh and Enkidu—even though it further angers Ishtar and plunges her women into mourning.)

Humbaba’s head is worth remembering when thinking about face-to-face encounters with what modern cultural theorists like to call The Other. At the beginning of Gilgamesh we are given an intriguing example. By the time Enkidu arrives in Uruk, he has been humanized and civilized. Our first glimpse of him is doubled: the narrator’s view, which observes Enkidu as different and special, but not terrifying in the manner of an Humbaba; and immediately a second view, from the point of view of the hunter, who is almost paralyzed with fear. What is not quite as obvious is the reaction of the woman who waits for him at the watering hole. The harimtu calmly strips before the strange creature, facing him and sexually initiating him face-to-face. The only comment about her
emotional response is the laconic indication that she felt no fear of the powerful savage she embraces.

The only explicit scene of sexual contact, then, depicts enormous energy but at the same time an intimate encounter, person to person, that lead immediately to a surprisingly respectful relationship on the part of the savage and the *harimtu*. When Enkidu enters the city, the population greets him in awe, but not terror. They await the battle that will take place when he meets Gilgamesh. The fighting itself is described in a verse paragraph about the same length as Enkidu’s sexual initiation, and like the earlier scene full of enormous power. The fighting begins as soon as Enkidu and Gilgamesh meet. There is no indication of their emotional states. The fight is a wrestling match, a favorite Mesopotamian sport (as it is in the Middle East today). Gilgamesh was remembered annually with wrestling contests. The battle is, of course, a face-to-face encounter.

It is easy to overlook the importance of these encounters, both of which are “heroic” in their own ways. We have come to expect, from a long tradition of heroic battles--Achilles and Hector, Aeneas and Turnus, are the models for the highest-end literature in the West as well as for the Superheroes of popular culture—that the heroic ideal is courage under the most intense pressure, when one individual faces another. In the case of Gilgamesh vs. Enkidu, the result of the fight (so even that it is difficult to see a clear winner) is a repetition of the sexual scene earlier: the two men instantly become the most intimate of friends.

While one can imagine that an oral storyteller in Mesopotamia could have elaborated the narratives of Enkidu and Shamhat and Enkidu and Gilgamesh into very long and detailed stories, the author of *Gilgamesh* tells of them in brief bursts of intense physicality. The same is true of the great episodes that dominate the first half of *Gilgamesh*. After the lengthy preparation for the battle with Humbaba, from Tablets 1 through 5, the killing is described in exactly four lines (5:262-265). Gilgamesh unsheathes his knife, sticks Humbaba in the neck, while Enkidu does something that reaches into the lungs of the giant. (The key line is broken.) Translators regularly fill out the scene with an older (Old Babylonian) version that adds some detail, but even there the fight takes up only a few more lines, and mainly adds to the outcome Humbaba’s dying cries and the enormous amount of blood that was shed.

The preparation for the battle with The Bull of Heaven is foreshortened. (The whole of Tablet 6 is slightly more than 180 lines long, more than one hundred lines shorter than Tablet 5 itself.) The fight itself is a bit longer, though. Once The Bull of Heaven descends and begins to devastate the city, the men seize the bull and, in a scene that reminds many readers of highly ritualistic bullfights, the action takes up some twenty lines (6:123-44), including Gilgamesh’s plan for killing him. The actual killing takes up merely two lines of text. Like a butcher, Gilgamesh dispatches The Bull of Heaven with his knife thrust between the yoke of the horns and the “slaughter-spot” (6:145-46). A good deal more attention is given to the heroes’ offering to Shamash that immediately follows the killing and to the great celebration that follows.
The brevity of the encounters does not, in my opinion, take away from the intensity of the storytelling. The two battles differ in another way. Humbaba is a very powerful ogre, but he is intelligent, even eloquent in his speech. The Bull of Heaven, who was identified with the constellation Taurus, has no such humanlike (or godlike) intelligence. The bull is pure animal; he neither understands the men who talk to each other while they are fighting nor speaks to them. But in another way the episodes are similar: both are face-to-face encounters. The episodes were very popular in the 1st millennium visual arts. What is depicted is the actual moment when the heroes strike the enemies.

