Preface: The Case for Intimacy

“He is the Slayer of The Bull of Heaven”

--“The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh”

The first line of what is likely the earliest reference to the greatest of heroes in ancient Mesopotamia announces almost everything that would become problematic in *Gilgamesh*. Perhaps the line should read, “He knifed The Bull of Heaven.” When his exploits become clearly visible, we see him and his friend Enkidu at the moment when Gilgamesh is burying his dagger into the bull. In a parallel scene we see the two heroes subduing a giant. These two adventures, which pit the humans against extraordinarily powerful creatures, would be appropriate in any modern superhero fantasy.

These were popular images of the hero in antiquity. But they do not reveal the empathic and tragic dimensions to the story of Gilgamesh.

The last lines of “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” hint at what might be called the Hero’s Dilemma. The fate of one selected for greatness involves a terrible loss. He is the one “anointed with first-quality oil,” but whose life is tragically brief. Centuries before Achilles the Mesopotamian hero suffers a fate similar to the Homeric hero whose story provided the pattern of the Western world’s most respected literature, the epic.

As soon as we detect themes and images in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” that reappear in later Gilgamesh stories, though, we are faced with problems. For one, the name Gilgamesh does not appear in the poem. Rather, we see a hero called by an epithet, Amaushumgalanna, an epithet most often associated with other figures in Gilgamesh’s city, Uruk. And the friend, Enkidu, whose life and death are so important to *Gilgamesh*, is nowhere to be found in this poem. Admittedly the reading of Sumerian texts at such an early period is fraught with difficulties and much of what we know now will be corrected when other documents are deciphered. But it seems clear that the legends that grew up around a Sumerian king drew on motifs that were ancient long before Gilgamesh himself appeared in history.

Hundreds of years before Gilgamesh ruled Uruk, at a time when the city was the largest and most prosperous community in Sumer, artists cut into cylindrical stones the visual record of a ruler, sometimes alone with the Great Goddess, but often with a companion. In beautifully crafted scenes, the ruler is seen in a variety of activities. The one who frequently follows him is slightly smaller, with long hair, and wearing a different skirt. Where the ruler, usually called by modern scholars a “priest-king,” wears a distinctive rolled cap and a long, see-through skirt, the one accompanying him, who might otherwise be identified as a woman (with the long hair) or whose gender is ambiguous, wears a shorter skirt. (The skirt is often, though not always, of the see-through variety scholars identify as netting.)
When he/she appears with the net-skirted high official, the scene appears to be a ritual procession toward the temple of the Great Goddess (as in this detail from a cylinder seal-impression) or a scene of feeding animals under the protection of the Great Goddess. As with other scenes from this very early period (the late 4th millennium BCE), it is difficult to tell if these are religious or secular activities. (The Great Goddess herself is often accompanied by a gender-ambiguous figure, a certain Ninshubur, her companion and servant.) The figure on the left in the well-known “Greenstone Seal of Adda” shows Ninshubur with a beard but revealing his/her leg in a way suggestive of goddesses. [See “Illustrations”: Fig. 16, Delaporte, Musée du Louvre, #S 462] Could the net-skirted acolyte of the ruler be the prototype of the beloved friend of Gilgamesh, Enkidu?

The essays in this book consider some dimensions of Gilgamesh that would have been obvious, I suspect, to a Mesopotamian audience, especially those who lived in the still-prosperous city of Uruk more than two thousand years after the historical Gilgamesh. The main lines of the story will be sketched in early chapters. Except for the names of gods, humans and places that present difficulties for a first reading of the poem, since Mesopotamian literature is not as well known to moderns as Greco-Roman myth and literature, the narratives can be followed rather easily. The essays here emphasize the setting of the stories, and the aim is to recapture something of the literary representation of intimacy in a very different culture from ours. The essays employ key modern concepts, notably libido and empathy, to remove the veils our Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions developed that tend to obscure the older culture. The preview of my case for intimacy in Gilgamesh involves brief comments on the protagonist of the story, the setting in and outside Uruk, storytelling practices, Mesopotamian deities, and the difficult cultural representations of gender and the body.
Stories of the Joy/Woe Man

*Gilgamesh* is a long Akkadian poem in twelve tablets, much of which (though not all) has been recovered. In brief, the large movement in the work consists of major episodes that divide into two main stages, one that emphasizes the “joy” aspect of Gilgamesh and a second that emphasizes his “woe.” The crisis comes just as Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu celebrate their victory over The Bull of Heaven, exactly at the center of the poem. Both Enkidu and Gilgamesh are plunged into terribly melancholia.

The First Half

- The king oppresses his people.
- His rival, Enkidu, becomes his intimate friend and “brother.”
- The two heroes, with the help of the Sun God, defeat the giant Humbaba.
- The goddess Ishtar offers herself to Gilgamesh.
- Gilgamesh rejects her and must then fight The Bull of Heaven
- The heroes celebrate their victory.

The Second Half

- The gods decree that Enkidu must die.
- Enkidu dies and Gilgamesh mourns his death.
- Gilgamesh literally goes mad and wildly searches for “life.”
- His journey takes him to the hero of the Flood and the man’s wife.
- Gilgamesh gains, then loses, a plant of rejuvenation.
- Gilgamesh returns to Uruk—and to Ishtar.

Coda: Tablet 12

This controversial narrative tells of Enkidu, who becomes trapped in the underworld but whose spirit is permitted to escape and speak with Gilgamesh. Enkidu tells of the fates of humans in the dreaded underworld. The Enkidu narrative can be seen in a simple diagram.
Gilgamesh is the ruler of the ancient city of Uruk, a city dominated in the poet’s imagination by the grand city walls (traditionally the work of Gilgamesh himself) and the temple complex of Ishtar. The opening lines of the poem call the reader to admire the great walls and the interior of the city, and the lines already anticipate the motif of the journey.
Gilgamesh is the one who has seen the *nagbu*, that is, he has seen it all, and “has brought back news” from before the Flood.” (The *nagbu* is, among other things, the source of waters—rivers and springs. The word also means “totality.” And I rather like the ambiguity in the first line of the poem: Gilgamesh has seen both the source of deep waters, like the *abzu* or *engur*, the waters of life and he has seen everything. The line may anticipate the ultimate reach of Gilgamesh’s agonizing journey, the place where Utnapishtim and his wife dwell, as the “mouth” of rivers.) The lines anticipate the journey Gilgamesh undertakes upon the death of his *ibru*, friend Enkidu, a journey that takes him to the sage, Utnapishtim, who tells him of the Flood.

The first glimpse of the god/man Gilgamesh, though, reveals him as the “Joy/Woe Man,” restless day and night. He oppresses the citizens by sending the men into battle and by demanding the first-night privileges in the bride house. The citizens cry out for help and receive it. Anu and the mother goddess, Aruru, create a “double” for Gilgamesh, the man/beast Enkidu.

Psychologist Sheldon Kopp considers Enkidu the other half, the animal nature, of the “hyper-man” Gilgamesh:

> In her wisdom, Aruru creates a double for Gilgamesh who will serve as his other half, his animal nature, someone who will break his pride by showing him that he is only a man. Each of us has such a shadow from which he flees. Each man is haunted by that specter of a double who represents all that he would say “no” to in himself. To whatever extent I deny my hidden twin-self, you may expect to see my personality twisted into a grotesque mask of neurotic caricature.3

As king and *en* (a term that is difficult to define; the sign itself is indicated EN in this essay, to distinguish the sign from the Sumerian word itself), Gilgamesh is—or should be—the very model of the “civilized” person. In appearance, strength, intelligence, and spiritual endowment (offspring of the goddess Ninsun, who “knows all things”), he is the image of male perfection.4 Enkidu is his equal in strength and will become the “friend” (*ibru*), completing him. But Enkidu is raised in the wild by animals. He must be initiated into the things of a human (prepared food and drink, clothing, speech). The initiation comes through a sexual encounter with a temple woman, a devotee of Ishtar. The woman waits in the wilderness for him, reveals herself to him, sleeps with him six days and seven nights. Sexual experience estranges Enkidu from the animals. That accomplished, the woman introduces Enkidu to civilized life. He enters the city ready to do battle with Gilgamesh.

**Gilgamesh the Hero**

This seems like a simple enough place to begin. “Gilgamesh” is a reading of a Sumerian name that in Sumerian texts is now often read Bilgames. Sumer lay in the southern part of ancient Mesopotamia—the land in the Middle East that is now Iraq—and the Sumerians clearly thought Gilgamesh/Bilgames was a real historical person. And a hero. Many stories and some visual records of him have been found not only in his native city, Uruk, deep in the south of Iraq, but over a wide area of Iraq and even in what is now Israel.
While there were other Mesopotamian heroes, no other caught the imagination of ancient writers than Gilgamesh. He is even mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in Greek literature.

What we call Gilgamesh—often referred to as the “Epic” of Gilgamesh—is a relatively recent story, actually a group of stories, that at some point in history became a standard text, in much the same way that the stories attributed to “Homer” became the standard texts of the Iliad and the Odyssey. A process of standardization took place with both the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament according to Christians) and the New Testament. The process of standardizing ancient texts often took centuries. Even the Islamic Qur’an took some years to be put into the order that is now fixed.

Fortunately, we have a number of Gilgamesh stories and poems that allow us to see how the Gilgamesh evolved over time. Not all of these Gilgamesh stories found their way into the standard Gilgamesh.

This leads us to the first and still the most important question about Gilgamesh. If it is a series of stories about a hero, does the overall collection show that the stories were unified into a single, coherent story? Or did it remain simply a group of tales linked in a chain, like some parts of the 1001 Nights? The question of the unity or artistic integrity of Gilgamesh is still open, the way it used to be for Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales and even for some Shakespearean plays. (The famous speech of the witches in Macbeth, which begins, “Double, double, toil and trouble,” was probably not written by Shakespeare. Did the author himself accept such changes to the script?)

To a great extent we have to infer the design and the author’s intention from internal evidence. We will see that the most controversial part of Gilgamesh is the last “chapter,” the notorious Tablet 12, which shows Gilgamesh in a conversation with the ghost of his friend Enkidu. The standardized Gilgamesh always has twelve tablets, but many scholars are upset with that part, since it gives a very different account of Enkidu’s death than is found in earlier “chapters” of Gilgamesh. We will look at the evidence later, but the controversy over Tablet 12 points out the desire to find an aesthetic unity even in the face of numerous difficulties.

### The Historical Gilgamesh

Ancient writings point to the existence of an actual, historical person we now call Gilgamesh. He lived, according to our best estimate, about 2600 BCE (that is, Before the Common Era, or B.C.). Archaeologists assign Gilgamesh to the period of Early Dynastic IIB. This is very ancient indeed. Scholars who study the texts call it the Presargonic Period, before Sargon the Great defeated Sumer and established the first empire in the area. The oldest biblical writings may go back as far as 1500 or 1600 BCE, that is, about 1000 years later than the time of Gilgamesh. And even earlier than the time of the Trojan War, which provided the setting for Homer’s Iliad. So if it is rather unlikely that the Bible or Greek literature influenced the development of the much older Gilgamesh stories, it
may be possible that Gilgamesh influenced the Bible and Greek mythology. We will deal with those possibilities later.

We tend to think that, because we have good editions and translations of the Bible and of Greek literature that someone, somewhere, possesses actual texts of those writings from the time they were presumably composed. Sadly, we do not possess any such texts, only later (and presumably correct) copies. In the case of biblical texts, as important as they have been for, in some instances, more than two millennia, the gap between actual physical texts and the time when the texts are thought to have been written is many centuries. The good news about *Gilgamesh* is that we have actual physical texts, most of them written on clay tablets, from the time of original composition. Some of them are even dated!

Still, there are many gaps in the record. The earliest poem about Gilgamesh dates from the end of the Early Dynastic Period—the text mentioned above, “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh.” While three copies of the poem have survived, two of them discovered in faraway Ebla, we can imagine how difficult it is to decipher such ancient writings. The city of Gilgamesh was known as Uruk (now called Warka). The Bible calls the city Erech. (All the variant spellings are due to different vocalizations. Such variations are common over time and space. We know, for example, that the English word “tea,” now pronounced “tee” throughout the English-speaking world, was pronounced “tay” in 18th century London.) [See “Illustrations”: Fig. 4: Biggs, Plate 1275]

The first line of what so far is the earliest Gilgamesh text (otherwise known from an epithet of the hero as “The Amaushumgalanna Hymn”), tells us that the hero killed (literally knifed) The Bull of Heaven. No doubt the pronunciation of the name Gilgamesh changed over time. It would help if we knew what the name originally meant. Sumerian names are quite often transparent. The father of Gilgamesh was said to be a man named Lugal-banda. The first part of that name, *lu-gal*, is a compound that means, literally, Big Man. It came to mean “king.” The second part, *banda*, usually means “little.” Lugal-banda may have gained a name because of his youth. The *banda* is often an apprentice.

The reputation of Lugal-banda and his father, a certain En-merkar (or En-mekar), survived as long as Gilgamesh’s survived, from the early 3rd millennium BCE into Hellenistic times, not long before the birth of Jesus. They were all prominent figures in what the ancients knew as the First Dynasty of Uruk. But even the evidence for a first *dynasty* that linked these men as grandfather-father-son is suspect. We do not know when the *principle* of dynastic order, that is, passing the title and power from father to son, actually developed. Later texts simply assume it was the case, but they may have simply invented a relationship between these famous legendary Urukeans. The case of Gilgamesh’s son is instructive.

**Gilgamesh & Son**

According to Genesis 5 the earliest humans lived a much longer life than the ordinary mortals who followed them. In the numerous biblical genealogies the longest lived
human was Methuselah, who lived 969 years. His grandson Noah became a father at 500 and lived nearly as long (950 years) as his grandfather. Soon after Noah his descendants lived gradually shorter lives until human life maxed out at about 120 years. The lists of (mainly) male names emphasize the principle of patrilineal descent, that is, descent from father to son. The ages of the earliest patriarchs are probably of secondary importance, but they do indicate that in some ways the earliest humans lived fuller lives—were closer to the act of creation itself—than we do.

Mesopotamian peoples kept similar lists. The most famous of these lists, The Sumerian King List, opens with beings who are in many instances half-human and half-divine, and they are said to live lives sometimes twenty times as long as the biblical patriarchs. The Sumerian King List also preserves the principle of patrilineal descent—but only to a certain extent. The writer was careful to indicate the names of (again mainly) males, many of whom were related as father and son; but the list preserved unexplained breaks and a shift of power from one Mesopotamian city-state to another, almost always explained as caused by force of arms. It is not too far-fetched to think that the dynastic changes were allowed or even guided by the gods. But the principles of selection are not fully explained by patrilineal descent. Early on—and in the First Dynasty of Uruk in particular—other reasons are implied. As we shall see, the power in early Mesopotamian city-states depended on human relationships with the gods. Although Mesopotamian peoples throughout their history knew a great many divine beings, and each city kept holy places for a great number of gods, as the cities became more complex, some gods were thought to be more powerful or important than others.

At a certain point in early history, the great cities were thought to be the homes of particular high gods (including goddesses); rule over the people depended upon attracting and maintaining the relationship with the chief god of the city.

In the case of the Sumerian city of Uruk, the city that is always prominent in Gilgamesh stories, the great goddess Inanna (or Ishtar, as she was known by Akkadian-speaking Mesopotamians) was the chief god. For the three thousand years we have records of Uruk Inanna ruled, sometimes with her “father,” the sky-god An (or Anu). Inanna’s “house,” the temple complex known as Eanna, was the most prominent building in the city until almost the time of Jesus, when the citizens built an even greater temple complex to her “father” and “mother.” Even then Inanna maintained her great house and was given an even larger temple for herself.

Sumer knew a peculiar myth in which Inanna, at her own initiative, “stole” her house, the Eanna, from heaven. Her “father,” Heaven itself, was at first angry, but finally reconciled to the audacious act of his rebellious “daughter.” He ends up blessing her, in effect exalting her to a grand power in the universe. Along the way he attempted to stop her journey down the mountain to Uruk, where she would establish her “House.” The journey takes her “House”—on the back of the Bull of Heaven—through the marshes of southern Mesopotamia. A cylinder seal may allude to that part of the journey: the en is in a boat where a bull carries a two-tiered object that looks like a temple in Uruk that dates from
ca. 3200 BCE. Such a structure is frequently seen on other cylinder seals. Note that the structure is topped by two reed bundles, symbols from Archaic Uruk times that represent the presence of the goddess Inanna. The stories of Gilgamesh often turn on the complex relationship between Gilgamesh and the goddess Inanna.

Back, though, to his son. There is almost nothing to be said about him. His name appears in The Sumerian King List along with a much shorter life span than any of his predecessors. His name appears in only one other brief text, where he and Gilgamesh are credited with rebuilding a famous temple. “The History of the Tummal” records the building and numerous restorations of the goddess Ninlil’s temple called the Tummal. Gilgamesh built something called the Numunbura, and his son Ur-lugal “made the Tummal flourish and brought Ninlil into the Tummal” after the temple had fallen into ruins. The son may also show up in the Sumerian “The Death of Gilgamesh.” There is some confusion if the son’s name is Ur-lugal or Ur-nungal. Ur-lugal is listed in The Sumerian King List as Gilgamesh’s grandson. The confusion is important for “The Death of Gilgamesh” because a certain ur-lugal-la solves an important problem for Gilgamesh. The problem-solver could either be our Ur-lugal, or, since ur can mean “dog,” the “king’s dog!” At any rate, The Sumerian King List says that Gilgamesh ruled for 126 years, but Ur-lugal only 30 years (or 15 years, if he is the grandson). The rulers who follow have reigns running from 36 years to a mere six years.

We are tempted to see the listing of the First Dynasty of Uruk in The Sumerian King List as a tribute to the great heroes Urukeans patched together. It is not entirely clear that the First Dynasty was a real “dynasty,” dominated by patrilineal descent. Only with the sons and later descendents of Gilgamesh do we see “ordinary” people with ordinary lives, even when they were rulers of the great city-state—and with no indication of noble deeds that would cause their names to be preserved as the name Gilgamesh would be.
With the son of Gilgamesh we are entering into something like our idea of history. Gilgamesh is just at the edge of the age of heroes, and much of his importance in Mesopotamian tradition derives from the bitter truth that even he was, as we might say, only human. Certainly *Gilgamesh*, in the version we know from two thousand years after the hero’s actual rule in Uruk, calls close attention to his mortality. (And it might be worth mentioning in passing that *Gilgamesh* makes no reference at all to sons or other descendents of Gilgamesh.)

![Fertile Crescent Map](mpoweruk, Public Domain)

**The Settings of *Gilgamesh***

**The Floodplain**

Gilgamesh stories were found in a wide area around Mesopotamia—what the Greeks called Iraq—where the stories originated. They were also found outside Mesopotamia. The reason for this wide distribution is interesting, because it suggests that Gilgamesh was useful in the ancient world far beyond the borders of his city, Uruk, which is located deep in the south of Iraq. By at least four thousand years ago a more or less standard school curriculum was found in Mesopotamia, and Gilgamesh stories in the Sumerian language were part of that curriculum. The schools themselves served a very practical purpose. They trained people in the reading and writing of a very difficult writing system. The alphabet we use today probably derives from this “cuneiform” or “wedge-shape”
writing that was produced by a stylus on clay tablets or wax tablets or incised in stone. Unlike the alphabet, which has only a few letters and can be learned by very young children, the cuneiform system had nearly six hundred signs that could carry a variety of meaning by themselves and could be combined in a bewildering complex of additional meanings. It took many years of study to master the system.

In an age when “books” were made by hand, individuals in many professions had to learn not only to read but also to produce the books they would use: magical and medical texts, astronomical observations, religious rituals, legal texts—and mainly business transactions. Hundreds of thousands of invoices have already been discovered, and no doubt thousands more will surface in Iraq in the years to come. One might wonder why literary works were taught in such a practical curriculum. (The same was true in ancient Greece and Rome, in the Middle Ages and in the modern world.) Students then, as now, may have questioned the usefulness of reading literature, but the schools then, as now, thought there was a reason for it.

The earliest Gilgamesh stories were written in the Sumerian language. An extensive oral tradition of Gilgamesh stories may well have preceded their appearance in writing. Gilgamesh, or “Bilgames,” was always thought to be a Sumerian ruler of the Sumerian city of Uruk. He is always associated with that city. By the time (maybe late in the 2nd millennium BCE) when the “standard” series of Gilgamesh stories were copied and dispersed over a large area around and beyond Mesopotamia, the language of the stories switched to Akkadian. Akkadian, unlike Sumerian, which has no known relatives, is a Semitic language much like Hebrew and Arabic. One of the dialects of Akkadian became the standard version used in the writing of almost all serious texts. And Standard Akkadian had become, by the time our Gilgamesh was written, an international language. A parallel can be found in the English language. By the 20th century English had spread to so many parts of the world that English had become an international, possibly a global language. The spread of Latin throughout Europe in the Middle Ages is a parallel phenomenon. English continues to spread in the 21st century, and has now become the second language of much of the world’s population. For many hundreds of years in the ancient world, Akkadian functioned in the same way. Although few people were literate in most of the societies where Akkadian was taught, the elites who were literate probably knew something of Standard Akkadian. The standard Gilgamesh text was written in Standard Akkadian. Besides Sumerian, which persisted only as a learned language (the way Latin continued to be used in writing long after it had died out as a spoken language), Gilgamesh stories were also written in some other non-Akkadian languages, Hittite and Elamite among them.

So at least some parts of the Gilgamesh series of tales became known to a large audience far beyond their original setting. An examination of the mostly fragmented texts that have survived and of certain visual representations of Gilgamesh suggests that the most popular parts of Gilgamesh were the stories of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu in their adventures with the monster Humbaba and the ferocious Bull of Heaven.
The first of those two popular stories takes up the better part of the first half of *Gilgamesh*. The Bull of Heaven story is the centerpiece of *Gilgamesh*. We will say much about those stories, but first we should mention a story that occurs late in the text, the story of the Flood.