The artists are careful to depict Gilgamesh and The Bull of Heaven facing Gilgamesh. This presented a problem with Humbaba, and two different solutions appear. In one case, Humbaba, brought down to the size of the heroes, faces Gilgamesh. In the other case, Humbaba’s head, like Medusa’s, faces the viewer. In all cases, though, it is clear that the courage of the hero requires that the opponents confront one another.

**Weapons**

The *en*, as portrayed in 4th millennium art, sometimes is shown with a weapon. The Lion Hunt Stela shows him with two, a large staff, perhaps a spear, with which he takes down an attacking lion, and a bow, in a scene where he is poised to direct an arrow into the head of another lion. In the cylinder seal where he protects a cow that is giving birth, he fends off a lion with a long staff. Gilgamesh and Enkidu, like Ishtar, is portrayed in later cylinder seals with bow and arrows. These weapons do not figure, though, in *Gilgamesh*.

Even in the one Sumerian Gilgamesh story that does depict armies in battle it is not clear what weapons Gilgamesh and Enkidu employ. In “Gilgamesh and Akka,” Uruk is called “the smithy of the gods,” and the implements of war, not specified in the poem, are presumably forged there. The story is an account of Gilgamesh’s defeat of Akka of Kish, the son of Enmebaragesi, who attacks Uruk. Gilgamesh (or Bilgames) is up to the challenge. The elders of the city do not support his plan to wage war with Akka. But Gilgamesh puts his trust in Inanna—and promptly ignores the elders. He turns instead to the assembly of young men, and the young men support him. He tells his “slave” (or “servant”) Enkidu to prepare the weapons they will need. The siege goes badly for a time, but then the young men of Uruk are armed. Gilgamesh raises his head on the city rampart and spots Akka. Battle is joined, Akka is captured. Gilgamesh, though, is merciful and lets Akka go free, repaying an old favor.

“Gilgamesh and Akka” is a short poem of just over one hundred lines. For a war story it is remarkably free of details of what must have been an important battle historically. (Again, one can imagine an oral poet, like the professionals today in North Africa who can turn the heroic *Sirat Banī Hilal*, expanding the tale to meet the expectations of a given audience. Poets have been able to tell the story in as little as an hour and to stretch it for more than a day’s recitation.) We are not told what weapons were forged or what Enkidu used when he went out of the city. Gilgamesh himself has only to appear on the ramparts for the battle to turn in his favor.
In *Gilgamesh* the hero uses the ultimate face-to-face hand-to-hand weapon, the knife. The knife (*patru*) is the weapon mentioned in the opening line of “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” where it (*gír*) is used on The Bull of Heaven. It is the same instrument used by the *kurgarra* in the 1st millennium “Inanna and the Mother of Sin.” In *Gilgamesh* the knife is often paired with the ax (*hatstsinnu*). Sometimes the *patru* varies with the *namtsaru*, a sword or dirk.

Gilgamesh uses the knife to kill both Humbaba (5:263) and The Bull of Heaven (6:145). Cylinder seals depict him using the knife even when other weapons are present. Gilgamesh later uses it to attack lions in the mountains. A beautifully ornamented knife is forged as a gift for the “butcher of the underworld,” Bibbu (8:176), among the many gifts for those in authority, who may be able to help Enkidu when he travels to the world of the dead.

Gilgamesh also uses the knife against The Stone Ones, as Gilgamesh prepares (?) to cross the waters to find Utanapishtim. Destroying The Stone Ones, however, appears to be a great mistake. He and the boatman will eventually be able to make the crossing, but they will never be able to repeat it, once they return. Clearly his attacking The Stone Ones is a desecration.

Against The Stone Ones Gilgamesh also uses his ax. The ax is mentioned more frequently in *Gilgamesh* than the knife, mainly because it is paired with the knife but—as in the killing of Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven—it is not employed in all cases. The two are used to kill and scatter lions (9:15). An Old Babylonian version of the story presents the forging of the ax in Uruk in preparation for going after Humbaba in somewhat more detail than in *Gilgamesh* itself (though the text is broken in this location).

More interestingly, the ax is used as a symbol for Enkidu. In Gilgamesh’s second dream he sees an ax (1:278) lying in a street in Uruk. People crowd around it. He tells his mother Ninsun the dream, adding that he lifted up the ax and set it at her feet. He loved the ax “like a wife” and embraced it. Ninsun will make the ax Gilgamesh’s equal. Dreams, which in these literary contexts are messages from the gods, are always dangerous to the dreamer and need to be told and interpreted by someone else. In this case the interpretation is pretty easy. Ninsun tells Gilgamesh that the ax is a friend and companion, and that Gilgamesh will love him like a wife.\(^{1530}\)

The ax is to be forged in Uruk as soon as Gilgamesh determines on going after Humbaba (2:241 = OB Y162-170, where both ax and knife are prepared for the journey). As they approach Humbaba, the take us both ax and knife.

In the great elegy for Enkidu in Tablet 8, the ax is again Enkidu himself. Gilgamesh will weep for Enkidu like a woman, “a professional mourner” (*lallarītu*, 8:46). In another passage that has caught the attention of many readers, Gilgamesh calls Enkidu a friend, likens himself to a female, and likens Enkidu to the ax at his side, the sword (*namtsaru*) at his belt, and the shield at his face (8:44-47). Enkidu is also the very garment he wears at festivals (*lubar isinnatia*) and his “belt” of “pleasure” (*nēbēh lalēa*) (8:48). The
juxtaposition of weapons and garments probably combine familiar symbols of masculinity and femininity. Enkidu fills virtually every intimate male and female intimate role for (or with) Gilgamesh.

On the level of extensions of the hand and coverings of the body the weapons and clothing in *Gilgamesh* reinforce the intimate, face-to-face relationships of heroes both in love and war.

**The Ethical Debate**

Humbaba praises Gilgamesh and asks that his life be spared. In return, Humbaba will provide the hero with as much timber as he wishes. Enkidu sees his friend wavering and urges him to kill the monster (who then releases his wrath on Enkidu.) Still Gilgamesh hesitates, and Enkidu then adds another curious idea into the mix. Gilgamesh should kill Humbaba quickly, before Enlil hears what the men will have done (5.187). Humbaba predicts that the gods will angrily take it out on them, but that Gilgamesh will establish a name that will endure. The debate continues, and before Gilgamesh makes his move, Humbaba curses them.

Twice in the debate Enkidu repeats the point that the great gods will retaliate for the killing of Humbaba. The odd point in the argument is that Enkidu specifies both Enlil and Shamash as the gods who will object to the taking of Humbaba’s life. Even with the restoration of many lines in Tablet 5 and the discovery of a number of older versions of the episode, many details are still missing. Mentioning Shamash in this context may simply be an anomaly. Assyriologists are still uncertain if the two lines that mention Enlil and Shamash place the sun god in his northern city of Sippar or his Sumerian city of Larsa (5.189, 213). Both lines are broken where the city name should appear. If Sippar, then linking Enlil and Shamash may be simply a formula indicating the high gods, Sumerian and Semitic, and their sacred dwellings.

In any event, it is not clear why Shamash would object to the killing of Humbaba if the Sun God had initiated the heroic act, protected the men in their arduous journey through the wilderness, and disabled Humbaba with the thirteen winds—only then to object to the execution. If Humbaba had come to symbolize “anything evil,” but had been protected by the powerful Enlil, there is reason enough for Enlil to demand punishment for the offense against him—but not reason for Shamash to demand punishment. The part of *Gilgamesh* that would clear up the problem has not yet been recovered.