We have several versions of the Great Flood story that is best known to most readers today from the Bible. Indeed, the Flood is still one of the biblical stories still regularly taught to children, whether in its biblical or Islamic form. Part of a Sumerian version has been found. A 2nd millennium BCE Akkadian version occurs in the work called *Atrahasis*. The early Gilgamesh stories do not have any connection with the Flood, but the Standard Akkadian *Gilgamesh* has one in Tablet 11. The discovery of this Flood account in the 1870s created such enthusiasm that it was the major reason *Gilgamesh* was (and still is) the most studied piece of Mesopotamian literature. All readers of *Gilgamesh* have to scratch their heads over the question: does the Flood story really belong to the Gilgamesh story? If it does, what was the use in adding it to the series of Gilgamesh stories? The question is number one in what is the basic aesthetic value of a unified, internally coherent *Gilgamesh*. Middle Eastern traditions of poetry and prose know the metaphor of “beads on a string.” The famous collection known as the *Arabian Nights* or the *1001 Nights* presents the same kind of question. Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is another example. Are they simply loosely related stories, or is there an artistic principle that binds them together? We will work with these questions throughout this book. The Flood presents the most obvious problem in this regard. (The last chapter, or Tablet, of *Gilgamesh*, Tablet 12, presents almost as serious a question.)

We should say something about the setting of *Gilgamesh* in the floodplain of southern Iraq. There is only a single Gilgamesh reference, very late in the game and in a wildly exaggerated letter that is no doubt a literary joke, which connects Gilgamesh to a site other than Uruk.

The great city of Uruk no longer exists. Where once the largest and most prosperous city in the ancient world (before Rome at its peak of prosperity) stood near the Euphrates River we find today only ruins in a wasteland. The soil that produced an amazing blossoming of crops, especially barley, was depleted over some four thousand years as the salts were brought to the surface. We need to imagine Uruk, a city of some one hundred thousand citizens—ten times the size of most cities in the ancient world—with a city wall that was eight miles in circumference, to grasp the importance of its most famous ruler, Gilgamesh. And the great goddess whose city Uruk was her “house,” Inanna, or as she is known in *Gilgamesh* under her Akkadian name, Ishtar.

At one time the Euphrates River was close enough to Uruk that it circled the inner city (or a canal from the river provided the city with water). Recent soundings of the site have revealed that there was a network of canals through the central city, making it more like Venice than, say, London or New York. Alas, the Euphrates is a meandering river, and it has moved away from many of the prosperous Sumerian sites that required its water to survive.
Even today, in southern Iraq, the most important official of a town is likely to be the canal engineer. We read of such an official in the earliest written texts ever discovered—in Uruk, by the way. Maintaining the canal system was central to the functioning of the city. Diverting water to the many groups who needed it was key to the survival of the city.

Living in a floodplain carries many risks, as the recent experience of New Orleans after the hurricanes of 2005 has demonstrated once again. A well-known scholar of Mesopotamia, Thorkild Jacobsen, pointed to a contrast between the two early civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Today we can see a remarkable sight along the Nile River and its canals: trucks bringing in fertilizer to land that, until the construction of the High Dam at Aswan, enjoyed the “gift of the Nile,” the flooding of the land that like clockwork provided the soil with its nutrients. The annual flooding of the Nile was highly predictable, and the ancient Egyptians incorporated its periodicity into the well-integrated (and fundamentally optimistic) worldview.

The floodplain developed by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia tells a very different story. Jacobsen himself, when he was excavating in Iraq, saw the terrifying floods of Tigris and Euphrates. If the melting of snow and ice in the regions of Turkey that supplied the two rivers comes together at the same time, the annual flooding can be devastating. Jacobsen thought that the anxiety seen in so much of Mesopotamian literature was derived from this elemental fear. At any moment the natural world can rise up against the humans who were trying to survive in their settled communities. There were still enough wild animals to threaten a city like Uruk. Even more threatening were the disasters that went to the heart of city life itself. Famine and plague are not such great threats to a mobile community, but they can (and did) ravage settled communities. For life on a floodplain one had to add the threat of flood.

The story we mentioned earlier, *Atrahasis*, is precisely concerned with the three major threats to civilized populations: famine, plague, and flood. The great god Enlil tries three times to destroy humankind with such “weapons.” Three times his plan was subverted by the cunning god Enki (or Ea, his Akkadian counterpart). The greatest danger was the flood, and we shall see in Tablet 11 of *Gilgamesh* that the only survivors of the great Flood testify to the terror Enlil caused.

The Sumerians living in the floodplain were not without measures to at least moderate the effects of flooding. In Uruk, for example, they formed and baked millions of bricks to build a foundation for immense buildings (also made of brick) that rose above the plain. At the center of the famous temple complex known as Eanna (“House of Heaven”) was the storehouse of grain that gave Uruk its prosperity. So great was the storehouse that it might better be seen as the central bank of the city-state. Before silver and later gold were used for the exchange of goods and services, grain was the first money. Parceled out to the citizens according to the work they performed for the city, grain rations were the capital that allowed an exceptionally prosperous and complex society to form.

That complex city was not without its internal problems, and here again we shall see the *Gilgamesh* taking note of the problem. At the beginning of *Gilgamesh* the ruler himself
is the problem. The people cry out because of his tyrannical rule. Gilgamesh, like the high gods Enlil and Ishtar, will have to learn from experience to curb their power. Being a great hero—or even a powerful god—does not exempt the powerful from using its authority in a proper way.

Other Places
Several incidents in *Gilgamesh* take place outside the well-defined Uruk. While they differ in some respects, the locations have one thing in common: outside the walls of the city there is wilderness. Even in the earliest records from Uruk, from what archaeologists designate as Uruk IV and III (basically the 4th millennia BCE), there are references to other cities, that is, city-states. But *Gilgamesh* contains very few specific place names. Nippur and Sippar are mentioned, largely because they are the earthly dwellings of Enlil and Shamash. Shuruppak, a city north of Uruk on the Euphrates River, is mentioned as the home base of the “Noah” figure of the Flood in Tablet 11, Utnapishtim. The Euphrates itself (*Purattu*) is mentioned, but the Tigris is not.

Outside Mesopotamia the only city mentioned is Aratta, famous in Sumerian literature as the loser in a contest between the rulers of Aratta and Uruk when Inanna chooses Uruk over her other (earlier?) dwelling in the mountains of what is now Iran. (Scholars still debate the location, some thinking that it was a kind of semi-mythological place like Camelot.) In that territory, in Iran (Elam) is the river Ulay. These references have given rise to the suggestion that the setting of the Humbaba story in the earlier versions was in the mountainous east of the floodplain. Three other mountainous areas are mentioned: Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, far north and west of Uruk and the dwelling place of Humbaba. The third is the mountain in the Zagros range, called Nisir or Nimush, the place where the ark sets down when the Flood recedes.

Other settings are less specific, though no less important to the story. For the most part they are simply outside the space defined as “civilized.” The difference between city life and primitive living became increasingly important in the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia BCE, and the contrast develops in *Gilgamesh* very early on when the newly formed Enkidu is “thrown” into the wilderness and lives with the animals. The woman who seduces him stations herself at the watering hole, and after a vigorous sexual initiation of the wild man, the woman civilizes him by stages. No sooner than Gilgamesh (in the city) finds a friend in Enkidu than he proposes to leave the city for the great exploit that will make his name. To find the domain of the giant Humbaba the men must journey through dangerous territory. They encounter the guardian of the Cedar Forest in his mountain. (An avatar of Ishtar is found there as well.)

The central episode, where the heroes battle The Bull of Heaven, is set back in Uruk. The Bull is brought in from “above,” as its name implies. The two heroic battles cause the death of Enkidu. After Gilgamesh mourns the death of his friend, he again takes to the wilderness. The landscape is difficult to follow. Gilgamesh enters mountains, follows the path of the sun (though a dark mountain), emerges in a dazzling garden of precious metals, finds the wise woman (another Ishtar proxy) at the edge of the sea, and crosses
the ocean and the Waters of Death, to the boundary of humanity itself, where he meets the Noah-figure Utnapishtim.

It may be worth noting at the outset that, where the heroic episodes involving Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven appear to have been the popular narratives in *Gilgamesh* for many centuries, the influence of the Gilgamesh stories in later literature may well have been the agonizing search for “life” that constitutes the second half of the poem. Such stories attach themselves to the widespread interest in Alexander the Great and in a host of folktales involving the search for Solomon’s ring or key. Versions of the story appear not only in the medieval West but in Islamic literature as well. Even in *Gilgamesh* the setting is largely mythic—in contrast to the specifics of the “civilized” Uruk.

**A Tale of Three Cities: Uruk, Babylon and Nineveh**

Imagine a time when the major Mesopotamian cities from north to south were Chicago, St. Louis, and New Orleans. I like to think of Mesopotamia in the 7th century BCE, dominated by Assyria in the north, with a still important city south of it, Babylon, who will soon rise up once again to dominate the area, and far down in the delta, the ancient Sumerian city of Uruk. All Gilgamesh stories are set in his city (except for a very late “letter” that seems to be something of an undergraduate joke).

Chicago, that is, *Nineveh*, held the key tablets that we now call *Gilgamesh*. They were kept in the libraries of the last great king of Assyrian, Assurbanipal (668-627 BCE). The king had collected manuscripts from across the empire and had them deposited in archives, much like the Oriental Institute in Chicago. The texts remained there until George Smith discovered them in the 1870s and brought them back to the British Museum.

St. Louis, on the great river, that is, *Babylon*, I mention here because it tends to get in the way of our thinking about *Gilgamesh*. It is true that the dialect of the Semitic Akkadian language, which was the official language of the Assyrian empire and the major international language of much of the Middle East at that time, is called Standard Babylonian, since the standard written dialect was based on what was written in the Old Babylonian period when the city of Babylon dominated the scene. St. Louis may have overtaken Chicago in the 1st millennium BCE, but not at the time of Assyrian domination. There is nothing particularly “Babylonian” about *Gilgamesh*, except for the dialect that had been standard for hundreds of years, much in the way Standard Written English is based on the triangle formed by London, Oxford and Cambridge in the Middle English period. One distortion that may enter our thinking is an assumption that the kings of St. Louis provided the ideology of kingship in *Gilgamesh*. Although Babylonian kingship may well have influenced many ancient Near Eastern cultures, it was not even quite the same as in Assyria. The scene far to the south, where Sumerian cultural values still held, was a bit different.

In the south was the still-famous city of *Uruk*. Think of Uruk in much the way Americans view New Orleans (pre- or post-Flood) and the way New Orleans advertised itself to
Americans. In Uruk we find traces of ancient Sumerian practices that may have been lost elsewhere in the South. And even in ancient Sumerian times Uruk was unusual—unique, actually. Its power was economic and artistic, and, if writing and the cylinder seal were invented there, “cultural” in a most important sense. And its influence spread widely.

By Assyrian times, Uruk had lost its independence to Babylonians and Assyrians, and would not regain it when Babylon returned to power, to be followed by Persians and then Seleucids. Babylon had associated itself ideologically with another ancient Sumerian city-state Eridu. And Assyria may have countered that with an interest in Uruk. At any rate, King Assurbanipal collected materials from around the empire and kept them in archives, the famous Libraries of Assurbanipal, which housed what are still the best texts of the “Standard” Akkadian Gilgamesh.

Uruk was a weird place. The Uruk of Gilgamesh is about sex, and at the very heart of the city was the goddess Ishtar, the embodiment of sex and violence, and she was surrounded by temple personnel that were odd, at least in terms of modern Western ideas about gender. Think Mardi Gras, the icon of New Orleans, perhaps the closest parallel to Urukean festivals. Even when Mardi Gras is celebrated in other places, it is always tied to that city. (Our small Upstate New York town has an annual parade, with plastic beads and candies tossed from floats, minus the women exposing their breasts. That would be difficult on cold April days when we are still bundled up in winter gear. And it’s unlikely that hookers are working the crowd, as they might be deep in the south.)

The city of Uruk cried out to the gods for relief from oppression. That plunges the story in medias res, as a later culture might put it. Gilgamesh is crazily subjecting both young women and young men to activities that, alas, still remain a puzzle. Many scholars have tried to figure it out. My own guess is that he acts like the Lord of Misrule and subjects the youth to perpetual Mardi Gras. The emphasis is on perpetual, since King Gilgamesh is ceaselessly active and cannot (or will not) sleep. He takes the joy out of even the most intrepid party-goer.

My interpretation of Gilgamesh turns on that odd phrase used only here in all the stories about Gilgamesh—and in all of Mesopotamian literature that has been deciphered so far. He is the “Joy/Woe Man” whose activities toggle between those extreme states. His activities might warrant some attention if he were simply an individual. But of course he is the “lord” and king of the city. The “lord” part is often overlooked in the story, but I will try to explain why it is central to both the character and the plot of this unusual story. The great question is if Gilgamesh ever resolves the problem, which is both personal and political. That is, is Gilgamesh healed of his compulsions?

The enormous transformation of “civilized” society that took place in Uruk late in the 4th millennium BCE may or may not have been jump-started or accelerated by the goddess who was already the main power at the time. The oddity of a rapidly growing city center and a surprisingly productive agriculture based on the humble barley grain without, apparently, a substantial use of force has puzzled experts for many years. If Petr Charvát is correct, that a rather faceless bureaucracy and a “pontifical couple” consisting of an en
and a *nin* who went about the territory conducting rituals and collecting goods for the
temple led the new society, the transformation was a relatively peaceful process.\(^8\) The
calls of Uruk attributed to Gilgamesh provide evidence of yet another, later
transformation, the one familiar throughout the ancient Near East, where kings and their
armies increasingly dominate social life. Much more will be said about this mysterious
LORD (= *en*). For the moment, consider that in the early writings about Gilgamesh, his
*en*-ship is never in doubt. For the most part he is both *en* and *lugal*, the king.

By the time *Gilgamesh* was written, Uruk had lost its kingship, though not the ideology
of kingship. The kings who dominated Uruk were increasingly remote in space and
culture. The *en*-ship had been much reduced, but again the ideology supporting it had
not been lost—at least in Uruk.

Centuries after *Gilgamesh*—and after Assyria had been defeated, Babylon given over to
the Persians and then the Seleucids—the odd characters of Uruk were still there,
including, apparently, the *en* (in Akkadian, *ēnu*). In the numerous documents from
Babylon and Uruk during the Hellenistic period, when the Seleucids ruled the floodplain,
it is difficult to find the *ēnu*. One important ritual text from Uruk does, however, point
not only to his presence but also his continued importance. In a special festival for Ishtar
(\(TU\ 42\)) we find the usual strange characters: *kurgarrû*, “lion-men,” singers, lamentation
priests, and exorcists. A great number of gods rise from their seats and, as the sun rises,
take a position before Ishtar. One line (16') has the king performing “the ceremony of the
installation of the *ēnu*.” (The reverse of this tablet has Ishtar proceeding from her Eshgal
temple to the *akītu*-temple at the outskirts of the city, which suggests that the festival was
part of the annual New Year Festival of Anu.)\(^9\) The presence of the king, at the time a
Seleucid king (or his proxy), and the centrality of the god Anu in this and other documents
from the period suggest that yet another major transformation has taken place. The sky-
god An/Anu was associated with Inanna and Uruk from very early times. But in the
earliest documents Inanna was given very special treatment (in the form of offerings),
while An was all but absent from the scene, a kind of “sleeping god” who had no particular
relationship to the people, and hence, no offerings.\(^10\) At some point after the collapse of
the Assyrian empire, the “rites of Anu” were established (or re-established?) in Uruk. The
construction of immense Hellenistic-size temples to accommodate Anu and his consort
Antum appears to have diminished the traditional importance of Inanna’s Eanna temple,
but the goddess was still a major force in Uruk society. The installation of an *ēnu* in the
context of the New Year festival would point to the continued importance of his role in
Uruk.

His role, of course, was to be spouse of Ishtar. Whatever power he may still have had in
Urukean affairs, derived from this ancient notion. The ritual he performed in ancient
times with a *nin*, who may have been Inanna or her proxy, a ritual involving a “bed” (or
mat), suggests a Sacred Marriage rite. It is possible, then, that the rite persisted for at
least three thousand years in Uruk.
Uruk, The First City

According to the familiar story in Genesis, the first humans lived in a “garden” and were forced to leave that ideal place for their transgressions. The first city was “Enoch,” named by Cain after his son, Enoch (not to be confused with the Enoch who had such a special relationship to the deity that he “walked with God.”)11 This first Enoch in turn had a son named Irad. Some think that the names derive from the Sumerian god Enki and his city, Eridu. To a nomadic people who followed their animals through grazing lands, cities must have been at best a mixed blessing. There is nothing particularly positive about the foundation of the city. The Israelites of the 1st millennium BCE, when Genesis 4 was written, would find little to praise in Enki and his Eridu, which was considered the first sacred place and the prototype of the sacred city of Babylon, the Israelites’ hated enemy. For their part, the Babylonians were following a very ancient tradition. Eridu was the first city after the Flood, when kingship descended from heaven.12

The city we are considering “first,” though, is not Enki’s Eridu, deep in the marshes of what is now southern Iraq, but rather a city a few miles to the north, Uruk. The remains of Uruk lie in an area now called Warka. Thousands of years cultivating crops, especially barley, gradually brought salts to the surface to the point where now only ruins in a wasteland can be found. But as early as the 4th millennium BCE Uruk was an enormous and an exceptionally prosperous city, the place where writing and a host of other arts of civilization make their first appearance in history.

Uruk, too, appears in the biblical record, as “Erech” in Genesis 10:8-10. The so-called Table of Nations identifies a great-grandson of Noah (through Ham and Cush) as the mighty hunter and “hero,” Nimrod. Nimrod is so fully associated in that text with the cities of Sumer (“Shinar”) in southern Mesopotamia and with the Assyrian cities of the north that it is tempting to see the mighty hunter as Gilgamesh. The three cities of the south are called Babylon, Erech, and Accad. Including Babylon in the list suggests that the account was written long after the cities of Uruk and Akkad had fallen under the sway of the upstart Babylon. We want to find out about the Uruk of Inanna and Gilgamesh in the periods before Babylon and Assyria came to dominate the region (including Uruk).

The excavators who have been bringing Uruk and the literature it produced to light have had to work, necessarily, from the top layers of the soil, that is, the most recent levels of occupation, closest to our own times, down to bedrock and virgin soil. When they excavated Eridu, they found a most interesting phenomenon, one that tells us much about both continuities and changes over thousands of years. They discovered a tiny brick building, no more than 9 feet square, with a raised platform in it and evidence of offerings—the earliest brick building in the area and the first temple. Above that modest beginning the Sumerians built layer after layer, each addition to the temple covering the one below it, 13 in all. It may well have been the first temple and the earliest city to develop around it. Uruk and other cities were built up in the floodplain watered by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (the area the Greeks called Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers).
The intrepid and largely self-taught Englishman who found the *Gilgamesh* tablets in the 1870s, George Smith,\(^1\) discovered them far off to the north of Uruk, in Assyrian territory. They were found in the archives of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, who reigned from 668-627 BCE,\(^2\) less than a century after Shalmaneser III had captured the northern kingdom of Israel and had carried off many of its citizens. Even without the part of *Gilgamesh* that most excited Smith and his contemporaries—a version of the Flood story—the discovery of writings from the period of biblical history made *Gilgamesh* an instant sensation. For one thing it spurred on the study of the languages of Mesopotamia and the scripts in which those languages, like the Akkadian of *Gilgamesh*, were written.

Excavators and the scholars in many fields who make use of their finds, then, are always working backwards, from the most recent to the most ancient materials. So Akkadian, the language of the Babylonians and Assyrians, came to be deciphered before Sumerian, which seems to have disappeared as a spoken language sometime in the 2nd millennium BCE. Even now students are likely to begin with the very late script and the language that had changed over thousands of years. Working back to the time when the mighty *Gilgamesh* is supposed to have lived, roughly two thousand years before Assurbanipal, means constantly adjusting to earlier times and usually increasingly fewer texts in different stages of Akkadian and in a very different and unrelated language, Sumerian. Fortunately, the earliest written texts and the earliest visual representations of Mesopotamian thought were found in Uruk.

This essay in literary criticism tries to reverse the trend: to read the Akkadian *Gilgamesh* in light of the earliest material from Uruk. Thanks to the recent convergence of archeology, anthropology, philology, paleography, and art history, the First City—in Mesopotamia and arguably the first “civilized” place anywhere—is becoming clear. Uruk may not always have been thought of as the earliest city. That designation always had a political and ideological twist in a society that found its institutions legitimized by a deep and usually sacred past. But no one in Mesopotamian denied Uruk’s importance. And it managed to prosper through three thousand years after its heyday, even when it lost political control to outside powers. That Uruk is the city of both the Great Goddess Inanna and the hero *Gilgamesh* is not an accident. There is a good reason for thinking that Uruk was the First City in large measure because of the relationship between the goddess and the human she selected as her partner. But that will require a bit of explanation.

**Early Periods: Ages of Inspiration, Domination and Maintenance**

Petr Charvát concludes his survey of Mesopotamian prehistory with a suggestion about *Gilgamesh*. Could it be, he wonders, that the oppression of Uruk’s youth with which *Gilgamesh* opens derive from the political reorganization of Sumer after the decline of Uruk?\(^3\) We might add an additional wrinkle. The Early Dynastic period saw a reduction of the status of the *en* to a ceremonial role while the *lugal* gained power. What Charvát calls an “Uruk-less Uruk” may have produced a conflict between the two concepts of rulership, and the conflict was remembered in stories about *Gilgamesh* long after his reign in Early Dynastic times. Charvát himself seems conflicted about the situation.
The three ages Charvát distinguishes are “pre-historic” in the modern sense that history begins with individuals. His reference to Gilgamesh at the very end of the book suggests that he, like others before him, thinks of the legendary Uruk king as reflecting the emergence of the individual. It is interesting to see how the great Uruk of the late 3rd millennium BCE, with its emphasis on the social roles of its elites (rather than the names of the officials), fits into his scheme of the three ages.

The first he calls an “Age of Inspiration,” a long period from the 9th through the late 6th or early 5th millennia BCE (235). One of Charvát’s major claims is that even in this early age, characterized by the freedom of people to experiment and abandon failed projects, virtually a Golden Age, humans were as capable as moderns to think up innovative solutions to problems that arise.