**Visual Evidence**

Finding as famous a literary and historical figure as Gilgamesh in the visual arts of Mesopotamia would appear to be an easy task. We have seen that as early as 1876 George Smith had considered a cylinder seal showing a nude hero wrestling a lion as a portrayal of Gilgamesh. That led scholars to other images of heroes holding lions and other figures, gods or heroes, contesting with lions and bulls. Recall the cylinder seal impression of hero a hero wrestling a lion George Smith used in *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, assuming it was a depiction of Gilgamesh.
A very striking image, from Abydos in Egypt, from the 4th millennium BCE, shows a tall man holding two very large lions. He is dressed exactly like the Sumerian en on 4th millennium cylinder seals, with his long robe, sash or belt, and distinctive rolled cap. The images (on the handle of a knife) also include pairs of animals that are not restrained by the “priest-king”: bulls, goats and others that are free because, presumably, the en is protecting them from the predatory lions.

[Fig. 46: See “Illustrations”: “Gebel el-Arak knife handle”]

The Egyptian “Gebel el-Arak” knife handle has been compared with a seal from that other important early civilization, Mohenjo Daro in the Indus Valley. There, too, a central figure is holding lions.1532

[Fig. 47: See “Illustrations”: “Mohenjo Daro seal”]

Very old images of two heroic figures positioned symmetrically suggested Gilgamesh and Enkidu, particularly when one of the figures had a human face but the body of a bull.

So many different images were suggested that a great deal of skepticism set in. Certainly there are images that show two heroes, one distinguished from the other mainly by dress (but also by weapons in some cases), fighting giants and winged bulls, and they must surely represent the moment when Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven.

Wilfred G. Lambert set out to clarify the confusion over different images, and he made a particularly important discovery. Certain cylinder seal impressions show Enkidu killing Humbaba, while others have Gilgamesh giving the fatal thrust into the giant who had been forced to his knees.1533 In the nine images Lambert used to illustrate changes in the Humbaba story, all of them show a central giant held down by the feet of one or both of the heroes on either side of Humbaba. In all but one image Humbaba faces the viewer. Lambert point out that the terrifying face of Humbaba provided a model for the later Greek images of Medusa. In five images a tree is included in the scene; in another a mountain is indicated by a worshiper standing on a mountain. (Tree and mountain may be related, as they are in the dwelling of Humbaba in Gilgamesh.)

In all nine scenes the two heroes are dressed differently. For the most part one of the heroes is “better dressed,” in Lambert’s description, than the other. Typically Gilgamesh wears a long robe and a distinctive cap. Enkidu wears a short skirt and a different headdress.

The most significant difference between older and later scenes is that Enkidu is one who kills Humbaba in scenes that derive from the Sumerian “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” stories, the ones that were part of the Decad curriculum. The later images show Gilgamesh as the killer. This, we have seen, follows the Gilgamesh portrayal of the scene and, I think, the ethical debate that led up to Gilgamesh’s decision not to show mercy to Humbaba.

Contrast a later Neo-Assyrian seal impression with one from an earlier time.
As Lambert interprets the older scene, the figure on the left, Gilgamesh, threatens Humbaba, while the figure on the right, Enkidu, is doing the killing. The later, 1st millennium image, reverses the action: Gilgamesh is using his dagger, while Enkidu threatens Humbaba with an ax.

Notes to Chapter Five

1505 George, The Epic of Gilgamesh, A New Translation, 44-46; Foster, The Epic of Gilgamesh, 43, takes the curious (and broken) line about the lungs to mean that Enkidu and Gilgamesh pull out something “as far as the lungs.” For Dalley, the text is simply too broken to read a coherent account at this point, 76.

1506 Black, The Literature of Ancient Sumer, 299-301.

1507 George, 151 (A version), 161-62 (B version); Douglas Frayne’s translations, in Foster, 104 (A version), 115 (B version).