Our Uruk, which Charvát always emphasizes is a “corporate entity,” is a development at the end of the second age, an “Age of Domination.” Uruk is the climax of changes that take place between the 5th and 3rd millennia BCE. The brilliant inventions of Uruk, like true writing, the cylinder seal, and the plowshare, are part of a larger movement. Key to the “Age of Domination” is sedentarization, the process that involved agriculture and animal husbandry. For all its remarkable innovations Charvát sees a tremendous loss of freedom in this age. Where earlier peoples could simply move on when conditions warranted it, the villages and then the cities could not as simply be abandoned.

The leap between late 3rd millennium Uruk and the third age, which Charvát sees as an “Age of Maintenance,” spans several centuries. He is largely concerned with the period from the 26th century BCE until the 24th century, when Sargon of Akkad transforms Mesopotamia once again. The key development in this period takes place not in Uruk (“Uruk-less Uruk,” not nearly as dominant as before) but in the cities of Shuruppak, Kish, and Ur. The innovations are first seen in Shuruppak, which the Sumerians considered the city of the great Flood, after which “kingship descended upon the earth” from heaven. At Shuruppak are found the earliest literary compositions like the proverb collection that is conceived as advice from a father to his son. The first ritual texts and historical writings appear at this time. (Charvát does not mention it, but the earliest literary form, the so-called “Ea-Marduk” incantations (or “Divine Dialogues”), appear as well; the format always involves the Father, the god Enki, or Ea in his Akkadian form, giving advice to his son, Asalluhi, in Akkadian the god Marduk who becomes head of the pantheon in Babylon. The advice consists of magical rituals to be performed, including magic formulas to be pronounced, in order to solve the problems the good Son has uncovered.)

This, the age of kings like Gilgamesh, is in many ways a reversion to patterns that are very old and obscured by the great Uruk, which had taken such a different tack. Probably the most striking feature is a renewed emphasis on kinship—the very thing Uruk avoided. The lugal s and nin s (which are now “Queens” but still are see seen in the names of male gods) gather wealth, protect it and display it, in temples, palaces, and in some cases in grave goods—as in the famous “royal tombs” of Ur.
Where Charvát’s reconstruction is difficult to follow is in the treatment of the *en*, which had been so central to the great 3rd millennium Uruk. On the one hand, the power of the *en* appears to be reduced, headed in the direction of its virtual disappearance in parts of Mesopotamia during Akkadian periods. The reduction in power had to be accomplished by the rise of kings. Where, according to Charvát, the *lugal* in the earlier period was a lesser administrator, probably the head of the defensive fortifications that dotted the landscape, the kings of rival city-states gained their authority at the expense of the temple.17 Eventually, in the long event of Mesopotamian history, the roles of palace and temple would be reversed, in the sense that the early kings depicted themselves as builders and protectors of temples; later the temples would pay taxes to the palace. Charvát sees this early temple building as, ironically, an indirect way for the kings to accumulate more wealth for themselves, since they could arrange for the use of temple lands. So even in the “Age of Maintenance” the palace could be said to profit from the pious offerings of the king.

On the other hand Charvát is convinced that, for the first time in history, the throne (*lugal* and *nin*) and altar (*en*) were united, and he clearly sees this as an important development in human history. As William Hallo had proposed before, the *lugal* as a title of great importance probably emerged in Ur. In Uruk *en* continues to be a title of authority. Charvát himself recognizes that the first *en* for which we have a name in Early Dynastic Sumer was a certain Enshakushanna of Uruk,18 at a time when certain cities in Sumer were united in league that was probably centered in Nippur. (The later Sumerian King List, from which is derived the idea that kingship descended after the Flood, lists the famous Enmerkar and others carrying the *en* name in different Uruk dynasties.)

It may be, as Charvát suggests, that at this point in history palace and temple were united in a way that was never seen before (and may never have been seen later). When we consider that the power of the *en* of Uruk derived from his union with the great goddess (who presumably selected him), the reduction of his authority in Early Dynastic Sumer may reflect that other conspicuous feature of the times, the bias toward the masculine and the suppression of the feminine in kinship-based societies—as well as in theology (?). Perhaps there was some justification for the much later *Gilgamesh* to see even in Uruk the great king’s oppression of the citizens, male and female, as the reason they cried out to the gods for justice. (Their plea, we recall, lead to the creation of Enkidu, which initiated the adventures of the famous heroes.)

**Storytellers**

Middle Eastern storytellers liken their stories to beads on a string, precious ornaments that produce marvelous and unexpected effects on a golden necklace, like the *1001 Nights*. The ancient masterwork, *Gilgamesh*, could be seen in that light. But it might also, and better, be compared to those striking brick edifices that rose high over the flat, alluvial landscape of Summer, now southern Iraq. Lacking resources of their contemporaries in Egypt, the Sumerians made due with what was, literally, at hand: the clay made into the millions of bricks that raised their buildings above the flood-prone land would also provide the twelve tablets on which *Gilgamesh* was written. One might call them
We are beginning to see that they knew how to use the devices modern writers employ: narrative structures, literary figures, significant comparisons and contrasts, metaphors and metonymies, condensations and displacements.

The architectonics of the collection of tales is a main purpose of this extended analysis of *Gilgamesh*. The pieces, like brickwork, are sometimes just individual poetic lines and small constructions of parallel lines and chiasms; sudden juxtapositions; unusual choice of words; sometimes patterns of substitutions; miniature narratives and long speeches. The question is always in the background: is *Gilgamesh* a finished construction or a patchwork of individual pieces.

The main narrative lines are visible. Most follow a chronological sequence, but there are a few significant changes in that pattern. Once we find ourselves in Uruk, the story involves the creation of Enkidu, his sexual encounter with a woman in the service of Ishtar, his preparation for city life (a civilizing process), his first encounter with Gilgamesh—a fight at the conclusion of which the two men become inseparable friends; preparations for and the encounter with Humbaba; a conflict with Ishtar that brings The Bull of Heaven into the city; the death of Enkidu, followed by Gilgamesh’s eulogy and elaborate funerary rituals; Gilgamesh’s arduous journey and his encounter with Siduri and Utnapishtim (and wife); and his return to Uruk. If Tablet 12 fits into a coherent story, a point much debated, it nonetheless narrates a very different version of Enkidu’s death.

And there are deviations from the strict chronological sequencing of events. The most interesting may be the story of the Flood in Tablet 11. The first lines of Tablet 1 are actually a kind of epilogue. Several lines repeat exact lines at the end of Tablet 11. That is, the first lines of the poem tell us that Gilgamesh will return to the city and in what physical/psychological condition he is in when he returns. This anticipatory prologue elegantly establishes a large chiastic pattern, the kind of narrative composition favored by ancient storytellers. It helps us to anticipate the center of the story, Tablet 6, which tells of Ishtar and The Bull of Heaven.

What makes the Flood story in Tablet 11 intriguing is that it introduces a new storyteller, the sage Utnapishtim, who has survived the Flood and is thus in a position to tell Gilgamesh what is already an old story, set in the past. We are invited to observe the reactions of the immediate audience of Utnapishtim’s story, Gilgamesh himself—and form our own opinions about the meaning of this puzzling tale.

**The Nature of Narrative**

In their *Nature of Narrative* Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg consider *Gilgamesh* the “earliest Western epic preserved in writing and also one of the most primitive.” It is more “primitive” than *Beowulf* or *The Iliad*. “Primitive” in their sense means that the plot is episodic and narrate the deeds of a hero in a chronological sequence. They provide this account of the origins of epic literature. Epic begins as a kind of anthology of heroic deeds in chronological order. Its unity is the simple unity provided by its protagonist, who connects the events chronologically by moving in time from one to the other, and
thematically by the continuous elements in his character, and the similar situations which they inevitably precipitate. *Gilgamesh* is certainly such an anthology, and it largely follows the hero’s deeds in chronological order. (The two problems in this regard are the Seeion of the Flood story and the addition of a 12th Tablet with a different temporal scene of Enkidu’s death.)

**Key Literary Figures**

Life on the Sumerian floodplain required a good bit of ingenuity to survive. In sharp contrast to the other well-known civilization in the ancient world, life on or near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers was much more stressful than life along the Nile. Where Egypt’s river flooded land on either side of it every year, the very regularity of the process inscribed itself on the psyche of the people. Just as the sun provided a predictable world, so the Nile could be counted on to provide a rich soil the farmers needed to feed the population. Religious literature, like the massive buildings and the elaborate rituals, reflected a serene confidence in eternal cycles, including (at least for the pharaohs) an eternal life beyond the years on earth. Such confidence is rare in Sumer, where the rivers were necessary for survival. Maintaining dykes and irrigation ditches was a constant requirement—and anxiety. The economy that depended upon agriculture and animal husbandry needed a reliable source of river water, especially in the Mesopotamian south, where rainfall was negligible. The rivers wandered, however, and floods could destroy life and property as well as nurture the population.

It is not surprising, then, that the dread of a catastrophe like the Flood produced the earliest stories of a cosmic flood. The addition to Gilgamesh stories of the Flood story has caused great interest among scholars. The sage who survives the Flood (*abūbu*) was not himself a Urukean, according to *Gilgamesh*; he lived in a city to the north of Uruk. Uruk, of course, was destroyed like everything else. For much of Sumer, one positive result of the Flood was that after the devastation kingship “descended” from the heavens. Uruk had its own spin on events before the Flood: the names of the sages who lived before the Flood are different for the Urukeans. Most importantly, what descended after the Flood was Inanna’s “house,” the temple Eanna.

The majority of references to the Flood are, of course, in Tablet 11, when the story is told. But other references to the dreaded *abūbu* show how effective the Flood served the poet. Most of the references repeat the danger of the giant Humbaba, whose “voice is the Deluge.” Gilgamesh is praised early in *Gilgamesh* for restoring the religious centers destroyed by the Flood. When Enkidu tries to persuade Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba, he urges Gilgamesh to “send the Flood” against the giant, like “cracking the whip” against him. There is another reference to the Flood, apparently in a reported speech given to Enkidu in a dream-vision of the underworld. The speaker seems to be the scribe-reporter of the underworld, Bēlet-sē[i]ri, but the text is very broken at this point and the point of referring to the Flood is, at the moment, lost to us.

The gods themselves are often used for metaphorical purposes. Since many of the deities, like Nisaba, goddess of wisdom but also of grain, are identified with their referents in
nature, they add resonance to otherwise plain descriptions. Even if we consider Gilgamesh a god—the poem only indirectly, if at all, suggests the tradition that he becomes a judge in the underworld—there are of the many hundreds of god names fewer than fifty in *Gilgamesh*. A good number of those cluster in the Flood story. Storm gods like Adad and his henchmen, Shullat and Hanish, wreck havoc during the Flood, and are, in a sense, the Flood itself. While they bring down the waters from the heavens, Errakal, a role or epithet of the warrior Nergal, rips up mooring poles and another god often identified with Nergal, Ninurta, also see to it that the waters below the earth rise up at the same time.

**A Note on Figurative Language and The Figural**

Lurking in the background of the literary analyses in these essays is an idea of representation derived from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their influential *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Their analysis of early Mesopotamian society in terms of “savages,” “barbarians,” and “civilized men,” has not found much of a following among Assyriologists, but they have much to say about writing and memory in what they call the “inscribing socius.”

In sharp contrast to the traditional and still very frequently employed use of “figure” in figurative language as a departure from the standard meaning or order of words, the figural is used in a very different way in Deleuze and Guattari. He derives his usage mainly from Jean-François Lyotard. The most extensive treatment is in Lyotard’s *Discours, figure* (1971), in which he distinguishes between “discourse” and “figure.” For Lyotard, discourse is “the condition of representation to consciousness by a rational order or structure of concepts. Concepts or terms function as unit oppositionally defined by their position and relation within the virtual space that Lyotard calls *textual or perspectival.*”23

By contrast, “The figural is an unspeakable other necessarily at work within and against discourse, disrupting the rule of representation.”24 The figural is used in literature and art, “variously evoked throughout Lyotard’s writing as the visible (figure/ground), the rhetorical (figural/literal), work, the Unconscious, the event, postmodern anachronism, the sublime affect or the thing.”25 While both Gilles Deleuze and Lyotard continued to write extensively after their work in the early 1970s about the figural in art and literature, especially about modern and postmodern figures, in many ways they followed parallel tracks. Their work on the figural has major implications for ancient Near Eastern literature, I believe, much of which has not been worked out.

The figural draws upon two important but discordant theories, the theory of the sign derived from the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and the theory of gesture derived from the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty; challenges both theories; and joins them in a way that encounters textuality and (related to signification) and vision (related to the phenomenology of gesture) “at the edge of discourse.”26 For Saussure the signifier is an arbitrary bearer of a concept, is “unmotivated.” For Lyotard and Deleuze,
on the other hand, the visible sign in, say, the line of cuneiform signs that make up a text, functions as a figural “thickening” of the linguistic signifier itself.

A poem like the Sumerian “Inanna and Enki” is of course a text, and might be considered a form of discourse. The me function on one level as concepts. A large group (#35-52) deal with sexual practices, intercourse, kissing, prostitution and the like. The me #37, giš-du₄₁-du₁₁, “intercourse,” is paired, as it often is, with “kissing.” The signifiers are not words, and they do not refer to things, according to Saussure; they are unmotivated (arbitrary) and differential, related to other signs in system of signs. Just as there is nothing “fishy” about the phonemes that make up “fish” (or the graphemes that make up ku₆), so the signifiers for sexual activities are mark the absence of all other signifiers in the system but do not directly signify the sexual acts. The way the narrative operates in “Inanna and Enki,” though, by presenting figures for the characters who carry out actions, like Inanna viewing her own private parts and talking to herself, suggests a different dimension than the list of me. (Lyotard would argue that copulation does not equal sexuality.) Reading the tablet or a printed version of a transliterated cuneiform text opens a dimension analogous to the gap between the narrative in “Inanna and Enki” and its list of me. Lyotard thinks that structural linguistics has failed to consider that the line (of signifiers, as in a line of text) “marks a figural space, it has the quality of a trace of the unrecognizable; it evokes an unreadability that is constitutive of the very possibility of recognition.” There is always “a figural coexistence of the plastic and the textual, of the line and the letter.”

Lyotard and Deleuze offer a deconstructive account of figurality in art and in poetry. (Poetic rhetoricity is analogous to anamorphism in painting.) “Poetry is the search for motivation in language not through direct contact with the real but through the twisting or rhetorical torsion of the flat table of linguistic space to the point where it becomes itself continuous, motivated, both in the traffic between words (e.g. in designation) and in the relation of words to (a) the surface, and (b) the event of their inscription. The figural work of art is to block together the motivated and unmotivated in language.” In this view the traditional Western view of figurative language, as a distortion, a rhetorical modification that lets us see “chicken” as “coward” rather than as a barnyard fowl, an instrument, is inadequate. Rhetoric is a figure rather than an instrument. The rhetoric figural evident in Sumerian poetry (although we may be just beginning to see its dimensions) as in English poetry evokes an incommensurability on three levels: (1) in the functioning of metaphor; (2) in the situation of metaphor within the system of tropes that constitute rhetoric; and (3) in the relation of rhetorical or figural language to the communicative function of literal language.

This is not the place to detail either the theory of figures or to show how the figures operate in Sumerian poetry. Rather, it is an invitation to consider what I think is a more adequate theory of figuration than one finds in most literary theory and criticism today. Bill Readings summarizes the view in this way. “The figural...lies in the inevitable, impossible, undecidable co-existence of the radically heterogeneous orders of the literal, of the motivated and unmotivated, the visible and the textually encoded, in all discourse.”
“Inanna and Enki,” with its play among different modes of discourse, is only the best example of this radical break with traditional views of figuration.

**Figures and Binary Oppositions**

Patterns familiar to poetry—and ordinary discourse, where we hardly notice them at all—are found in *Gilgamesh*. Any given appearance may have little significance, but when the patterns recur, they develop as leitmotifs and sometimes build to a crescendo where the “poetic” quality is obvious, even though the experts in Sumerian and Akkadian are still needed to point out the subtleties involved. Up/down, near/far, inside/outside, and light/dark are but a few oppositions that are developed in the poem. Some, like the body seen from inside and out, turn out to be used quite differently than in the West, where the ancient Greek tendency to oppose mind and body is countered by a very different orientation in Mesopotamia.

Some of the more obvious ones to watch for, though, are what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call “orientational” metaphors. These arise from the fact that we have bodies and organize concepts around the body in its physical environment. Lakoff and Johnson mention a number of orientational metaphors we use in ordinary language and are frequently encountered in literature: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, and central-peripheral. I feel up one moment, but fall into a depression in another. We wake up, but then drop off again to sleep. We will see a character at the peak of health, who then falls ill and sinks fast. The gods rank above us poor mortals, but some of us are socially inferior to others. Lakoff and Johnson identify such binary oppositions in this way:

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HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN
CONSCIOUS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN
HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP; SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN
HAVING CONTROL OR FORCE IS UP;
BEING SUBJECT TO CONTROL IS DOWN (p.15)
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Each of these has a physical basis. Drooping postures and erect postures signal sadness and positive emotional states. Humans lie down to sleep and stand up when awake. Illness often forces us to lie down. Physical size frequently correlates with physical strength. There are many such orientational metaphors that are so obvious that we rarely think about them. Not only emotional states and physical well-being, but social status, virtue and vice—she has high standards, while he falls into an abyss of depravity—and even the distinction between the rational and the emotional fall into such categories. All of these we will see acted out in the narratives of *Gilgamesh*.

Mesopotamian society largely projected these distinctions onto the cosmos. A god who is closely tied to Uruk, the one considered the highest god, dwells in the highest heaven is the Sumerian god An, in Akkadian Anu. He is sometimes considered the “father” of the goddess Ishtar. The name itself is transparently AN, that is, THE ABOVE. Sumerian mythology finds a female counterpart in KI, THE BELOW. The splitting of AN and KI creates the surface of the earth, where mortals dwell. An important moment in the visual
arts of Mesopotamia is discovering the ground line, upon which humans stand or move. With the ground line the status of individual humans, deities, and demonic beings can be determined: the higher the rank, the taller the figure.36

**Some Metaphors They Lived By**

Much of the poetic richness of *Gilgamesh* comes from the use of metaphors that would have been obvious to Mesopotamians, especially those in the south like the Urukeans. Where some 2% of Americans are directly engaged in agriculture, Uruk’s wealth depended on it, and most people were engaged one way or another in the processes or products of the land. Sumerian poetry already reflected those preoccupations. The school curriculum included debates like that between “The Hoe and The Plow.” Love poetry pitted The Shepherd against The Farmer. Date palms, linen and wool, bread and beer, wild and domesticated animals provide images that, we shall see, add color and meaning to characters and episodes in *Gilgamesh*, of ten in a surprising way.

Readers of narratives like *Gilgamesh* with strong storylines are naturally eager to get into the action. The first episode begins at line 56 of Tablet 1, but the reader would be well-advised to notice that key figures already appear in the first fifty-five lines. One of the most significant discoveries about *Gilgamesh* is that a much older version began with what now is line 29. The author of *Gilgamesh* introduced a prologue to the older prologue, much as many biblical scholars find in the opening of the Book of Genesis, where two creation stories appear, and the first one we read may have been composed much later than the second account of creation.

Details will appear in later chapters, but at the outset it is worth observing that the two prologues offer two very different views of the hero Gilgamesh. As I read the two, it appears that they open up a conflict that runs through the story as a whole. We will see that the Gilgamesh legends developed at a time when the older concept of rule in Uruk, which involved the relationship between the Great Goddess and the “lord” or *en* she selected, came to be combined with the new form of rule, the king, or *lugal*. The two prologues of *Gilgamesh* highlight the differences between the two forms of rule and anticipates the conflict that develops between them in the stories that follow.

We first see Gilgamesh in his role as the *en*. We are invited to see him upon his return to Uruk after a terrible and exhausting ordeal. This opens up a whole series of figures that have particular relevance to Uruk. There is, first, *water*. In an area that receives very little rainfall, agriculture and animal husbandry—not to mention life itself—depended upon the use of rivers and the maintenance of an elaborate irrigation program. The second word in the very first line of *Gilgamesh* indicates that Gilgamesh has seen the *nagbu*. It is a difficult term to translate. We would find it easier if the word were a more familiar term (in Akkadian as in English), *apsû*, a borrowing from the Sumerian *abzu*, which by twists and turns has come down to us as *the abyss*. It had a special character in Mesopotamian thought, an immense body of water under the earth, a source of life but also of danger and even terror, when flooding—especially the great Flood itself—brought chaos to the world. We will see how this is developed in *Gilgamesh*, but we might note
here that one reason for the importance of beer in the everyday life of Urukeans was that the brewing process purified the water that, without purification, could lead to serious illness.

Why, then, choose nagbu, another source of water? The *Gilgamesh* poet has a tendency to substitute unusual words and phrases for the more typical terms. In this he follows a tendency in Akkadian poetry to prefer variation rather than strict repetition even when parallel lines say roughly the same thing. Sumerian practice tended to prefer exact repetition. In any case, the nagbu *Gilgamesh* sees (the verb is the third word in the first line of the poem) also has the meaning of “totality.” *Gilgamesh* is the hero who has, as we might say it, “seen it all.”

Not only has he seen the nagbu, *Gilgamesh* has gained a kind of wisdom. In *Gilgamesh* seeing something contrasts with hearing something. I will argue that the difference generates in *Gilgamesh* two very different sorts of “wisdom,” the wisdom of eye and ear.

*Gilgamesh* returns exhausted. But the terminology used to describe him at the end is familiar from healing rituals, and it raises the question if, in gaining wisdom, *Gilgamesh* has been healed—if not cured of his illness.

*Gilgamesh* is characterized by his mobility—in both prologues. In the First Prologue he has gone everywhere in the world and gained full understanding. This is similar to the Second Prologue, except that here his mobility is temporal as well as spatial. He learns of the past and brings back secrets, revealing what had been hidden.

What he does with that knowledge and those secrets is different as well. Only here do we see *Gilgamesh* writing, literally cutting his experience into a stone tablet. Uruk was probably the site in which writing was invented, and Uruk advertised this important invention in written form, as might be expected, but also in the visual arts. The only other character in the story who is described as writing is the goddess in the underworld who records the fates of the dead who arrive there.

*Gilgamesh* is a builder. He is given credit for building the extensive city walls that surrounded Uruk. The poet is silent here about the need for city walls, with its suggestion that the walls indicate the increasing militarization of Mesopotamia. Rather, the poet highlights the beauty and brilliant design of the walls. (The poet uses another variation for the wise ones who set down the foundation of the walls: the “Seven muntalki” rather than the more usual “Seven Sages.”) Modern readers have made much of this description of the walls, since the construction involves both artistic and engineering creativity and the promise of long-standing, if not eternal, art.

Modern readers have not, generally, found as much to admire in the rest of the description of the city—the city within the walls. But it has much to commend it. Uruk is called Uruk-of-the Sheepfold (*supūru*), or Uruk the Sheepfold, and it contains the sacred “storehouse” of the main temple complex, Eanna. Eanna is also the dwelling place of the great goddess Ishtar, who in other myths, is said to have seized Eanna in the heavens and brought it to earth. Imagining the city as a sheepfold and, a few lines further on, as a place containing
not only dwellings of citizens and a large clay-pit (connecting bricks, walls, temples, and also the main implement for writing, clay tablets) but also extensive cultivation of date palms reminds us that the Mesopotamian temple was a far different place than moderns imagine it to be. The temple controlled large flocks of sheep, goats, and herds of other animals. The domesticated animals helped Urukeans work the land, provided meat and dairy products, but were especially important to the textile industry, which was a source of great wealth, especially in the late 4th millennium BCE. The temple also had, at its center, a storehouse of grain. The most sacred place was imagined as both a dwelling of Ishtar and a storehouse of, mainly barley, whose cultivation was so productive that its surpluses provided Uruk with its capital to expand trade. The temple was as much as central bank as it was a place of religious ritual.

Twice in the brief First Prologue Uruk is described with Ishtar at the very heart of the city. I will argue that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Ishtar is central to a reading of the story as a whole.

The First Prologue ends with an emphasis on the tablet on which Gilgamesh is written. We are asked to read the story of Gilgamesh as he himself wrote it.

There is only a slight, indirect reference to Gilgamesh as a king in the First Prologue. The Second Prologue, of about the same number of poetic lines, imagines Gilgamesh almost exclusively in terms of his kingship. It is not only that he was the greatest of kings, according to the poem, he extended the civilized world far beyond the city itself, opening passes in the uplands and digging wells in the mountains.

Gilgamesh as a dominating physical presence is emphasized again and again. He is a military leader—a feature only indirectly described in the hand-to-hand combat with two monsters. Even the Flood is evoked in this section, for the courageous hero is both a wall of floodwaters attacking the enemy and a mighty floodwall protecting the citizens.

The Second Prologue also emphasizes a feature often overlooked in thinking about Gilgamesh as a king. At a certain point in history, kingship, unlike en-ship, became hereditary. Like other great heroes celebrated throughout the world, Gilgamesh was fated from the start to achieve greatness. He is, in that odd phrase, “2/3rd god, 1/3rd human.” That means, among other things, that he was still mortal. But his fate was set by the high gods when the Great Goddess herself “drew” the “image of his body” and the crafty god, Nudimmud, “perfected his form.” Even more important for kingship, however, is the emphasis on his parents, the Wild Bull Lugalbanda and the Wild Cow Ninsun.

Where Gilgamesh the writer dominates the First Prologue, it is Gilgamesh who speaks in the Second Prologue. There he boasts that he is a king like no other. (Later in the story, his rival, who becomes his friend, shows his heroic spirit when his first words are a boast.)

The Second Prologue also mentions the great search that will take Gilgamesh through the whole world, where he will finally meet the hero of the Flood, Utnapishtim. He seeks “life.” The Second Prologue does not comment on the difficulty of the search or the exhaustive, if not tragic end to the story, when Gilgamesh does not find exactly what he is
searching for. It does, however, comment on the duties of a good king, restoring sacred places and holy rites that had been lost. Kingship was a more “secular” role than was  
en-ship, but the early kings always demonstrate the care they show for the temple. From the perspective of the modern world it is hard to separate church and state, religion from a secular life in Mesopotamian thought. But kings in Mesopotamia gradually tipped the balance in favor of the palace over the temple.

Two different intimate relationships are already suggested in the two prologues. The First Prologue emphasizes Gilgamesh’s complex relationship with the Great Goddess Ishtar. The Second Prologue on the other hand emphasizes his relationship with his father and mother. Both will be developed later in the story.

The reader who anticipates that Gilgamesh is a story about a man and his friend may already have noticed that neither prologue mentions, or even hints at, the friend, Enkidu. Now that the earliest Gilgamesh-related material, visual and literary, have been discovered and Enkidu is largely (sometimes completely) absent from those accounts, it is important that the most obviously intimate relationship in Gilgamesh has an early history all its own.

Otherwise the prologues, consciously or not, establish key oppositions and figures of speech that will be developed as motifs in the narratives that follow.

**The Principle of Substitution**

What might have been dismissed as mere magic by the ultra-rationalist critics in our recent past is in some ways a fascination with metaphor.

We would expect heroes like Gilgamesh and Enkidu to be tall and powerfully built. We will also see that they develop an intimate relationship (as soon as they fight for dominance) that is indicated by spatial images. The hero goes before his friend to protect him, but also stands behind him. The beloved is that axe by his side. He embraces the friend like a spouse. Gilgamesh is so physically attractive that a goddess proposes marriage to him. When he loses his friend, Gilgamesh acts like a lioness circling her cubs.

There is a great deal of gender-bending in Gilgamesh. The ones who serve the goddess Ishtar are especially important in this regard. And Ishtar is present in a number of avatars, like the goddess Irnina in the mountains and the woman who runs the tavern, Siduri.

More difficult for us is the way a piece of clothing, a statue, even a “name” can substitute for a person. And a person can substitute for another. In the Sumerian “Descent of Inanna to the Underworld,” when the goddess is slain by her sister, a substitute, her lover Dumuzi, is found for her—and Dumuzi’s sister offers herself as a substitute for him. The complicated question of “sacrifice” (in rituals involving pure animals and other items like grain, flour, incense) in rare moments involves the killing of a substitute. Only a few actual events have been recorded, but on an ominous occasion a king will become a
“gardener” while another man takes his place—and is killed when the event is over. The principle of substitution can, then, have a tragic character.

Two of the great gods in *Gilgamesh* are central characters in a Sumerian myth that many in the West would find scandalous. The crafty god Enki, wisest of the Mesopotamian gods, gives to Inanna more than one hundred of the divine *me*, the powers that, in effect, run the universe. In the West there is a long tradition that emphasizes the righteousness of god and the deceptiveness of an adversary, Satan. In “Inanna and Enki, The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization from Eridu to Uruk,” gives at least three kinds of speech to Inanna. (Inanna has tricked Enki in giving up the *me*, and when he sobered up he tries to get them back from her.) The first is “forthright,” and that is what we would expect. Then he gives her the art of “slanderous” and “ornamental” speech. These gifts the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition would find problematic. But Sumerian mythology makes clear elsewhere that these two deities are fully capable of using trickery to get their way.

In *Gilgamesh* Enki is known by his Akkadian name, Ea, and the poet provides him with one of the best known uses of metaphor in Mesopotamian literature. It occurs in a telling of the great Flood. (Finding a Flood story in *Gilgamesh* excited the early scholars who worked with the text, and the Flood continues to fascinate readers of *Gilgamesh*. There is a story that the man who discovered the tablet in Iraq and was the first to translate it, George Smith, became so excited as he read the tablet in the staid British Museum that he began to strip off his clothes.)

In the biblical Flood the decision to kill off most of humanity is the evil, especially violence, enacted by humans. The reason for the god Enlil’s bringing on the Flood is not made clear in *Gilgamesh*. In another version it is the “noise” that humans make—possibly a reference to the problem of overpopulation. At any rate, the crafty Ea disagrees with Enlil’s plan to destroy humankind. Ea’s problem is that he is bound by oath not to leak the plan. He deals with this problem by speaking to his human “servant,” not directly but through a reed wall.

His servant, Utnapishtim, a major figure in Tablets 10 and 11 of *Gilgamesh*, then faces another problem. He has to bring the community together to build the great boat—a problem the biblical Noah does not have to deal with—even though he knows they will all be killed in the Flood. Ea provides him with a solution.

Utnapishtim tells the community of the Flood, but in such an ambiguous way that they will not understand what he is saying. The speech he gives to his people is a sustained example of deceptive speech. Utnapishtim, as I read the passage, both tells the truth and tells it “slant,” as Emily Dickinson once put it. He does so by carefully manipulating metaphors. The details of this remarkable speech—in a narrative context in which the storyteller Utnapishtim is challenging Gilgamesh to figure out the subtleties of the Flood story—will be taken up later, in Chapter Eight. Suffice it here to mention that Utnapishtim tells his people that he will have to leave his city, that he will not longer walk on Enlil’s ground but will travel to Ea’s watery dwelling. Meanwhile, the gods will *rain plenty* on the people, an abundance of birds and a profusion of fish, a veritable *harvest* of
grain and a *shower* of cakes. The people do not take this as a world turned upside down, and for their hard work, they are rewarded by the greatest party they will ever enjoy. When it comes, the Flood will be described in such vivid and violent way that even the gods are terrified by the results of their decision to destroy humankind.

**Gilgamesh and Enkidu**

Dumuzi—or as he is known in *Gilgamesh*, Tammuz—was selected as a *sag*, or substitute, for Inanna when she was trapped and killed in the underworld. In addition to mythic literature involving this, the most famous *en* of Uruk, Dumuzi is featured in a number of rituals and magical operations where a replacement is needed, especially when a person is gravely ill. The physician-exorcist Sin-leqi-unninni who is thought to have written *Gilgamesh* would certainly have known this material. In “The Descent of Inanna to the Underworld,” Inanna is resurrected with the help of Enki, but she is detained in the underworld until a substitute is found for her. Dumuzi is chosen when two others who were properly respectful of the goddess escaped the tragic decision. He resists the decision, tries to flee, and is captured, tortured and killed. When the grim demons capture him, Dumuzi appeals to the Sun God for help. He is, after all, the “spouse” of Inanna (*dam dingir-ra*) and therefore no longer “mortal” (*lú nu-me-en*, line 370). The Sun God Utu helps him to escape from his captors, but Dumuzi is seized again. Inanna decrees his fate, but modifies it, as we have seen, by allowing Dumuzi’s sister, Geshtinanna, to take his place in the underworld for half the year. Inanna places her spouse among the immortals (line 412).

One crucial passage in Tablet 7 of *Gilgamesh* is missing. The gods are in council we know, but there is a gap in the text that tells us of the gods’ deliberations. The passage is normally filled in by a version in the Hittite language. Gilgamesh and Enkidu stand accused of killing both Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven. Anu thinks that one of the men should die for the offenses. The Sun God tries to help, claiming that the gods themselves ordered the killings, but his objection is dismissed. Gilgamesh will live, but Enkidu must die. The second half of *Gilgamesh* narrates the death of Enkidu and its effect on Gilgamesh.

Enkidu becomes, in effect, a substitute for Gilgamesh. Throughout the story the two heroes are virtually identical. In the cylinder seal impressions of the scenes showing the killing of Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven, the two heroes are imagined in a way that was very ancient: the two heroes on either side of a central adversary. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are just about equal in height; but they are clothed differently, and Enkidu preserves the body of the animal he was at his birth. (Recall the long-haired acolyte accompanying the *en* in early Urukean cylinder seal images.) They are equal, but different.

I will argue that the presentation of the heroes as virtually equal has profound implications for *Gilgamesh* as a whole. The details—how Enkidu was created as a rival to Gilgamesh, how the wrestling match was virtually a tie, how the mother of Gilgamesh adopts Enkidu, and, of course, how the two heroes act together in taking down Humbaba...
and The Bull of Heaven—will be taken up later. What strikes me as a brilliant move by the author of *Gilgamesh*, making them almost but not quite identical, is the culmination of the evolution of Enkidu through more than a thousand years of Gilgamesh stories.

The changing perception of Enkidu over the centuries in Mesopotamia has been documented by Jeffrey H. Tigay in *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*. In many respects the development of Enkidu over time reflects the evolution of the Gilgamesh stories into a unified whole. In Gilgamesh stories older than the *Gilgamesh* collection, Enkidu moves from being the “slave” of Gilgamesh to his intimate “friend” and constant companion. (The term “slave” is usually softened in translations to “servant,” but as both the biblical and the Islamic traditions show clearly, to be a “slave” of God is both an accurate representation of the relationship and an exaltation of the one with the lower status. The transfer of a title from divine/human to king/subject is anything but demeaning in some early societies, even those who kept slaves in mainly difficult and certainly oppressive circumstances.) The development of Enkidu’s roles can be seen in Sumerian and Akkadian literature from the Old Babylonian period (early 2nd millennium BCE) into 1st millennium texts.

The recent discovery of even earlier Gilgamesh texts shows the evolution of Enkidu in even greater clarity. It is unlikely that literature earlier than the “Presargonic” period (otherwise known as the Early Dynastic era) will come to light. Two documents that are the earliest Gilgamesh texts are “The Birth of Gilgamesh” and “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh.” Both will be taken up later. “The Birth of Gilgamesh” does not (unsurprisingly) refer to Enkidu, but it does point out an unusual feature of the late *Gilgamesh*: the birth and death of Enkidu, that is, his entire life story, is given at considerable length. The birth and death of Gilgamesh himself are only suggested, if at all. This gives us a tale of two heroes, one from birth to death, but the other as already an adult. Like most commentators on *Gilgamesh* I see important changes taking place in the adult Gilgamesh. It has even been called a coming of age story. While the events in *Gilgamesh* may have been accomplished in a matter of weeks, Gilgamesh himself appears to move from callow youth through difficult experiences to a mature, almost an old, man. Like most, I see this as a growth in “wisdom,” and I will argue that the evolution of Gilgamesh is full of subtle changes.

“The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” is a most important recent contribution to Gilgamesh literature. It provides a transition from earlier visual images of an Urukean hero to the more familiar figure of the 2nd and 1st millennia. It indicates briefly many of the stories that make up the *Gilgamesh* collection. But it does not, apparently, know anything about Enkidu.

**The Great Gods of Gilgamesh**

**Ishtar of Uruk = Inanna**

The temple complex in Uruk known as Eanna was the center of city life from the 5th millennium BCE into the first century of the Common Era. The compound of some 3000
square feet contained many buildings and courtyards. At its peak in the 4th millennium BCE Uruk grew into the largest city in antiquity, equaled only by Rome at the height of its power. It has been called the First City (though Mesopotamians would not have called it this) because it saw the almost unimaginable development of a social system with a complex bureaucracy, maintained by records kept in the world’s earliest development of true writing; the invention of the cylinder seal and the plowshare; the expansion of a system of irrigation to water long rows of, mainly barley, the world’s earliest known money (distributed as rations). Virtually all aspects of “civilization” are evident at this early stage of Uruk’s development. Sumerians there celebrated their achievements in the visual arts and, later, in literature.

Uruk’s Eanna temple was one of three devoted to the worship of Inanna in the collection of Temple Hymns attributed to the poet/princess/priestess Enheduanna, who lived in the Akkadian Period late in the 3rd millennium BCE. Here is Enheduanna’s portrait of Eanna, the “home” of its “princess,” Inanna. (Kullab, mentioned in the first line, was once a separate settlement but later was assimilated to the city of Uruk.)

The poet addresses the temple directly and provides a brief description of the features that fit the goddess who dwelt there. The poet then goes on to speak to the temple about Inanna in a more direct way. The “house” itself is radiant, and it contains (under the control of Inanna) the divine me, something like the software that operates the universe. If it is a house of power, it is also a place of desire: the fresh fruit, with its “irresistible ripeness,” is a metaphor for libido. As we shall see in Gilgamesh, desire, kuzbu (Sumerian hili), is itself a cosmic power invested in Inanna especially among the gods, and infused by the gods into humans (and animals).
Eanna is also described as a house that “descended” from the heavens. This is a striking example of the individuality and power of Inanna herself. The myth of Inanna stealing the “House of Heaven” from the heaven of her “father,” the creator god An, is purely Urukean. Without her father’s permission, Inanna seized the house and removed it to earth, thus gaining all the power and authority it represented. The temple is also called a “shrine built for the bull,” which may refer to The Bull of Heaven, who will reappear in Tablet 6 of *Gilgamesh*.

A number of Old Akkadian cylinder seal-impressions depicts a kind of architectural structure—quite possibly a “house,” that is, a temple—carried on the back of a bull. Some indicate the bull descending a mountain. Such a story is told in the myth “Inanna and AN,” where the AN refers both to “Heaven” itself—the “Above”—and to the Father of Inanna, father of the gods generally, whose name is An. The poem tells of Inanna’s outrageous and dangerous act: she has stolen the House of AN from her father. The father is furious and tries everything he can to stop her on the journey, which ends up at Uruk. One cylinder seal depicts an *en* in a boat along with the Bull carrying what may be the House through the swampy waters, as the myth, though the text fragmentary at this point, implies.

Once she has established the House in Uruk, the Father relents. He is forced to agree that Inanna, not her father, now rules the universe.

In this Temple Hymn (lines 198-209 of the collection) the seven corners, seven fires, and seven desires of Eanna seem to point to rituals held during the night, while Inanna was seen in her cosmic aspect as the Evening Star and the Morning Star (the planet Venus). We know from very early Uruk texts that different offerings were made to Inanna under these two (and other) aspects of the goddess.

When the poet turns more directly to Inanna, she she points to the goddess as a “pure one” and “the whole horizon,” once again emphasizing her singularity and her cosmic power. Inanna throws “stone dice,” likely a metaphor for her power to change fate. She is one of few high gods who could claim such an awesome authority. This power is specified in the lines that differentiate gender roles according to what women and men are expected to wear. (The line about “covering the head of” the man might refer to a helmet, associating Inanna with warfare—or the “cloth” covering may possibly refer to the characteristic rolled cap of the *en.* What this line anticipates, but does not state explicitly, is the power of Inanna to *change* female into male and male into female. We know of cross-dressing rituals in which the men and women in the service of Inanna wore garments that combined masculine and feminine aspects. (This may remind readers of Shakespeare who, many millennia later had Antony and Cleopatra in their erotic encounters exchanging clothes and sword.)

Inanna is “crowned with lapis lazuli desire,” that is, both she and her temple wear the precious decorative stones—exhibiting “desire,” the most conspicuous element in this early poetic treatment of the great goddess. We will see her, and these aspects, in *Gilgamesh* under her Akkadian name of Ishtar.
The Temple Hymn to Inanna is followed immediately by a hymn to Dumuzi (in Akkadian texts, Tammuz), the most famous of the mythical lovers of Inanna/Ishtar.

Ea of Eridu = Enki
Next to Inanna/Ishtar, the Sumerian god Enki, Akkadian Ea, is probably the deity most frequently represented in the visual arts and in literature and ritual texts. He is nearly as complicated a figure as Inanna. Even their attendant gods reflect that complexity. Inanna’s Ninshubur has a name (beginning with Nin) that could be male or female; he/she is depicted in art as having attributes of both sexes, wearing a beard and carrying a bow at the same revealing a shapely, feminine leg, as shown in a number of cylinder seal-impressions. (Inanna/Ishtar is also represented at times with her bow and a beard—and with her charming erotic qualities.)

Enki is actually given precedence in the collection of Temple Hymns: Hymn #1.

Enki/Ea’s Isimud, his attendant, for his part is a Janus-figure, a god with two faces. Enki is a god who, among many traits, is known for what is usually called “wisdom.” Virtually all ancient cultures have important notions of “wisdom.” We will see that in *Gilgamesh* the Sun God displays a certain kind of wisdom. The wisdom of Enki/Ea is much different, darker, more complex, more like the cunning of an expert problem-solver. He is a crafty god, capable of subverting any order. A trickster, Enki, like Inanna, is an expert manipulator of words.49

One Sumerian tradition has it that Enki’s city, Eridu, was the original city on earth. Like An, Enki is one of the “older” gods, a generation or two removed from deities like Inanna and Utu. He lived in the time of origins and is a powerful creator. His temple in Eridu, the E-Engur, House of the Abyss, is the first to be praised in the Temple Hymns collection. (Enki may mean “en (LORD) of KI,” the Great Below. He is represented often as living underwater in a dwelling that is so dark that it cannot be penetrated.)

Temple Hymn #1 is a relatively long poem in the collection at 23 lines. (The second Temple Hymn, which praises the god some Sumerian traditions consider the most powerful of the high gods, Enlil, is given, in contrast only thirteen lines.) Enki’s “House” in Eridu, *E-unir*—a temple that is itself a ziggurat—was originally a small cube-like structure but was expanded many times over the centuries.

House that is a ziggurat growing Heaven and Earth together,
the great banqueting hall of Eridu,
shrine of the *Abzu*, built for its prince, and
*E-du-kug*, House that is a holy mound,
where pure food is eaten,
watered by the prince’s pure canal,
Mountain, the pure place scrubbed clean with potash,
*Abzu*,
your *tigi*-drums belong to the great me.
Your great surrounding walls stands strong,
Light cannot reach the meeting-place where the god dwells.
Your well-constructed House is sacred,
and has no equal...a beautiful place.

Your prince—the Great Prince—has firmly fixed a holy crown
for you in your precinct.

Eridu! With a crown placed on your head,
bringing forth thriving thorn-bushes,
pure thorn-bushes for the susbu-priests.
*Abzu*! The shine is yours, your great place.

Where you call upon Utu,
at the oven bringing bread to eat,
on your ziggurat--
a wonderful shrine stretching toward Heaven,
at the great oven that rivals the banqueting-hall,
your prince, the Prince of Heaven and Earth...
can never be changed....

*Nudimmud* has built a House in your precinct.
*E-engurra*—the House of Subterranean Waters--
has taken his seat upon your dais. (Temple Hymn #1)

A number of Sumerian “contest” poems have survived, and quite a number of them appear in curriculum lists for use in the scribal schools: “Sheep vs. Grain,” “Hoe vs. Plow,” “Bird vs. Fish,” “Winter vs. Summer” and the like. Enki, as we will see in *Gilgamesh*, is the god who most likes contests. In a number of myths Enki is pitted against goddesses, and the contests are in doubt up to the end. One of the most astonishing contests has Inanna tricking the Trickster and winning the precious *me* for herself and for her city. “Inanna and Enki: The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization from Eridu to Uruk” is a unique text because it contains a list of more than one hundred of the divine *me*, powers that are particularly important to a Sumerian view of the organization of a city-state. The poem begins with Inanna viewing her own genitals in preparation for a journey from Uruk to Eridu. There she gets Enki intoxicated, and in that state he gives her the *me*. When she departs and he sobers up, he tries desperately to get them back (by sending monsters to attack her boat). She manages to return safely to Uruk with her cargo. In a great celebration Enki becomes reconciled to Inanna.