1508 IM 29, in George, 47.


1511 George inserts the Old Babylonian version of some twelve lines into the gap of three lines at the end of Tablet 5 (lines 297-99), 47.

1512 The Hittite text is translated by Gary Beckman in Foster, 157-65.

1513 Hittite Prayers to the Sun God were intended to appease angry personal gods. According to Daniel Schwemer, the hymns to the Sun God and appeals to personal gods are both “heavily influenced” by Akkadian prayers, both in the language and in the motifs employed. At least one of them probably became “part of the advanced scribal curriculum.” In the three hymns edited by Schwemer the Sun God is addressed in ways similar to the Babylonian tradition. A very ill person, who cannot sleep and does not know the sins he may have committed, seeks answers in the form of dreams directly or through a seeress, or by extispicy. The “Prayer of a Mortal” combines motifs of the Sun God as a Lord of Judgement, god of mercy, an eminent king and lord, “father (and) mother of the oppressed [and] orphaned.” He judges the “case of dog and pig” and also the case against “the evil and wicked person.” The mortal who makes the plea will offer him bread and beer. See Schwemer, “Hittite Prayers to the Sun-God for Appeasing an Angry Personal God: A Critical Edition of CTH 372-4,” in Mon dieu, qu’ai-je donc fait? (Zurich: Habilitatinsschrift, 2008), made available online.


Chapter Five: The Sun’s Path to Humbaba


The Sumerian Dictionary I.iii.173-76.

F. A. M. Wiggermann, Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts, 175. Wiggermann is certain that the figure is not The Bull of Heaven, and leaves open the question if it is related to the dying god Gu-gal-anna.

Angim, 148 ff., cited in Wiggermann, 177.


See Frayne, “Birth,” Figs. 9, 10, 12 and 13. Piotr Steinkeller sees in the deity with rays streaming from his shoulders a Sun God, “Early Semitic Literature and Third Millennium Seals with Mythological Motifs,” 244-83, where Dominique Collon sees a Moon God or a Sun God battling a mountain god, “Moon, Boats and Battle,” Sumerian Gods and Their Representations, ed. Finkel, 11-17. Maria De Jong Elli, “An Old Babylonian kusarikkutu,” DUMU-ES-DUB-BA-A, ed. Behrens, 125-35, deals extensively with the figure as animal, as myth, and as en enemy of the gods that is transformed into a positive, apotropaic influence.

Wiggermann, Mesopotamian Protective Spirits, 169, 171.


Wiggermann, Mesopotamian Protective Spirits, xii.


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

George, The Epic of Gilgamesh, A New Translation, 145, where the text is called “Bilgames and Akka.”


While others see a shift in scene, from Enkidu and Shamhat to Gilgamesh and Ninsun, George, the Epic of Gilgamesh, A New Translation, 9-11, interprets the whole scene of Gilgamesh’s dreams as Shamhat telling Enkidu about Gilgamesh telling Ninsun about the dreams. Shamhat and Enkidu immediately make love at the end of Shamhat’s account (1:299-300).

The line numbering here follows Andrew George’s. Numbering the lines in Tablet 5 is particularly tricky because of the many gaps in the text. Where George has these two lines, for example, in 5.189 and 213, Benjamin Foster numbers then 5.91 and 107, and Simo Parpola numbers them 5.162 and 204. Parpola reads “Sippar” in the break, while George and Foster read “Larsa.” These are the only places in Gilgamesh where Shamash’s city (whichever one is meant) is mentioned. The possibility that Sippar was taken by the Babylonians as the sacred city as Nippur had come to be in an earlier period for the Sumerians may provide a rationale for pairing those cities rather than Utu’s generally less important site, Larsa. See Jennie Myers, “Šamaš of Sippar and the First Dynasty of Babylon,” 194-95.

See www.ancient-wisdom.co.uk/crossculturality.htm.