In the Temple Hymn #1 Eridu’s sacred mountain grew, splitting the Above and the Below. Eridu, on the earth that divides heaven and the underworld, has its roots in the “dark interior” of the *abzu* (Akkadian *apsû*), from which we get our deep “abyss.” The water that is always emblematic of Enki—cylinder seal impressions show him with streams (and sometimes fish) issuing from his shoulders—provides for the cultivation of plants and for the purification of places like Enki’s mountain and the wall surrounding the temple.
Enki’s temple in Eridu, by the way, is the earliest brick building that has been discovered. From a very small beginning, with a building no more than ten feet square, the Sumerians kept covering the temple with increasingly large structures. Not surprisingly the Sumerians considered Eridu the first city. The small, early temple is dated ca. 4900 BCE, and it was covered some eighteen times thereafter until about 3800 BCE.53

The creator god was known for his “wisdom,” as the Temple Hymn attests. So important was Enki that a catalog of texts and authors (a catalog that identifies Gilgamesh and Sin-leqi-unninnī, by the way) claims that Enki was the author of the most important, mainly religious and magical texts.54 Enki was followed by works authored by the sages who were thought to have emerged from the depths in the form of fish and instructed humans in their earliest days on earth. The sages were followed by “experts” and other humans. The catalog arranges the lists in a hierarchical way, with, of course, Enki at the very top. (Note that the Temple Hymn refers to Utu the Sun God in his role as the dispenser of Justice, a role that required a different sort of wisdom. Both forms are evident in Gilgamesh.)

**Illil of Nippur = Enlil**

Much of what is written about Sumer and the Sumerians is centered on the King of the God, Enlil, and his holy city of Nippur. The emphasis on Enlil and Nippur derives from the excellent excavation work on the city and the large finds of important documents. There is no question that for a good part of the 3rd millennium BCE Enlil and Nippur was regarded with awe. Nippur has been considered something like a Vatican for the Sumerian city-states. It was the center of an economic network, the Kengir League, which, it now seems replaced Uruk as the center of such a league. More than Akkad or Ur, Uruk was diminished in importance (if not in size or economic clout) by Nippur.

The importance of Enlil will appear in episodes of Gilgamesh involving Humbaba and the Flood—long after the Babylonians and Assyrians had gained dominance in Sumer. The formula that still designated the highest gods in the pantheon remained the same, An, Enlil, and Enki (or in Akkadian, Anu, Enlil, and Ea) in that order. Though he was not “first” in the list, he remained the most powerful of the gods, the King of the Gods. By the Early Dynastic period (ca. 3100-2390 BCE) Nippur had been elevated to the “cosmic center of the universe,” in the words of W. G. Lambert.55 It is no coincidence that the title, King of the Gods, comes from the very period in which kingship emerged as the major force in Mesopotamian life, the palace finally outstripping the power of the temple. Gilgamesh is thought to have lived (ca. 2600 BCE) in that period, and at least part of the fascination with Gilgamesh was the conflict poets saw in him between kingship, which was rooted in military matters, and the “weak king” rule of the en (usually translated “lord”) in places like Uruk.

Nippur had become a center for writing. Excavators have found some 30,000 clay tablets there. Many are “school tablets,” written by students in cuneiform, a study that took many years to master. Much of what we know about Sumerian myth and literature comes from tablets written originally or copied in Nippur. A catalogue of texts to be used in the
schools includes, rather prominently, Gilgamesh stories in Sumerian—and the Temple Hymns cited here to give us a glimpse of the great gods and their “houses.”

Although the name Enlil looks like a Sumerian name meaning something like en (“lord”) of lil (“air” or “wind”), the name was probably pronounced Illil, and it has been suggested that the name was not originally Sumerian, but Semitic I- lu-lu, a form of the word god itself, a name that shows up in the earliest Akkadian texts as ‘Il. This is not altogether surprising, since Nippur was located much farther to the north than Uruk, Ur, Larsa, Eridu and other cities in the south, close to the Euphrates River. Nippur (or Nibru) is closer to the northern cities that were dominated by Semitic peoples—Akkad, Babylon, and Sippur (not to mentioned the even farther northern Assyrian cities like Nineveh)—than to cities like Uruk.

Enlil’s temple, the Ekur, is second in the collection of Temple Hymns. Only Enki’s Eridu takes precedence in that collection. The first few lines (of 13 total) are incomplete, but they point to Enlil’s role in determining fates (nam-tar) and to the House raised with a ziggurat. The description is noteworthy in identifying architectural features: door-jambs, architrave, pilasters, the peak and the base of the structure. The poem seems to situate the temple, in Nippur, to the right and left of Sumer and Akkad, that is, at the center of the southern and northern territories. As in the first hymn the god is considered its nun, usually considered a “prince,” and en, usually translated as “lord.” Enlil, like Enki, has the important title en prominent in his name.

Where the text is complete we hear:

House of Enlil, your interior is cool,
your exterior determines fates.
Your door-jambs and architrave are a mountain summit.
Your pilasters project a defined mountain.
Your peak is a...princely platform.
Your base holds together Heaven and Earth.

Your nun the great nun Enlil, the good en,
the en who measures the limits of Heaven,
the en who determines fate,
the Great Mountain (kur-gal),

Enlil has built a House in your precinct,
the E-kur, Mountain House,
and taken his seat upon your dais. (Temple Hymn #2)

The hymn actually provides little detail either about the temple or its divine inhabitant. Where the southern temples are differentiated in ways that reflect the cities where they are located and the territories around them, the Ekur (which may mean “Mountain House”) is a temple like a mountain at the navel of the universe. Mesopotamian thought located the original home of gods, and the place where they assembled, in the “Great Above,” in the heavens. Nippur stands high at the place where earth and heaven meet,
where a connection can be made between gods and humans. Then, rather than seeing the city and its main temple in relation to its countryside, the poet sees all of Sumer and Akkad, south and north, a territory that spreads to the outer edge of heaven. In other words, the poet sees a world empire, not a city-state.

Enlil, who for all his power in Mesopotamian theology, has fewer roles to play in Mesopotamian literature than the other high gods, and has little depth or complexity of character. He is the fixer of destinies, and he is the prince and lord of the universe. Even literature that is appreciative of Enlil’s power sees him mainly as an elemental force, perpetually angry. We will see how this vision of the King of the Gods plays out in *Gilgamesh*.

**Shamash of Sippar = Utu of Larsa**

While the other gods were primarily Sumerian deities who persisted through many centuries, picked up additional attributes as they were associated with other gods (especially those who were originally Semitic deities), and expanded their influence far beyond their original homes, one very prominent figure in *Gilgamesh* is the Sun God, known in Sumer as Utu and in the north as Shamash. (The root letters in *Sh-m-sh* have cognates in all Semitic languages and support the common term for “sun” in those languages.) The increasing importance of the Sun God in *Gilgamesh* provides one of the clearest examples of the “evolution” of the Gilgamesh series from Old Babylonian times through the Standard Akkadian *Gilgamesh*. Now it is clear that the roles of the Sun God were expanded in Mesopotamian culture as the Semitic north gained power. Babylonians and Assyrians gave greater importance to the Sun God than the Sumerians had done in the south. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Sun God’s holy city, Sippar, replaced Enlil’s holy city of Nippur as one might call it an ideological center of the culture. It was Sippar that provided the ideological (mythological and ritual) cover for the new city, Babylon, not vice-versa.

The Sumerian gods, Inanna, Enki, and Enlil, are excellent examples of an ideological principle that was quite different from the northern imperial principles seen in Akkad, Babylon, and Assyria. Inanna, Enki, and Enlil, though their influences extended widely throughout Mesopotamia in the north as well as the south, remained tied to their original homes in the city-states of Uruk, Eridu, and Nippur. Their lands were their possessions, and the border of one city-state was the border of another. There was no real “empty” land, and the principle support the relatively weak kingships that developed in those cities. Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians, whose strong kingships derived from long traditions of tribal chieftains, much more easily adopted the framework of empire.

The Sumerian “home” of Utu, the city-state of Larsa, was close enough to Uruk that the temple towers of one could be seen from the other. Utu appears in Sumerian myth and literature frequently as a youthful “brother” of Inanna. Unlike the powerful Uruk, this sister city of Larsa never gained the economic or political importance of places like Ur and Nippur. The influence of Utu was largely benign, but it was nothing like the sun gods of other cultures. (Egypt provides a very striking contrast.)
Since the sun appears always to be on the move, the Mesopotamian Sun God ranges freely over territories that remained largely unknown to humans. While he had a home in Larsa, he was thought to have a resting place at the border of the underworld, and during the night, after rest, he resumed a cycle that included a journey through the underworld, frequently imagined as a journey on a dragon-boat.

The evolution of the Sun God in the north may have been at least in part urged by this free-ranging movement, which prepared the way for imperial conquest and expansion. In one period, the Old Akkadian period (ca. 2400-2200 BCE), the period that saw the world first great empire under Sargon of Akkad, Shamash of Sippar came to be seen as a warrior, contesting (perhaps daily) with two aggressive monsters, the lion with human hands known as Big Day (ugallu), and the Bison-Man (kusarikkû). As frequently happens in Mesopotamian ideology, the aggressive figures who are defeated by the gods, mastered and tamed, become assimilated to the triumphant gods and serve them.

Shamash’s contests with Big Day and the Bison-Man seem not to appear in literature, but they are frequently represented in the visual arts. As we shall see, this aspect of Shamash will have an impact on Gilgamesh stories very early and throughout the evolution of those stories.

An Old Akkadian cylinder seal-impression appears to represent a great goddess, probably Inanna (center), flanked by contests to left and right. The small human on the left may be a servant of the large figure to the left of Inanna. The nude hero himself wears the characteristic cap of Gilgamesh but with the horns conspicuously on the cap. The horns indicate that he has (or will be) deified. He is defeating a deified figure on a mountain: this may represent the battle between Gilgamesh and Humbaba.

To the right of the goddess is another large figure defeating a bull on a mountain. Note that the bull wears a horned cap. It is possible that this scene represents Enkidu defeating The Bull of Heaven. Together the scenes appear to show the two great victories over powerful divine agents. If the central figure is Inanna, the scene would foreshadow her outrage over the heroes killing The Bull of Heaven. One of the heroes is condemned to death for the outrage—and Enkidu is the hero who will be condemned.
The *Temple Hymns* collection includes two Utu temples, one in Larsa and the second in Zimbir (= Sippar). The Sippar temple hymn is longer (fourteen lines to nine lines) than the Larsa hymn. The contrast between the Sumerian Utu and the Semitic Shamash is not as evident as what appears to be a conscious effort to associate the two. Such an association is characteristic of the period when Sumer had been defeated by Sargon of Akkad and taken over into an empire. Sumerian gods were assimilated to Akkadian ideas of divine kingship.

The *Temple Hymns* begin in the traditional Sumerian strongholds and end in the area of the new, northern capitol.

The Sippar hymn (#38)\(^{62}\) refers to Utu as nun, en, and lugal. He is a judge, pronouncing judgment “where the sun rises.” He wears a beard and ties on the suh (a crown?) at night. The center of the hymn indicates the sun’s beneficent influence on people and animals. When the en sleeps, the people sleep; when he rises, they rise. The “black-headed” people bathe before him. The references to animals are intriguing, but the lines are broken. There is a reference to “the bull” (gu-de) and people prostrating themselves, but it is not clear to whom they prostrate themselves. Similarly, the herds pasture before Utu, but the sentence is not complete. If the bull and the beard are at all related, one might see a reference to the Bison-Man, the kusarikku (Sumerian alim and gud-alim), mastered by and assimilated to the Sun God.

The temple of Utu in Larsa is shorter (ll. 169-77) and the lines are also somewhat broken, but they appear to refer to “shining horns” (aggressive, and holy), and a beard of lapis lazuli. They appear to be associated with the “shining bull” that lifts its neck to Utu. That is, the shining bull (\(gu\_a\ ninda\_2\ babbar\_2\)) is the temple itself, embodiment, perhaps of the mythic animal with which Utu fights and then is assimilated to Utu once it is mastered. The temple is called Ebabbar for the sun’s radiance that is so conspicuous in the poetic description of Utu’s home. Located some six miles from Uruk, the temple, according to the poet, could be seen from a section of Uruk, Kullab, once a separate settlement.

The hymn reads:

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House sent from Heaven
visible in Kullaba,
shrine E-babbar, glowing House,
glowing Bull.
Lift your neck to Utu who [rules] the sky.

Your glowing horns are fierce,
beard silver and lapis lazuli....

Your nun, the powerful sunlight, en...
of the true word,
who brightens the horizon,
who brightens the sky's...vault:
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Utu, lugal (king) of E-babbar,
has built his House in your precinct,
House Larsa,
and taken his seat upon your dais. (Temple Hymn #13)

A Sumerian hymn to Utu of Sippar (Zimbir) adds detail to this portrait. There he is a “great hero” and a “great physician,” and one who decrees judgments through the lands. Mainly, though, he is a young god, a bison running over the mountains, a young wild cow, a gazelle, a bull, a cedar tree. Especially, as he is in Sumerian love poetry, where he appears with the young Inanna, Utu is “patient-hearted, playful.”

Sippar (Zimbir), dais upon which Utu sits every day,
E-nun-ana, House of Heaven’s nun,
crown born by Ningal in the House of Utu, your nun....
...fills Heaven and Earth.
When the en sleeps, the people sleep,
when he rises, the people rise.
The bull....
and the people prostrate themselves.
In front of Utu the heads pasture....
The black-headed people (sag-gig-ge) bathe in front of him,
The Land (kalam) has....
He measures out the me;
your House is a flood.

Judgment are announced where the sun rises,
powerful sunlight,
wearing a beard and
tying on the suh-crown at night,
Utu, lugal of the E-babbar.

House, Zimbir, has taken his seat upon your dais.

Tammuz = Dumuzi
Two humans—probably better to consider them from the start as humans who were transformed into deities—were brought into the Temple Hymns, at least one of them, Shulgi of Ur, centuries after Enheduanna had served as the en-priestess of Ur. Enheduanna, daughter of the founder of the Akkadian Empire, lived ca. 2350 BCE. She was bilingual in Akkadian, the term that now covers both Babylonian and Assyrian dialects, and Sumerian, the language of the Temple Hymns. Shulgi, for his part was the second ruler of the Third Dynasty of Ur ( = Ur III), and ruled ca. 2094-2047 BCE. Enheduanna was the first to be called the en-priestess of the high god of Ur, Sumerian Nanna = Akkadian Sin.
Dumuzi became one of the most popular mythic figures in Sumerian literature (Tammuz in Akkadian literature), almost entirely because of the tempestuous love affair with Inanna/Ishtar. Condemned to death by the goddess, he lived on as demigod and ruler, raised to that position by the goddess who had condemned him to the Underworld.

Dumuzi is treated as a deity in Temple Hymn lines 210-220, which follows immediately after Inanna's, as does another member of the Inanna circle, Ninshubur, the “true minister of Eanna.” Dumuzi’s “house” in the city of Bad-tibira consists of thirteen lines.69

House where lustrous herbs are strewn upon the flowery bed,
   bedroom of the Holy Inanna,
   where the nin (Lady) of the Plain refreshes herself--
   E-mush, House that is the sacred precinct, flowery
   and holy.
Its...clay set for the one who tends the ewes on the high plain.
   Your...House of Arali, the House that is the Underworld
gives shade (?) to the shepherd.
   Your nun, a raging lion on the plain,
the shuba-jewel of the Nigig whose breast is holy and wondrous,
   the en who is Inanna's husband (dam),
Dumuzi, lugal of E-mush, has built a House in your precinct,
   Bad-tibira, and has taken his seat upon your dais.

The short poem covers, quite explicitly, the essentials of the Sacred Marriage. Dumuzi/Tammuz is the very model of the en who becomes the “husband” of Inanna/Ishtar. The “House” of Dumuzi in Bad-tibira is seen almost entirely in terms of the gipar, the Storehouse that is imaged as the bedroom of Inanna.

Dumuzi is celebrated in the literature as a shepherd. (The shepherd, representing animal husbandry, is often pitted against the farmer, representing agriculture, in which the administration of the city-state, sacred and secular, had major interests.)

The poem does not ignore the punishment of Dumuzi—and his reformation as a divine being—in the line that refers to Arali, another name for the Nether World. While it is generally a gloomy place with little water and bad food, the Nether World still provided a good life in palaces for the humans and deities living there. As its nun (Prince) Dumuzi remains a “raging lion,” an image of potency as well as power generally, and he remains, in an image used in one of the love poems, the shuba-stone, a valuable jewel, honored by Inanna. He remains “holy” (kugga) and sovereign in his own House.

Shulgi

Including a man who was certainly human and sponsored poetry during his reign indicates an addition to the Temple Hymns written by Enheduanna. Shulgi’s long reign included the names of some of the poets, women (in the tradition set by Enheduanna?), who produced writings that became part of the canon studied in the schools. Some of the most explicit writings that describe the Sacred Marriage involve Shulgi. There is a text that refers to Shulgi's death and elevation to Heaven, where he met with the gods
themselves. It may have been seen as a temporary elevation of the human, but it may
have influenced legends like those of Gilgamesh.

The fifteen-line poem (lines 119-133) refers to Shulgi by name—but does not provide the
indicator that the name is a divine name.70

House, \textit{E-mu-mah}, House with a magnificent name (\textit{mu}),

rising mountain of Heaven,

your holy walls and great foundation are a precious fate (\textit{nam}).

An interior full of the princely cosmic powers (\textit{me nun}),

beaming light that shines,

shines with your back to the blue sky and your massive front to all

people,

in the Land (\textit{kalam}) it stands as a binding agreement and a single

track.

Magnificent river with an open mouth gathers together your...

...me.

Your base is awesome, a hill of righteousness grown in a broad place.

Your lofty dwelling magnificent with all the \textit{me} of prince-ship

...shouting....

house of celebration,

your platform makes the settlements glad.

House, your \textit{nun} Shulgi, has made it great and princely,

the perfect and magnificent....

the powerful and great wind, adorned with the \textit{me}

determining destiny (\textit{nam}),

Shulgi of An, has built a House in your precinct,

\textit{E-hursang}—House that is a hill—and taken his seat upon your dais.

The next to last line preserves the ambiguous fate of Shulgi himself. It could be read An

= Heaven, the Above vs. the Below; or as “The God,” An himself, father of the gods and

Heaven itself. In either case, Shulgi is praised as the one who operates the \textit{me}, the cosmic

powers (rather like a computer program for the universe). While Dumuzi’s praise poem

emphasizes his participation in the Sacred Marriage itself, Shulgi’s rather emphasizes the

king’s immense powers that extend beyond the empire that was Ur III to the universe

itself.

\textbf{Fathers and Sons: A “Divine Dialogue”}

A Sumerian poem of the type known as a “City Lament” includes all of these deities. “The

Lament of Sumer and Ur” provides a useful example of a theology that links the different

gods and illustrates the different roles they perform. “The Lament of Sumer and Ur” is

also an example of genre usually called “Ea/Marduk Incantation” but is now known as

“Divine Dialogues.”71 The reason is that a large majority of these texts involve Enki and

his son, other gods are involved in the early texts, notably Enlil. A key element is a
dialogue between Father and Son.

In the case of “The Lament of Sumer and Ur” the Father is Enlil himself and the son is

Nanna, also called Sin, the main god of Ur. (Ur, well known to the West as the birthplace
of Abraham, was a major city during the 3rd millennium BCE especially. The city is not, however, mentioned in *Gilgamesh* where Uruk, Nippur, and Sippar are prominent.\(^72\)

The formula in the Divine Dialogues is clear. A terrible problem, such as an attack upon the population by demons or illness, has arisen; the Son sees it but is unable to deal with it; he seeks out the Father, who transfers the knowledge needed to solve the problem to the Son. The knowledge usually consists of something that is to be done (a ritual) and something to be said (an incantation), and a solemn promise that what needs to be done will be done.

In “The Lament for Sumer and Ur,” as the title suggests, all of Sumer is under attack by outsiders, the Gutians and the Elamites. Ur is at the center, a “primeval city of lordship and kingship, built on sacred ground.”\(^73\) A long poem of more than 500 lines, the lament greatly expands the devastation throughout the country. The *ēnu* of five Sumerian cities, including Inanna’s Uruk, Nanna’s Ur, and Enki’s Eridu, are seized by the enemies and sent off to Elam in the east of Sumer. The gods of the cities lament the devastation.

As the focus shifts to Ur itself, the king, Ibbi-Suen, finds himself immobilized, in anguish in his own palace. He weeps bitterly as kingship of The Land is defiled. The destruction is likened to a great storm and a great flood.

Enlil as Father provides Son Nanna with much advice. A key revelation is that Ur was given kingship by the gods, but it was not given an eternal reign. “The reign of its kingship had been long indeed but had to exhaust itself” (ll. 360-70). Finally, though, Enlil provides his son with a favorable response. Ur will be rebuilt in splendor, and its people will bow down to Nanna once again. There will be prosperity again: grain in abundance. The formal conclusion takes up another forty line of poetry.

What modern Western readers will notice immediately is the irony that the Father gives what the Father had taken away. In the lengthy description of destruction to Sumer and to Ur the high gods themselves are the ones who sent the devastation. The poem opens with the unimaginable: the “appointed times” have been overturned, the “divine plans” obliterated. And the highest gods are responsible. An, Enlil, Enki and the Mother Goddess (Ninhursag in one version, Nimah in another) have decided the fate of Sumer. Even Utu casts “his curse on the road and highways.” And Utu also takes away equity and justice in the land. Inanna herself hands victory to the enemy.

What is most striking is that the poem never indicates the reason for the gods acting in this way (or for Enlil changing the fates once again, for that matter). These great questions of divine justice, which are so much part of the Western tradition, may have been asked in Mesopotamia, but this poem at least does not clearly articulate an answer.

We will see a similar situation in the Flood story in *Gilgamesh*.

The Divine Dialogues appear in Sumerian and in bilingual Sumerian and Akkadian texts. The earliest *Semitic* texts show up in 3rd millennium BCE Ebla, far to the west of Mesopotamia (near present-day Aleppo in Syria) and are thought to have been written in
an archaic form of Old Akkadian. The role of the Sun God shows a marked emphasis on Shamash as divine punisher. A particularly striking punishment, one that shows a strong Semitic influence, has Shamash cutting off a transgressor’s line. For a society that highly values genealogy, this is the worst possible punishment for sin or crime. We will see in Tablet 12 of *Gilgamesh* the importance of a person leaving offspring behind in order to care for the dead.

One of the most exciting finds in recent years is a poem that tells of the birth of Gilgamesh. In cylinder seal impressions from the Old Akkadian period, the protector of the infant Gilgamesh on his dangerous journey from the mountain wilderness to Uruk is the Sun God.

**Ishtar = “The Goddess”**

When Gilgamesh is given the peculiar designation, “two-thirds god, one-third human” (1:48, 9:51), the poet employs the ordinary Akkadian term for “god,” that is, *ilu*. The word is cognate with other Semitic languages. It normally translates the Sumerian *dingir*. As is usual in Semitic languages, *ilu* has a feminine equivalent, in this case, *iltu*. Since Sumerian does not inflect nouns for gender, a Sumerian speaker would have to qualify *dingir* if the speaker wanted to designate a female deity (e.g., adding *munus*). In order to distinguish divine power or the divine nature from “god” or “goddess,” Akkadian uses a regular element to build an abstraction, *ilūtu*. Ishtar’s divine nature, for example, was so indicated.

More interesting for our purposes are the terms derived from the god name Ishtar. The abstraction *ištarītu*, for example, is used to translate an epithet for Inanna, *nugig*, which is also sometimes a woman of special status in the service of Ishtar, the *qadištu*. Occasionally a feminine construction, *ištartu*, can be used for “goddess.” The most interesting term, though, is derived directly from Ishtar’s name (and from Inanna, her Sumerian counterpart). Akkadian *ištaru* refers to a goddess, the goddess, protective and personal goddesses, and statues of the goddess. It approaches our concept of “divinity” as closely as any term in Akkadian.

The difficulty in translating the term “Ishtar” in the Flood story (11:116) derives from the poet’s employment of the term in parallel with “Lady of the Gods” (11:117, 163). It could be read as Ishtar herself, or as the essential deity indicated by her name. As later chapters will show, scholarly interest in the Great Goddess of Uruk, which has been intense for many decades, is increasing at a rapid clip. There is little doubt that Ishtar came to be equated with the “goddess per se.” The “motherly” aspect of the goddess, which appears in Assyrian literature, does not necessarily mean that she was seen as giving birth. Possibly it reflected a dualism in the goddess from the start.

The high goddess Ishtar, nurturer and lover of Urukean ens and kings, is both Above, in the heavens, and Below, in the dwelling she has seized and taken to earth, and even closer, in the psyche of the person.
Plato’s *Symposium* discusses two forms of the goddess Aphrodite—the most conspicuous counterpart to Ishtar in Greek mythology—one heavenly, free of sensual desire (Aphrodite Urania) and another, earthly and sensual (Aphrodite Pandemos). The distinction was to have a considerable impact on Western thought, not only for philosophers and theologians but also, perhaps more so, for artists and writers. It illustrates as well as anything the prevalent mind/body dualism so characteristic of the Greco-Roman tradition. If there is any counterpart in Mesopotamian literature, it would appear in a curious piece called “The Agushaya Poem.”

“The Agushaya Poem” is a kind of contest between Ishtar and Ea. Ishtar, the “pre-eminent of goddesses,” is shown in her most warlike form, “always in battle” and cunning. In “her manliness” she “dances around gods and kings.” When she threatens even the crafty god Ea, he, as usual, comes up with an ingenious solution. He creates an image of Ishtar, a creature embodying “discord” (šali). When Ishtar and the creature each hear about the prowess of the other, they both become enraged. Ishtar demands that Ea dispose of the creature, and he agrees—but only when she recognizes herself in the violent creature and changes her own behavior. Ea orders a new festival in honor of the event, a festival in which people dance wildly in the streets. The poem ends with Ishtar in her suitable grandeur. The “lioness” Ishtar is quieted, her heart “appeased.”

Inanna and Ishtar are periodically “exalted” in Mesopotamia, that is, raised to the highest eminence and powers of the gods. Her roles and powers are multiplied in the extensions and avatars in which she appears. As her influence spreads through the ancient Near East it becomes more and more difficult to identify the characteristics that are essentially Urukean. With “The Agushaya Poem,” though, we see the ability of the goddess to learn through a kind of self-scrutiny. Mesopotamia would see neither the raging Ishtar at the beginning of the poem (the Ishtar captured in her likeness) nor the quiet Ishtar at the end a distinction between an Earthly, Lower, or bodily Ishtar or a Heavenly, Higher or more mindful Ishtar.

Simo Parpola has argued that in Assyria, Ishtar had an even more important role. He discovered in Assyrian prophecy texts that oracles were not called the “words of Assur,” the high god, but rather the “words of Ishtar.” Ishtar as the Goddess bridges the gap between human and divine. As she influences humanity she is “the emotion (šāru) moving the prophet, the breath (šāru) issues from his or her “heart,” and the voice (rīgmu) and words (dibbi) emerging from his or her mouth.” She is the “heart,” seat of emotions, love, spirit and courage, “the essence of anything.”

As Ishtar is, then, the “spirit” or “breath” of Assur, she is, for Parpola, the “functional equivalent” of the spirit of Israelite Yahweh and the Christian Holy Spirit.

**Mesopotamian Religion**

Mesopotamia was polytheistic, an idea that is still difficult for most of us in the West, since the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions rigorously opposed even the possibility of other gods. As the Sumerian Temple Hymns show, at some point the Sumerian city-
states were thought to be ruled by a single deity or a divine couple. (This even though many deities were worshipped in any given city.) In at least some of the cities the chief deities were served by humans who were raised to a very special status, male ens where the high god was female, as in Uruk, or females where the high god was male (as in neighboring Ur). The gods received offerings. Temples possessed agricultural lands and domesticated animals. The economy flowed through temples, which operated much like the national banks of our own time.

Mesopotamian religion still remains a puzzle. In many ways it seems to lack the faith, hope and charity that the West assumes is the heart of religion. If by faith we mean a belief system that binds believers in a community; if hope is related to the promise of eternal life and the eventual end of evil in the world; and if charity is an explicit demand that we care for others in (and out) of the community, the many thousands of documents from Mesopotamia are silent about these demands.

The most comprehensive theory of Mesopotamian religion was developed by Thorkild Jacobsen in *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (1976). Jacobsen saw the fundamental elements evolving from the 4th millennium BCE, where the gods were seen as providers (with the myths and rituals of Inanna and Dumuzi as representatives), through the 3rd millennium, where gods were rulers and the characters of the high gods as individuals were developed, through the 2nd and 1st millennia, when the gods were seen as parents, and personal religion developed. Jacobsen, in a very influential analysis, interprets *Gilgamesh* in the context of 2nd millennium religion.87

In sharp contrast to Jacobsen’s comprehensive account of Mesopotamian religion, A. Leo Oppenheim argued against the very idea of a Mesopotamian religion. Oppenheim did, however, identify a central element in Mesopotamian religion, the care and feeding of the gods.88 Certainly the temples were actively preparing daily meals (no doubt for those who regularly kept the temples) and offering them (first) to the deities, a practice debunked in the apocryphal “Bel and the Dragon” attached to the biblical Book of Daniel. (“Bel” was the main epithet of the Babylonian high god Marduk, a translation of the Sumerian en.)

Another well-developed aspect of Mesopotamian religion was the constant anxiety about how things were fated to happen. Elaborate rituals like the investigation of the liver of sacrificed animals were attempts to interpret messages from the gods. The gods were thought to be sending messages in a great variety of forms. A good sampling of these concerns can be seen in, e.g., *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.*89 Assyrian prophets from the time *Gilgamesh* was held in the Libraries of Assurbanipal received their messages from Ishtar. One of the prophets even cited a passage from *Gilgamesh* in her prayer to Ishtar.

In some cases, though, our Western ways of thinking about religion prepare us to understand Mesopotamian religion in those areas of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that have actually been influenced by earlier practices. The pouring of water to cleanse the soul as well as the body is one such ancient practice. Even in that statement, though, we may find ourselves trapped by the language we use. Did the Sumerians distinguish “soul”
and “body” in the way the Greeks have led us to distinguish them? (For that matter, does the Bible distinguish soul and body in that way, even when the Hebrew Bible is translated into the Greek language or when Aramaic-thinking Christians translated concepts into the Greek that we now know as the New Testament?) Consider the problems we face as we try to conceptualize religious practice in modern English. With “ecstasy,” “union,” and “sacrifice,” we noticed that Mesopotamian practices may still color our thinking, even though they are filtered through certain conceptual lenses. Certain practices that came to be regarded as pagan and thus idolatrous, practices such as preparing cakes for the Queen of Heaven or human sacrifices for Moloch, helped to define Israelite religion in contrast to the religion of Israel’s neighbors. Christian redefinition of communion and sacrifice in the temple turns “Babylon” into a symbol of everything abhorrent in false religion. Islam literally drives the ancient goddesses out of the holiest of sacred sites, the Kaaba.

More difficult to detect in our own thinking is the filter of Western modernity. Without entirely losing the traditions that lead us back to the ancient world, the modern West tends to desacralize much that was considered sacred, and to make what had been considered divine, real, and external to human subjects now experiences of the inner person. Ecstasy becomes primarily an erotic experience with little reference to the sacred. Inspiration is the preserve of the individual artist, and “creativity” separated in thought from Creation. Marriage is a commitment of two individuals. Self-sacrifice is an honorable giving of something that confirms the existence of an autonomous self—or it is viewed suspiciously as an unhealthy self-effacement, a social pathology that victimizes the one who wants to be generous. And so on.

The common, almost automatic response of Americans today, is that religion is a matter of “belief” first and foremost. And “belief” however odd or contradictory is something very private. Something so personal and “subjective” is to be separated in thought from the communal and from the reality that science can verify. There is, of course, considerable gain in political freedom in such thinking. The tolerance of different beliefs has made the modern West a safe haven for thinking of all types. Consider---to cite but a single example—Louis Harris’s polling of American attitudes toward religion in the 1980s. *Inside America* (1987) devoted a chapter to the question, is America “A God-Fearing Country?” The book as a whole divided issues into those of “Home and Family,” “Community,” and “The Nation and the World.” Significantly, religion was considered in the category farthest removed from the cosmos. The chapter was one among many that dealt with personal appearance, stress, weight, eating out, happiness, alcoholism, drugs, sex education, smoking and the sense of powerlessness felt by many individuals.

Harris summarized the results of many national polls taken from the late 1950s through the mid-1980s. They covered church attendance and noted differences by age, sex, region, race and specific religious denomination. The polls asked about the image of God. 68% thought God is more like a master than a spouse. (Only 8% opted for the spouse image.) 65% imaged God more as a father figure than as a mother figure. (A fairly large percentage, 24%, thought that God is a cross between the two.) Only 17% thought of God as a lover, while as substantial number consider God a judge. Perhaps because the image
of the divine has been democratized, a substantial plurality thinks of God more as a friend than as a king. (27% preferred the king image, and no fewer than 26% combined the images of king and friend.) No doubt reflecting the Christian majority among American believers, almost half thought of God as a redeemer, and 36% thought of God as both a redeemer and a liberator. Not quite half of those polled thought of God as both a creator and a healer.91

In his conclusion, Harris observes that Americans are believers: 95% reported that they believe in God. But far fewer than half attended religious services regularly. Such polling is so much a part of our modern West that we hardly think of it. The ancient world would not have even dreamed of such a statistical method for discussing religion. Harris’s final remarks neatly summarize what we have been exploring in our comments on modern religious language. If anything, since he is commenting only on American beliefs, his remarks tell us more about the advance guard of modern thought than about the West generally, which retains pockets of traditional belief-systems that might well produce rather different results if such polling were extended throughout the West.

God does have personal meaning for most Americans, emerging as a father figure, a kind of master of the universe, who passes judgment on moral, ethical, and faith-related matters, but who is also a friend in need, a creator and a healer.

The evidence is that America is religious, but neither demonstratively nor with heavily ritualistic tastes. Religious belief may well run deep, but it is likely to be contained within the individual rather than reflect in a slavish loyalty to church attendance or to the letter of the dicta of a particular religion. It seems that religion is practiced in a way that makes it thoroughly compatible with a nation founded on the principles of pluralism and religious freedom.92

This is a carefully crafted generalization based on scientific polling methods. The advantage of such polling is that it offers a profile of a community’s beliefs at a given time. Ten years after Harris published his surveys, Americans in great numbers claimed to have embraced one of the beliefs that had been jettisoned early on in modern thought: the belief in angels. No doubt the “father figure” would be challenged by more Americans than in the decade when Harris wrote his conclusion. But by and large his conclusions are likely to hold up for some time, because they reflect a trend that began even earlier than the founding of the American nation.

One needs to be attentive to certain of Harris’s phrases. The “individual” who “contains” religious belief is set against “slavish loyalty to church attendance,” slavery being the most degrading condition imaginable in a society that values the individual to the extent that we do. “The letter of the dicta” possesses something of a double whammy. The Pauline distinction between the “letter” and the “spirit” is still very much alive nearly two thousand years after it was used to break with certain religious traditions; and “dicta” carries with it the rule of a despot who turns all into humiliating subjects.
Not everyone would have chosen Harris’s phrasing, of course. Like Richard A. Henshaw, who cataloged the many social roles related to the Mesopotamian temple, I prefer to think of the people who held those (often high-status) offices as “keepers” of a “sacred house.” Would any of them have understood Louis Harris’s conclusion about religion? In this study I try always be on my guard not to assume a modern mindset in the consideration of ancient religious practice and belief.

One point is important to raise at the outset. Mesopotamian notions of “the sacred” seem to be much more extensive than our own. Indeed, the relentless constriction of the sacred is one of the most significant tendencies in the long event of ancient Near Eastern religion. But it is also one of the most difficult features to demonstrate. Think of one claim in the highly-influential New Testament Book of Revelation: in the heavenly Jerusalem of the future, “I saw that there was no temple in the city, since the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb were themselves the temple” (21.22-23). The temple is the earliest indication of religious life in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamian religion, however much it changes over time, remains temple-centered.

Through much of the Hebrew Bible, the temple in Jerusalem provides the center of a community’s identity. Yet the biblical texts speak of the long period before Jerusalem was the center of Israelite life and of conditions that led to the construction of a temple in that city. The Bible tells as well of the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians, and its rebuilding. Depending upon one’s readings of certain New Testament texts, the destruction of the temple at a time (70 CE) that happens to correspond to the last datable cuneiform tablet in Mesopotamia was already seen as the event that utterly changed Judaism and also the Christian movement emerging from the Jewish community.

The temple complex in Uruk was not the earliest in the ancient Near East. As we have seen before, nearby Eridu was considered in one Sumerian tradition as the first city, and its temple of the god Enki the first attested place of communal worship, the temple already defining a city (or city-state) and providing the people of the region an identity. The famous city-states of southern Mesopotamia, the area that came later to be known as Babylonia when the city of Babylon came to dominate the old towns, were in some cases close enough so that a person standing on ziggurat could see the neighboring city. Yet the cities managed to maintain their local identities for thousands of years. In many ways the cities resisted the powerful tendencies to incorporate them into larger centralized units, a tendency Hans J. Nissen calls the “particularism” of the individual city-states as a check on kings’ attempts to unify the larger area into a political entity with central control. Sargon is credited with the first great empire in the region, an empire centered in the city of Agade (from which the term Akkadian is derived), toward the end of the 3rd millennium BCE. At different times Babylon dominated the landscape, especially in the south, Babylonia, and the Assyrians dominated Nineveh and the north. But local traditions were remarkably persistent in the face of such centralizing tendencies. Even in the very latest (Hellenistic) period when the southern cities were producing cuneiform writing, Uruk persisted in calling cultic officials by titles that differed from their Babylonian equivalents.
All studies of Mesopotamian religion describe a relatively small group of gods that were known throughout north and south, had temples dedicated to them in different cities, and at times constituted a pantheon of high gods—with hundreds of other gods many of whom are known today only by name. The ones we have highlighted above, the ones named explicitly in *Gilgamesh*, were known and honored throughout Mesopotamia.

Inanna of Uruk is, as we have seen, one of the high gods that emerged early and persisted through the millennia. The identification of Sumerian Inanna with Akkadian Ishtar came early, and though they may never have fused entirely, Inanna/Ishtar remain so closely related that it is useful to distinguish them only when the language is primarily Sumerian or Akkadian. We have, for example, a “Descent of Inanna to the Nether World” in the Sumerian language, and a “Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World,” a shorter piece in Akkadian that is many way similar to—and in many ways different from—the Sumerian version. One is certainly not a translation of the other, but the underlying narrative is much the same. (On the other hand, we do have many bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian texts that deal with rituals; and a translation of a Sumerian original appears as the 12th tablet of *Gilgamesh*, written in Akkadian.)

An/Anu, Enlil, Enki/Ea, and other high gods tend to dominate Mesopotamian religious discourse just as they do our modern discussions of Mesopotamian religion. A formula developed that named the highest deities in just that order: Anu, Enlil, and Ea. To that group of three was sometimes added a goddess. At first it was a Mother Goddess, like Ninhursag. Later that slot in the formula was taken over by Inanna/Ishtar. The Mesopotamian scribal schools also exerted a powerful centralizing tendency. A common curriculum seems to have been established relatively early, although scribes in Sumerian cities may have specialized in the very early days. Hymns to the gods are mixed in the curriculum with heroic stories (a number of them about *Gilgamesh*), debate poems, and various pieces of “wisdom” literature.

The point is that it has always been difficult to reduce the diversity and complexity of Mesopotamian religion to its essentials. Much of that difficulty stems from the local traditions that resisted centralization and standardization. From an early period there appears to have been a hierarchy from high gods through lesser gods, spirits, to humans, where elites were distinguished from ordinary persons (and slaves). Humans did not expect eternal life (in the Western sense), which would have been the life of immortals, the gods themselves. A few privileged figures, like Utnapishtim, Dumuzi/Tammuz, King Shulgi of Ur, and his “brother” Gilgamesh, were prominent exceptional cases, where living a life “like that of the gods” was at least conceivable. Most of these ended up with elite roles in the underworld. Tablet 12 of *Gilgamesh* catalogs the fates of the rest of us, generally a dismal life in the underworld that was relieved only by loved ones left behind on earth.

The current paradigm offered by Assyriologists is the Nippur-centered religious and political culture of the 3rd millennium BCE. In the period of rivalry between city-states and emerging empires, Enlil was King of the Gods as kingship emerged as the major force
in Mesopotamia. With the rise of kingship was the increased militarization of Mesopotamia.

In this paradigm, Enlil is the archetypal strong king. While Enlil may have a council of high gods (and a goddess) around him, as king he makes arbitrary and capricious decisions. His rule is absolute, and is not dependent upon Law or custom. These are the characteristics of the great tribal chieftains, and the ideology may have spread from the northwest, largely Semitic tribal societies, into first northern Mesopotamia and eventually into the Sumerian south.

The King of the Gods is also a husband—of a wife (Ninlil), who, though having considerable influence, was not equal to the husband. The consort of Ninlil is a mother par excellence. In the ideal family, like the divine family headed by Enlil and Ninlil, sons are most important, and they are mainly enforcers, “warrior gods” like Ningirsu/Ninurta.

The idea that some deities were organized in families has led scholars to propose family relationships for the major gods. When upstart Babylon came to dominate Mesopotamia in the 2nd millennium, the otherwise strong kings were in one respect not equal to the earlier kings of Ur, Isin and Larsa: they were not divine. They were not the high priests of the imperial Marduk. The paradigm had shifted in another way. Marduk was, as his name suggests, the True Son of the Father, Enki/Ea. Babylon adopted much of the earlier theology of Eridu. In the only major literary work that was advanced as a religious document, worthy of being spread through the society, Enuma Elish, a genealogy of the gods is traced—close to Hesiod’s Theogony in many respects—and the lineage reaches its greatest member in the Son. The Father continues to give advice to the Son, but in the end is absorbed by “Bel,” that is, LORD Marduk.

Assyrian kings were in many ways like Babylonian kings, but even there, where the societies shared many features, the Assyrian kings were high priests—just to mention one conspicuous difference.

For Uruk, on the other hand, whose religious and political ideology was formed before Nippur became the ideological center of Sumerian culture, the model is different. The “weak king” of Uruk, sometimes called a “priest-king,” that is, the en, remained a different being even when he took on kingship. When Uruk lost is political autonomy, collapsed and came back to prosperity and influence, Uruk conserved its unique heritage. Some of that is reflected in Gilgamesh. At least that is my argument in the interpretation I offer here.

One thing is certain. Mesopotamian religion, in all its forms, never separates material culture from a separate “spiritual” life. The ruling elites, whether they have roles to play in the life of the temple or not, are largely the bureaucrats that at least attempt to manage the economy.

Already in the 4th millennium BCE certain tendencies that can be distinguished as northern and southern are apparent in the material culture of Mesopotamia. To a great extent the division reflects more than anything else the ecological differences that are still
apparent today in northern and southern Iraq. The north receives more rain than the south and was thus less dependent upon the management of river water, canals and other aspects of irrigation agriculture than the south. Different crops and different trade goods reflect the topography and ecology of the two environmental niches. Before writing had been invented, there were already by certain tendencies in the visual arts. The south developed anthropomorphic art, for example, to a much greater degree than did the north, which tended toward stylized abstract designs.

It is, as I hope to show, in the visual arts that certain features of Mesopotamian religion that influence the Gilgamesh tradition appear first—and writing emerges soon after.

The very prosperity of Uruk late in the 4th millennium BCE creates even more problems in, first, trying to separate “religious” and “secular” in Mesopotamian thought and in, second, isolating Urukean traditions when so much of Urukean culture spread through Mesopotamia and even beyond. (Copies of the earliest Gilgamesh literature show up in Ebla, a city located far to the north and west of Uruk, near modern Aleppo in Syria.) Some years ago Guillermo Algaze called Uruk’s influence The Uruk World System. He defined World System (or World Economy) in this way.

It is a “world” system not because it encompasses the whole world, but because it is larger than any political unity. And it is a “world economy” because the basic linkage between the parts of the system is economic, although this was reinforced to some extent by cultural links, and eventually...by political arrangements.

Whether Uruk was really the center of a World System has been hotly debated since Algaze proposed the idea. But there is no question that Uruk—largely through its merchants and traders—influenced cities well into what is now Syria and Turkey. The problem is a bit like assessing specifically American influences in our “global” economy.

**The Heroes of Gilgamesh**

**Gilgamesh Amaushumgalanna and Enkidu**

Douglas Frayne offered an initial look at an earlier Gilgamesh poem the 1997 American Oriental Society Meeting. “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” is known from three copies, the oldest (from ED IIIa Abū Salābīkh, about 2600 BCE) and the others slightly later (ED IIIb Ebla, ca. 2300 BCE). While it is exceptionally difficult to translate, Frayne has identified enough themes and motifs to show that, while the name Gilgamesh does not appear, the poem contains a wealth of materials that will later appear in Gilgamesh.

The hero of the piece is called Ama-usum-gal-anna, a puzzling epithet because of the initial *ama*, which usually means “mother.” The *ama* has been plausibly explained as an *eme-sal* dialectal variant of *en*. It could mean something like Master of the Great Dragon of Heaven.

The epithet is frequently used for Dumuzi, especially in Sumerian love songs, where he, not Gilgamesh, is the *en* of Inanna. Dumuzi, like Gilgamesh, was originally human, but transformed into one of the lesser gods at his death—according to some traditions at least.
Dumuzi and Amaushumgalanna may originally have been separate figures. The important point is that these mythological figures select and combine pieces of very ancient motifs, narratives, names and epithets, such as we see with Amaushumgalanna. The roles played are usually more significant than the individualizing features that give characters in, say, modern fiction, personalities.

Among the many Gilgamesh motifs in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” are: The Bull of Heaven in the opening line; possibly a reference to the Cedar Forest (but not to Humbaba); the gain and loss of a plant of life, and many others. In addition to these mythological motifs, the one historical event that different sources agree refers to the reign of Gilgamesh is his defeat of Akka, King of Kish.

Only a few gods are mentioned in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” and they are the great gods Inanna and Enlil, and less obviously Utu. (The hero uses a weapon of Utu and another weapon of Nanna.) A figure identified only as the “wise physician”—Enki?—is the object of the hero’s quest for life—as in Gilgamesh. The quest turns out to be not as successful as the hero had hoped. Mesopotamian literature has three variants of the Heroic Dilemma: kingship is not permanent; regimes will lost their power; and in this poem, the hero is anointed with “first-quality oil” but will not live long.

The hero has a “friend,” or perhaps more accurately “comrade in arms” or “equal,” but it is not Enkidu, whose name does not appear. The hero is the kuli of Enlil, King of the Gods. And Amaushumgalanna is the spouse (dam) of Inanna. He even wears the “bright head-band” (bar-su za-gir) that Gilgamesh wears in Gilgamesh, a motif that ties him to the even earlier visual images of the Urukean en. As in the Early Dynastic royal inscriptions, there is a balance between the hero as king and the hero is en, the one selected to embrace Inanna.

The absence of Enkidu is telling.

The Enkidu of Akkadian Gilgamesh stories, with a close personal relationship between the two, developed from Sumerian stories in which Enkidu is a trusted slave (or servant) and sometimes comrade-in-arms, to one of greater equality. Possibly the relationship between the en and the person accompanying him in the even earlier cylinder seal images anticipated a personal relationship between the two figures.

(Recall the Old Akkadian cylinder seal-impression above, which may represent both Gilgamesh and Enkidu in their battles.)

In the last page of her very thorough study of Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature Gwendolyn Leick concludes that Enkidu’s death in Gilgamesh is a substitute for Gilgamesh, allowing him to continue, though in great pain for the loss of his friend. His grief is like the goddesses in Dumuzi lamentations. I would go a step further and suggest that the evolution of the friend and double greatly increased the empathy shared by the two protagonists in Gilgamesh but also the empathy that ties the reader to both Enkidu and Gilgamesh. The very long tradition of ritual weeping for Dumuzi prepared the ground for this relationship between reader and narrative figures.
In “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” the name Amaushumgalanna is almost always written with the Sumerian DINGIR sign, which suggests that the hero is, or as I will argue, becomes a kind of divine figure through his intimate relationship with Inanna/Ishtar. Quite unlike Mesopotamian kingship, which is passed along from father to son, and which depends upon the king maintaining his power in the city-state or empire, the “spouse” of Inanna is selected by the goddess and, in the phrase used in politics today, serves at her pleasure. (There is at least one instance of a year that was named for the selection of an en. As with other attempts of humans to determine the will of the gods, rituals, like reading the livers of sacrificed animals, were performed to discover who would fill this important role.)

“The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” concludes with the same tragic dilemma that faces Gilgamesh in the much later Gilgamesh. The hero, though “anointed with first-quality oil,” nu zi-ud, will have a life that will be shortened. There is always gain and always loss. In Gilgamesh the selection of Enkidu, rather than Gilgamesh, to die—to die young, at the height of his power—appears arbitrary and capricious; but the death of a young man, not gloriously in battle, is especially problematic. “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” suggests that this is the fate of the hero. The ultimate resolution, that the hero will eventually be translated into a lesser deity, is rarely celebrated as fully as the losses are lamented.

It has long been thought that Gilgamesh is a story of protest against the arbitrary role of the gods. (Gilgamesh and Enkidu both insult the great goddess in the central episode of The Bull of Heaven.) It has also been seen as a story about individuals. The heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu are certainly named individuals, and naming them picks up an old idea that a name itself permits a kind of immortality if it is preserved (at least in writing). The use of what is essentially an epithet, Amaushumgalanna, rather than the proper name of the hero, suggests that the roles played by the hero are as important as a personal name.

“The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” is from about 2600 BCE. Four hundred (or more) years earlier, in humanity’s earliest true writing, we find many documents that refer to the roles people played in Urukean society. We see, for example, that a person receives daily rations of bread and beer according to his or her occupation. We also have a list of professions that becomes standardized over the centuries. It is not clear—and is the subject of much debate among scholars—if any personal names are preserved in these earliest of documents. Deities are named, but humans appear not be named.

There is a parallel in the visual record. The figure who is usually called a “priest-king,” a term which is itself an attempt to interpret the role that is undoubtedly the en, appears frequently in mini-narratives in as “realistic” a presentation as early Mesopotamia produced. While it is possible that these figures carried personal names, it is more likely that they represent the different roles of the “weak king” of Uruk.

“The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” without naming Gilgamesh, makes it at least the most important transitional presentation of the hero who already by the time of Gilgamesh was both en and king of Uruk.
The Death of Gilgamesh

The notoriously difficult problem of dating Sumerian literary texts complicates the issue of Gilgamesh’s death. The death of Enkidu, narrated immediately after the glorious victory over The Bull of Heaven, is the crisis that impels Gilgamesh to search for answers to the great questions of life and death. The agonizing quest was even reflected in an Assyrian prophecy text of the 1st millennium BCE.

Dina Katz, in a thorough investigation of Sumerian sources, suggests that the poem, “The Death of Gilgamesh,” which like most other Sumerian works is known from Old Babylonian copies—that is, from the early 2nd millennium when Babylon, especially under King Hammurabi, was in its ascendancy—may well have been composed earlier, in the Ur III period. Katz looks very carefully at all references to the world of the dead in Sumerian sources. The Semites who came to dominate north and south appear to have had a different idea of life after death than that held by the Sumerians. (The role of the Sun God as a judge in the netherworld is, as we shall see, an important Semitic innovation in Mesopotamian literature.) A key text for Katz is “The Death of Urnamma,” the founder of the Ur III dynasty. Much of Sumerian ideology can be gleaned when “The Death of Urnamma” is compared with “The Death of Gilgamesh.”

“The Death of Gilgamesh” contains what may be the earliest statement of the key principle that death is the fate of all humanity. If we add “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” which is even earlier than “The Death of Gilgamesh,” we may be able to see how the Gilgamesh narratives came to displace the death of Gilgamesh onto the death of the hero’s friend (while yet anticipating his own death).

While “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” apparently contains no reference to Enkidu, “The Death of Gilgamesh,” does refer to Enkidu, but only in passing. (Niek Veldhuis translates the reference to Gilgamesh’s “buddy,” while Douglas Frayne calls him a friend and “comrade in battle.”) Like many Sumerian poems the narrative of “The Death of Gilgamesh” is carried by a series of speeches. Gilgamesh receives dreams of the high gods in council. Enlil plans to reward Gilgamesh with eternal life for the hero’s great achievements. The crafty Enki balks at the plan. Enki recalls that after the Flood the gods had agreed that no human would live forever. Even though Gilgamesh is the son of a divine mother, he will not gain the life of the gods. Enki decrees his fate: he will be governor of the dead and a judge, like Ningishzida and Dumuzi. Gilgamesh recounts his dreams to his own council. Since, as we have seen earlier, Gilgamesh has the hero conspicuously recounting his dreams to Enkidu, the absence of any reference to Enkidu in such an obvious parallel situation suggests that the motif of the friend is a later development to the story.

Katz sees a significant evolution of the netherworld idea in this “The Death of Urnamma.” Ur III kings, especially Urnamma and his son Shulgi, claimed to be brothers of Gilgamesh. Where the Ur III king had been raised to the level of the already legendary hero Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh is raised to the level of the judges Ningishzida and Dumuzi.
The Birth of Gilgamesh

*Gilgamesh* tells the complete life story of Enkidu, from birth to death. If the controversial Tablet 12 is included, *Gilgamesh* even includes Enkidu’s life (such as it is) in the underworld. The evolution of Enkidu is complete even if Tablet 12 is considered something of an afterthought. From a story about a man who searches—alone, it appears—for “life” to stories in which Enkidu is the “slave” (softened in translations to “servant”) of Gilgamesh, then to a comrade in arms, and finally a friend, the friend, the person with whom is most intimate, Enkidu’s role in the Gilgamesh stories is increasingly expanded until he becomes virtually the double of the famous hero.

So striking is this development that it traces in high relief the contrast with the life story of Gilgamesh himself. Many readers have felt that Gilgamesh moves from the first episode, where he seems to be a very young man, to a very mature, if not old man. The sense of exhaustion is certainly clear when the encounter with the sage Utnapishtim goes badly for him. One could calculate that the whole of *Gilgamesh* covers a span of but a few weeks. But time in such a heroic narrative is as illusory as space. The heroes are able to
walk distances that leave the rest of us panting. And the time is closer to the duration in which both Enkidu and Gilgamesh are able to learn from experience. Though Gilgamesh may not be an old man by the end of the story, he is, for most interpreters of the poem, far wiser than he was at the beginning.

The birth of Gilgamesh is only hinted at in Tablet 10. The passage is, sadly, very incomplete. There are two references to a lillu in Tablet 10. In the past these were taken to refer to a liliun, that is a lil-demon. It was generally thought that the “real” father of Gilgamesh was not the human Lugalbanda but a lil spirit. The tendency today is to read lillu as a “fool.” The passage is taken to contrast the life of a fool or idiot with the good life Gilgamesh had and could have again—though he could not have the “life” he sought. (There is another nice contrast possible, since Enkidu is a lullû, a primeval human being. He, too, is told to appreciate the good life he had experienced with his friend Gilgamesh, though he was fated to die young.)

Recently, Douglas Frayne has revised the legend that a lil-demon was part of a Gilgamesh tradition. The passage in Gilgamesh seems to refer to the mother and father of Gilgamesh. Perhaps the gods have fashioned Gilgamesh “like” his father and mother; another possibility is that the gods have “acted like” father and mother to Gilgamesh. The lines do refer to the mixture of divine and human in the hero. Since Gilgamesh texts do come to light from time to time, it is possible that the passage may someday be recovered fully, and the problems will be resolved.

Frayne, however, uses a much older text, like “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” from the earliest period of literature. That text is very difficult to read, as one expects of such early work, and it has its own share of gaps. But Frayne thinks that the text is illustrated by a rather large number of Old Akkadian cylinder seal impressions, which tell of the birth of Gilgamesh in a most striking way.

Gilgamesh was conceived, not in Uruk, but in the mountains, where Lugalbanda had gone to collect valuable objects. (Uruk cylinder seals often depict the en, often in the company of a sign of the Great Goddess, in a mountainous area.) In “The Birth of Gilgamesh,” the goddess Ninsun is credited with performing a “wise deed.” This appears to be the seduction of Lugalbanda. She then carries the child (or fetus?) in a clay pot as she and Lugalbanda begin a dangerous journey through Elamite territory to Uruk. In Uruk the reigning en, presumably Enmerkar, is concerned that Lugalbanda has brought so little back from the mountains. The clay pot is brought in, and the tension in the family is resolved when Inanna accepts Ninsun as the wife of Lugalbanda as her daughter-in-law and in a sense adopts Ninsun’s offering, the child Gilgamesh, who will “seek counsel” with Inanna.

What is perhaps most striking about the story is the dangerous journey from the mountains to Uruk. The child needs to be protected from a lil-spirit. Even in Uruk the demon lurks—Lugalbanda “shudders” in the presence of the lil—but it is eventually banished from the house. Frayne notices parallels with the stories of Sargon the Great and Moses, stories in which the special child is threatened with death and received into
the household of a powerful female. If Frayne is correct in his interpretation of the text, Gilgamesh may have been the earliest evidence of a hero myth where the birth is marked by marvels and danger.

The text is supported, according to Frayne, by a remarkable series of Old Akkadian cylinder seal impressions, which show different episodes in the story. A persistent theme in these late 3rd millennium BCE seals is the protection of the child. A tree is bent down to shield mother and child. Sometimes the danger to the child is visualized. Frequently the scenes include a presentation of the child to a great goddess. On several of the presentation scenes the child sits on the lap of the goddess.

The virtual absence in *Gilgamesh* of the birth and death of Gilgamesh himself suggests that the poet has displaced these episodes to Enkidu. The displacement has the powerful effect of intensifying the reader’s identification with the all too human Enkidu and at the same time vastly increasing empathy for Gilgamesh, whose interior life is represented in scenes of triumph and in sorrow.

**Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay**

Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay’s knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adores? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? Or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee. (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*)
Knowing Lily Briscoe

Samuel Noah Kramer, who prided himself on concentrating throughout his long career on the study of Sumerian literature. More than his contemporaries Kramer could claim to have developed that specialty. He admitted, though, that in his youth he had wanted to write fiction in the manner of Theodore Dreiser (1871-1947). Dreiser was no Virginia Woolf (1882-1941); he could not, or would not have written an interior monologue like Lily Briscoe’s in To the Lighthouse (1927). But in many ways Dreiser shared Woolf’s “realistic” fictional aims.

Kramer had also considered being an Egyptologist before he settled on Assyriology. He would have appreciated Virginia Woolf’s portrait of Mrs. Ramsay, one of the principal characters in To the Lighthouse, especially in this passage. Another important character in the novel is the artist Lily Briscoe, through whose consciousness the reader filters the beautiful and fertile mother. She sees Mrs. Ramsay in the context of “tombs of kings,” reminding us of the excitement the West had in the 1920s for rediscovering the treasures of ancient Egypt. To the Lighthouse is set in a summer house in the Hebrides rented for years by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. He is an imperious and taciturn professor of philosophy; his wife is the center of the family and the group of friends invited to stay with them. In their own domestic way, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay stand over their community the way the idealized Pharaoh Ramses II and the beautiful chief queen and mother of his children, Nefertari, stood over Egypt in the statues that represented the famous couple. The very quiet association of an elite modern nuclear family and the very famous and powerful ruling family of ancient Egypt would have pleased Kramer.

In this brief passage from the novel a great many themes are subtly intermixed. For those of us who treasure “tablets bearing sacred inscriptions” in exotic languages, inscriptions that keep their secrets and never make them public, the allusion may have special interest. (We are reminded of Gilgamesh writing his experiences into a precious tablet and storing it away for us to read centuries later.) For Woolf’s original audience the “treasures” would connect not only the novel itself but also the many forms of art appreciated by the Ramsay’s circle and the wider audience for High Modernist art in particular.

The passage does draw a distinction between inscriptions and the knowledge they may provide us and “intimacy itself, which is knowledge.” There is only one “exterior” represented. Lily is “sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay’s knees,” and at the end learns her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee. (The gesture reminds us of the ways people solicited the help of rulers in ancient societies.) While Lily is “smiling” that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the meaning of pressing herself against Mrs. Ramsay, the reader knows, from this passage but from many others in the novel, that Lily’s deep desire for intimacy is increasingly desperate.

The reader follows Lily’s frustration at the difficulty she finds in completing a painting she has been working on. As a visual artist she shares the anxieties of literary artists like Woolf herself. On the final page of the novel, which of course is the conclusion of Woolf’s artistic work, Lily finally solves the aesthetic problem. “With a sudden intensity, as if she
saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.”

But Lily wants Mrs. Ramsay to know Lily intimately, and the passage that has her touching the body of Mrs. Ramsay is one of the most eloquent and complicated explorations of the current key idea of empathy. And the passage represents empathy to the extent that such a representation can be articulated in words and images. Lily wants to press into “those secret chambers,” to become, “like waters poured into one jar,” one with the object of her adoration. It is “unity” and “intimacy” she desires.

It is not even ironic that the reader of To the Lighthouse also “knows” that Mrs. Ramsay worries throughout the novel that the not very pretty Lily should find a mate. Mrs. Ramsay has found a candidate and tries in subtle ways to establish a connection between the two. While the final lines of the novel point to a successful completion of Lily’s painting, there is little hope that Mrs. Ramsay’s desire for Lily will be realized.

Samuel Noah Kramer had the pleasure of hearing, in Istanbul, Erich Auerbach lecture on comparative literature. Auerbach’s magisterial study of the representation of reality in Western literature ends with Woolf’s To the Lighthouse. Auerbach’s method in Mimesis was to select two specific passages from two literary works that he hoped illustrated the problem of literary representations of the “real” world. He began with passages from the Bible and Homer’s Odyssey. His magnificent survey ends with a passage from To the Lighthouse (though not the one considered here).

Auerbach’s analysis of a passage in which Mrs. Ramsay measures a brown stocking that will be given to the boy whose father maintains the lighthouse (of the title) shows that Woolf’s innovative narrative technique is far more complex than the passage we have considered. Where earlier writers had used devices like the interior monologue, mainly to advance the storyline by preparing for significant “exterior” happenings, Woolf provides multiple perspectives that frequently lead nowhere. In Woolf’s case “the exterior events have actually lost their hegemony, they serve to release and interpret inner events, whereas before her time (and still today in many instances) inner movements preponderantly function to prepare and motivate significant exterior happenings. This too is apparent in the randomness and contingency of the exterior occasion.” Lily’s completion of her painting at the very moment when the novel ends is actually more dramatic and more like a climax than what we have come to expect in To the Lighthouse. Actually reaching the lighthouse is achieved by Mr. Ramsay and others in the boat a page and one-half earlier; though it is a kind of conclusion to the narrative, the action is in itself trivial. Lily Briscoe, back on land, cannot see the boat arriving at the little island. She rather guesses that the boat must have arrived. She even pronounces aloud that “he” (presumably Mr. Ramsay) “must have reached it,” suddenly feels “completely tired out” and then relieved. Then she has the inspiration that enables her to complete her work of art. Some readers have found the coincidence of the boat arriving at the lighthouse and Lily’s completing her painting puzzling because even such a mildly dramatic event seems so unlikely given Woolf’s storytelling technique.
Auerbach was convinced that “certain tendencies and needs on the part of both authors and public” prompted what he considered were the characteristics of the “realistic novel” in the period between World War I and World War II: “multipersonal representation of consciousness, time strata, disintegration of the continuity of exterior events, shifting of the narrative viewpoint (all of which are interrelated and difficult to separate).” My point is not that the long event of representing reality in narratives from the Bible and Homer into the 20th century enables us to find a place for Gilgamesh. In many ways the variety of stories and narrative techniques in Gilgamesh, with its striking changes of pace and narrative developments, is more like T. S. Eliot’s 1922 The Waste Land than ancient narratives like the Odyssey and the Elohist story of Saul and David, which initiate Auerbach’s analyses. Rather it is to point out in Woolf’s description of the inner life of Lily Briscoe, Woolf has found a subtle way to suggest a great complex of conflicting emotions prompted by the simple action of touching the knees of Lily’s beloved Mrs. Ramsay. To become one with the loved object is perhaps impossible, but the desire is no doubt universal and is articulated in mystical traditions in a great variety of cultures. Lily’s desire expresses itself in sight, touch, and especially articulate thought tries to enter the other, a desire that today is commonly called empathy. The Gilgamesh poet expressed in a series of “exterior” acts, most notably in Gilgamesh’s responses to the death of his friend.

Woolf’s description of Lily’s consciousness runs into the familiar modern “mind/body” problem, the Cartesian split between consciousness and “extension.” One cannot help but admire Woolf’s—and other modernists’—attempts to place the reader in the possibility of, as here, entering empathically into fictional characters.

With Gilgamesh it is hard to know where the author is. The different narrative techniques, as in the lengthy, well-developed and finished story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu versus Humbaba in contrast to what follows it, the story of The Bull of Heaven, and in the amazing twists and turns in Gilgamesh’s encounter with the sage Utnapishtim, may simply be reflections of the obvious: that Gilgamesh is a collection of tales developed by many “authors” over many centuries. Finding unity in this diverse “collection” of tales is a major aim of the essays in this book. Interpreting To the Lighthouse is a very complicated business, but we can see in the author’s techniques an attempt to pull together themes and images into an artistic whole, even if that whole does not yield a simple, chronological narrative. Interpreting Gilgamesh, from a time when authorship was very different from much of the Western literary tradition, is complicated in a different way.

Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries come at a time when “overcoming metaphysics”—what the philosophers call the “onto-theological” character of Western thought that developed from Greek philosophical thought on the one hand and from biblical narrative theology on the other—was often assumed as a drive to rid narrative (and other arts) of traditional Western values. Gilgamesh is a refreshing case in that respect. Neither space nor time as represented in its stories show the kind of confidence the West developed in its notion of a cosmos, complete and whole, even if not completely perfect. Where
monotheism and Greek ontological thought largely covered over gaps in a universe, Mesopotamian thought often confronts an abyss. The stories of *Gilgamesh* see glimpses of it and hurtle toward the *abzu* and the “source of waters.” The first lines of *Gilgamesh* announce that Gilgamesh has found “everything” at the source of something. The question is what.

I will argue that two modernist concepts, empathy and libido, offer an approach to that what.

Enkidu, or rather *knowing* Enkidu, gives a hint of the process.

**Knowing Enkidu**

The metamorphosis of Enkidu was largely complete, we think, by the Old Babylonian period. He begins to look more and more like Everyman. He is taller, stronger (and hairier) than we are, but in most essentials he is like us. His friendship with Gilgamesh offers him rewards we can only dream of. But in a number of key respects his life is ours.

The audience of *Gilgamesh*, then as now, could see him as “only human,” more so than his near-equal Gilgamesh. (As the Great Goddess can change fates and raise her lover to a higher level of being, the king of Uruk can raise an ordinary person to a special status—but he can certainly not make him immortal.)

Enkidu, it has been claimed, was the only *virgin* represented in Mesopotamian literature. (Another exception may have been Inanna herself. Like Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, who speaks of her “salad years, when [she] was green in judgment, cold in blood...” [*Antony and Cleopatra* I.v.73–74], Inanna has a past, as Gilgamesh reminds her in Tablet 6. A Sumerian love poem has the young Inanna speak to her “brother” of her innocence in sexual matters.)

His transformation from animal to human is accomplished through a sexual initiation with a woman sent into the wilderness by Gilgamesh. The text is silent about any sexual encounters he may have had while he lived among the animals in the wild. But his weeklong tryst with the woman shows his libido is certainly prodigious—perhaps rivaling Gilgamesh’s own insatiable desires. (The text never condemns sexual activity as such, except in the effects on the young women of Uruk, whom Gilgamesh oppresses in a way analogous to his oppression of the young men by the incessant playing of (martial?) games.)

He also has to learn how to eat and drink the food of humans. Like a young child, he acquires speech, and his first utterance is a very self-conscious boast in his own strength.

He is able to help Gilgamesh in two heroic adventures, but at a key moment Enkidu creates an ethical dilemma for Gilgamesh: to kill Humbaba or spare the giant’s life. We hear his passionate argument for killing Humbaba—and understand it.

Later in the story we understand Enkidu’s joy in defeating The Bull of Heaven and in humiliating Ishtar. We also understand his suffering from an incomprehensible illness,
his terror facing death, his deep depression. It makes sense to us that he would curse the people who changed his life—and even cursing the door he had fashioned for the god who would condemn him.

His very existence may have resulted from an appeal to the gods for a rival to Gilgamesh, but his life is quite “human.” This we see because his emotional life is made clear to us. He has a more fully developed interior life than most “Everyman” figures.

Is empathy too strong a term to describe Gilgamesh’s and our knowledge of this fictional character?

Even if that is the case, it does not make Enkidu a Lily Briscoe or the ancient audience (hearing or reading) Gilgamesh the same as a High Modernist reader of novels.

**Recognizing the Other**

For all their attempts at knowing the “real” person, Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay are not credited by the author of the novel with succeeding at the task. On the other hand, the author presents enough clues to hope that the reader (without the author telling the reader directly) will come to know the “real” Lily and Mrs. Ramsay in all their complexity. We know something of what the characters look like; we know something of their behavior from observing their actions; we hear them speak. We hear others speak of them, filling in background and revealing things the characters themselves would rather hide. The real test, though, is recognizing conscious and subconscious thoughts, images and motivations. Postmodern fictionalists often play with these narrative devices to subvert them, but there is still a strong tendency to display in fiction characters who have a certain “depth.”

In dealing with Mesopotamian stories, certain long-familiar props to the Western tradition of representing the reality of characters seem not to apply. The distinction between “soul” and “body,” or soul/body/spirit is such a construct. Since at least the Middle Ages, the “soul,” once considered unknowable by the person who possesses one, came to be regarded as the “deepest part” of the person, a tradition still active in “soul” music. Anthropologists have shown that this is not a universally held view. Clifford Geertz, for example, distinguished a common Western notion of the “atomic” person, individuals separated from other individuals like billiard balls bouncing off one another. The “core” person is sacred and presumably unknowable to others. He contrasted this with the people in Morocco where he conducted his fieldwork. They had a very different view of humanity, one that emphasizes the nisba-connectedness that binds persons to families, occupations, religious sects and status.116

Behind this is a very different concept of the person from what has developed in the West since the Renaissance: The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotional judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and seen contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however
incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures.\textsuperscript{117}

It is not clear to me that Mesopotamia had anything like a universally-held view of the person. At least early Sumer seemed to regard the person as in some ways living after death as long as the skeleton was intact. Some myths of creating humans—such as we will see with Enkidu—emphasize the equal importance of a male and female principle operating to construct a human being out of disparate materials. A male deity usually is the one who provides the creature with an “image,” and I suspect that was envisioned as the bony structure that gave form and stature to the individual. Once that was lost (usually by the third generation), the individual in the grave could be tended by the loved ones left behind, with beverages poured through a tube into the grave and an annual feeding of the “spirits” when they returned to earth for a day. After that, they could be forgotten. Even though a piece of the divine was added into the mix when humanity was created, Mesopotamia did not leap to the idea that a “soul” or “spirit” would live eternally. The stories of Gilgamesh and Enkidu have as a kind of background hum the “reality” that Enkidu was human like the rest of us and must face (however long) a generally grim afterlife in the underworld, while the part-divine Gilgamesh will ultimately experience a different fate, even though he, too, is human.

Having said this, I think \textit{Gilgamesh} invites a version of empathy in the story, in the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and between Gilgamesh and the Great Goddess Ishtar. Further, like \textit{To the Lighthouse}, the fictional devices in \textit{Gilgamesh}, although very different from the modern novel, open the audience to an analogous recognition of the “fictional” other.

Several different modern approaches to the possibility of empathy are considered here. Then, perhaps surprisingly, the discussion will turn to Mesopotamian healing rituals. A persistent form of healing in Mesopotamia involved making images, usually representing the lover of the Great Goddess, Dumuzi, and transferring the psychosomatic illness of the patient to Dumuzi, the prototypical substitute. The image is destroyed or sent out to the wilderness. The ritual is often connected with a myth in which a wise god recognizes that a person is in a terrible state, describes his symptoms to his even wiser “Father” god. The Father transfers the healing ritual, especially the incantations that will effect the cure, to the Son.

I propose that the language of illness and healing in \textit{Gilgamesh} is especially relevant to the two heroes, Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

\textbf{Intimacy, Which is Knowledge}

\textit{Gilgamesh} is a sexy story. Or \textit{Gilgamesh} is about sex. Or sexuality. Homer’s \textit{Odyssey}, which tells of a great war hero who returned to his home, his bedroom, and his wife at one time in ancient Greece was thought to end there. All modern editions and translations of the story have Odysseus going on to (a few) other adventures. In one period, though, scholars thought the return home to a wife completed a story that began with Odysseus,
a mere man (though a hero) sleeping with a beautiful goddess. He had everything but pined for his real life with his real wife.

Since the interpretation of *Gilgamesh* offered here emphasizes the hero’s return to his home and to a kind of “wife,” I join virtually all interpreters of *Gilgamesh* who see erotic elements in the story, but as will be increasingly clear, I think those elements are central to the story. Not everyone will agree.

The problem is in framing the issue. A goddess offers Gilgamesh great honor and riches if he will become her spouse, and the offer is richly erotic. Gilgamesh refuses the offer. In another part of the story Gilgamesh first fights, then embraces the powerful Enkidu, who becomes what we might call his “best friend.” They end of in bed together not long after Gilgamesh refuses to mate with the goddess Ishtar. Does this suggest homosexuality? These issues have been discussed by many interpreters in the 20th and 21st centuries.

I see something, a powerful force, that is more pervasive than most people see in the series of tales that make up *Gilgamesh*. The Sumerians had a word for it: *hi-li*, and it had an equivalent in the language that *Gilgamesh* was written in, Akkadian. In Akkadian the word is *kuzbu*. Both terms have a strong emotional and erotic intensity, and both terms are used to describe deities as well as humans (and animals). Perhaps libido is our weak modern equivalent.

In struggling with these questions I propose an old term, but one still useful and remarkably suited to many different contexts: intimacy.

Google the term and something on the order of 14 million items will pop up. (By the time this book appears the total may be double that.) Within the first ten items will be a wise caution: *intimacy* means more than just sex. A working definition will appear, something like, simply, “closeness between people.” And intimacy is intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual as well as physical. As the condition of being a *friend*, a thesaurus suggests that many other common terms shade into intimacy: chumminess, closeness, companionship, comradeship, familiarity, and fellowship among them.

Still, intimacy always carries some erotic charge. Google relates the word to “foreplay,” and the first item is likely to about “bra fit” than friendship.

It is certainly better than the highly problematic modern terms like sexuality, as in heterosexuality and homosexuality. Virtually every aspect of intimacy presents itself in the Gilgamesh stories.

Since I have spent the better part of my adult life studying language and literature, I am inclined to use intimacy first the way linguists, especially sociolinguists, use it. In his famous book on the “Five Clocks” of English usage, Martin Joos challenges the archetypal English teacher, Miss Fidditch, who always demands, in speech as well as in writing, a certain kind of “correct” English. Rather, Joos claims, there are at least five styles we learn to use, from hypercorrect written “formal” (and even “frozen”) style, through
“consultative” and “casual” to the earliest, and most basic style he calls “intimate.” It is a style that “excludes public information.” (Miss Fidditch objects: how can it be a language?) It takes Joos a few pages to explain the idea, but I think we get the point. Just as we learn to speak with those with whom we are close (physically, as well as in other ways), there are a few people we know well enough that a mere “Engh” or “Cold” at the dinner table is sufficient to communicate feeling and relationship.

Edward T. Hall discovered the spatial correlation to these intimate speech acts. He invented “proxemics” as a way of analyzing social distance, from the rather formal way we address a large group that contains strangers to the intrusive distance that we allow a very few persons ever to enter. Hall bases his observations on our similarity to our primate relatives, but he also shows that different cultures uses these distances in different ways. In the Arabic-speaking world, for instance, people often crowd so closely to speak face-to-face with another that Americans and Europeans find themselves peddling backwards to avoid such physical closeness. On the other hand, Arabs will often retain a rigid distance between men and women. The latter derives, I think, from social norms that anthropologists call “homosocial.”

From an early age Arabs tend to separate men and women into different worlds. Even in households, different social roles encourage men to spend most of their time with other men, women with other women.

Fatima Mernissi has written eloquently about this hudud or frontier that divides children as they approach puberty. Mernissi, a sociologist and anthropologist, grew up in Fez in the 1940s. Her father encouraged her in her studies, to be “modern”—and yet he imposed on her the veil when she ventured into public spaces. The hudud came to dominate all aspects of life, the barrier that separate the family house (which she calls a harem) from the outside world as well as the homosocial divisions inside the family as much as outside. The opening of Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood speaks eloquently of the frontiers.

I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez, a ninth-century Moroccan city some five thousand kilometers west of Mecca, and one thousand kilometers south of Madrid, one of the dangerous capitals of the Christians. The problems with the Christians start, said Father, as with women, when the hudud, or sacred frontier, is not respected. I was born in the midst of chaos, since neither Christians nor women accepted the frontiers. Right on our threshold, you could see women of the harem contesting and fighting with Ahmed the doorkeeper as foreign armies from the North kept arriving all over the city. In fact, foreigners were standing at the end of our street, which lay just between the old city and the Ville Nouvelle, a new city that they were building for themselves. When Allah created the earth, said Father, he separated men from women, and put a sea between Muslims and Christians for a reason. Harmony exists when each group respects the prescribed limits of the other; trespassing leads only to sorrow and unhappiness. But women dreamed of trespassing all the time. The world beyond the gate was their obsession. They
fantasized all day long about parading in unfamiliar streets, while Christians kept crossing the sea, bringing death and chaos.\textsuperscript{121}

A striking example of crossing the cultural sea in the \textit{depiction} of intimacy is the 1964 trial for immorality of Lebanese fiction writer Layla Ba’labakki. She had published a short story whose title is translated as “A Space Ship of Tenderness to the Moon.” Members of the vice squad attempted to confiscate all copies of work. The case reached the Lebanese Court of Appeals—where Ba’labakki was exonerated. The prosecution of Ba’labakki and the judges’ decision in the case provide a window through which we glimpse a culture’s struggle with the representation of intimacy.

The title of the short story is a thinly disguised metaphor for sexual ecstasy. The final sentence has a man urging a woman, “Let us take off, you and I, for the moon.”\textsuperscript{122}

Prosecutors seized upon two sentences in the story. I should add that the couple whose love-making was seen as offensive were not, as we might have expected, unmarried. They are married—and to each other. Rather, the story is told from the point of view of a wife, anticipating and then experiencing sexual love with her husband. The two sentences are these: “He lay on his back, his hand went deep under the sheet, pulling my arm and putting it on his chest, and then, his hand traveled over my stomach....” And,

“He licked my ears, then my lips, and he roamed over me. He lay on top of me and whispered that he was in ecstasy and that I was fresh, soft dangerous, and that he missed me a lot.”

Eventually in this high-profile case, the judges accepted the defense’s argument that the story exhibits a legitimate use of “realistic” phrases in the literary school of realism. The connection to a literary movement that took root in the modern West and has spread throughout the world would probably be enough to persuade a jury in the West. But the Lebanese judges used arguments that would seem strange in a Western courtroom. They found that certain “realistic” features have been used in their tradition to provide examples (\textit{hikma}), that is, a kind of wisdom.

The traditional stories the judges offer as evidence would likely not occur to most Western readers. They do mention literature in the Arabic tradition: Golden Odes, Abu Nuwas’s love of wine in his \textit{al-Khamriyat}, and even Sheherazade’s \textit{A Thousand and One Nights}. But their key examples come from stories considered sacred:

The myth of man receiving the Covenant from God, the rainbow in the heavens, and man’s unworthiness to receive it;
The legend of the isolated cave in the desert (\textit{Saw’ar}), its walls stained red with blood which stained the entire land of Canaan;
The tale of Egypt’s Pharaoh, in which his loved one, tempting the Pharaoh to lust, wretches on a bed of Lebanese cedar wood, her naked body fragrant with the scents of the land of Ethiopia;
The story of the virgin of Israel, guarding of a dying kingdom, bringing to old age and coldness the warmth of her body...; and
The legend of the rose of Sharun, the lily of the valley.¹²³

Even in America of the early 1960s, before *Hair* and the countercultural revolution, these examples would have been considered tame indeed—and not particularly “realistic” in the sense the term was used by Western authors. To the judges, though, they, like “A Space Ship of Tenderness to the Moon,” describe “the experience of life” for a worthy purpose, to “extract a kind of wisdom” and to create “artistic beauty.” They found, therefore, that the story was not “harmful to the public morality.”¹²⁴

If we find such cultural differences in our own time and with storytelling techniques that seem almost natural to us, how can we hope to reconstruct an ancient culture and a story that goes back, if not to the origins of storytelling, to the earliest literary tradition that has yet to be discovered?

To complicate further what may seem to be a hopeless task, I want to emphasize in my interpretation of *Gilgamesh* that the stories preserve motifs and themes that go back in some cases a thousand and even two thousand years. It has long been recognized that the “standardized” collection of Gilgamesh stories, the collection usually called the “epic” of Gilgamesh, makes use of much earlier material. *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* by Jeffrey Tigay is still the basis for comparing and contrasting the Standard *Gilgamesh* with earlier versions of stories in the collection, even though evidence has continued to appear after the publication of that important work. Tigay identifies many changes, large and small, and detects nuances, such as identifying the city where much of the action takes place, Uruk, as the city of the goddess Ishtar, when earlier it had been called the city of Ishtar and her “father” the Sky God Anu.

Much of the early Gilgamesh material was written in the Sumerian language. This is not surprising in that Gilgamesh was hailed as a great king, perhaps the prototypical king, not long after the hero is thought to have lived—some two thousand years before the texts, written in the very different Akkadian language, were found in a 1st millennium BCE Assyrian capitol. The setting of the story, Uruk, is crucial to my understanding of the stories. Uruk has been called the First City, although the Mesopotamians did not think of it as the earliest city, because virtually every feature we consider “civilized,” i.e., a culture rooted in city life, appear in that first immensely large and productive city. The city walls of Uruk, celebrated in the first lines of the poem—and attributed to Gilgamesh—mark the division between the civilized and whatever stands outside of it, the primitive, the wild, and the often terrifying unknown.

Uruk was the first place where we find certain key inventions. Writing is the most important of these for our purposes. Another is the cylinder seal, which provides us with an extraordinary range of visual images. The plowshare, wheeled carts, and clay sickles are among other inventions that transformed an already old society, and the decision to cultivate a grain that resisted the saline soil turned a small economy into an immensely productive one, capable of reaching out to areas far beyond Uruk’s walls.

My major claim is that *Gilgamesh* preserves, consciously, relics of Uruk’s past. Urukean culture survived, more or less intact, for some four thousand years. By the time of the
Standard *Gilgamesh* Uruk had lost its autonomy—to Babylon, Assyria, the Persians and the Greeks. Elements of Babylonian and Assyrian societies, especially, transformed the Sumerian culture of the city. The most important question is: how much did these other elements transform Uruk—at least in the literary representation of the city.

The status of goddesses and women in the society is probably the most hotly debated question Assyriologists face these days. Rivkah Harris, who produced groundbreaking studies on the life course of Mesopotamians, male and female, developed a picture much like Middle Eastern cultures today. A detailed portrait of modern Palestinian Arab culture is given, e.g., by Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana in their collection of folktales, *Speak, Bird, Speak Again*. Much of this has been developed under the term “Patrimonialism” by J. David Schloen. For Harris, “the essential characteristics of masculinity were mastery and dominance,” while women were expected to place greater value on relationship and bonding, “which made for dependence on the male.” Nevertheless, Harris found, “the ideal spousal relationship was one of mutuality and shared sexual passion, which laid the foundation for a faithful, contented marriage.”

Rivkah Harris deliberately avoided the thorny question of historical changes in views of the life course, gender differences, and marriage. Before *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, her most important work was on the class of cloistered women in Old Babylonian Sippar and Babylon. Interestingly, this is exactly the period in which, according to some scholars, important differences begin to appear, especially in those two influential northern cities. How much the changes reflect differences in northern, mainly Semitic, groups that spread from northern Syria into northern Iraq, and the Sumerian south is still very much an open question. The argument that Mesopotamian goddesses were diminished over time—and changes in the status of women reflected the displacement of powerful goddesses by male deities—was best made by Tikva Frymer-Kensky.

The argument for change has increasingly turned on the militarization of Mesopotamia. Military operations on a large scale correlates with the development in Mesopotamia of a strong kingship. The great walls of Uruk attributed to Gilgamesh provide the most striking symbol of the rise of kingship. Gilgamesh, as we shall see, is praised as the greatest of kings, but the stories that grew up around this legendary king almost never show him leading men into battle. Only “Gilgamesh and Akka” presents him in this role, and even there he overwhelms his enemies simply by making a glorious appearance on the famous walls of his city.

True, in *Gilgamesh* the king and his companion Enkidu kill the monstrous Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven, and these are feats of manly strength and skill. But they are largely reflections of very ancient battles between gods and their opponents, who are as often as not forces of nature. Defeating such cosmic enemies brings order (if only temporarily) to an unstable world.

Much of the argument developed here can be seen in the opening lines of *Gilgamesh*, where, in addition to the highly-acclaimed walls of Uruk the poet offers a vision of life...
inside the walls. At the center of the city is the goddess Ishtar in her sacred “house.” I argue that the depiction of Uruk symbolizes masculine and feminine unity in what scholars have called a “sacred marriage” of human and divine. Sumerian culture had a word for this relationship: en, term sadly translated almost everywhere as “lord.” The Sumerian en is sometimes called a “priest-king,” but while the combination of priest and king may tell us something about the “lord,” it can be confusing, since the “priest” part is not altogether clear, and the “king” part is now qualified as a “weak” kingship. While there is a great deal of evidence, visual as well as textual, for the importance of the human en, especially in Uruk and nearby Ur, and for its prestige—the title is frequently carried by the high gods of Sumer, exactly how much this “lord” ruled the land is difficult to determine.

It appears that the most important role of the en was to engage in a ritual with a nin, who might be a goddess or a proxy for the goddess. The ritual involved a mat or bed and might well have been a celebration of the famous, but controversial “sacred marriage.”

I take the conflict between kingship and en-ship to be the central unifying feature of the different stories in Gilgamesh. The most interesting question becomes: is the conflict resolved? However this question is answered, the intimate relationship between Gilgamesh and the great goddess Ishtar resides at the heart of the story.

**Perspectives on Empathy**

One day Alison [Gopnik] came home from the lab in a state of despair that will be familiar to working parents. She had realized she was a terrible researcher (one of her papers had been rejected by a journal) and a failed teacher (a student had argued about a grade), and she came home to discover she was also a disgraceful mother (the chicken legs for dinner were still frozen). Like any good, strong, tough-minded professional woman in the same position, she broke down in tears on the sofa. Her son, who was not quite two, looked concerned and after a moment’s thought ran to the bathroom. He returned with a large box of Band-Aids, which he proceeded to put on her at random, all over; this was clearly a multiple-Band-Aid injury. Like many therapists, he made the wrong diagnosis but his treatment was highly effective. She stopped crying.130

There is more good news not reported in Dr. Gopnik’s vivid recall of the incident with her young child. Like the others who contributed to their 1999 study, The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains, and How Children Learn, Andrew N. Meltzoff and Patricia K. Kuhl, Alison continued her already distinguished career after suffering through her bad day. We need not be cognitive scientists to understand the narrative, which is in itself a good illustration of empathy. The point of the story, for the scientists, is that very young children learn, for example, to imitate others, and they develop the capacity for empathy much earlier than previous researchers had believed to be the case.

Stories like this are familiar today through short stories, plays, novels, TV shows, films and new media like the Internet. The history of the novel in the West and its spread through all parts of the globe is a useful guide to the ease we moderns have in seeing (or
guessing) that we have access to the Other. It is not so easy to see this in ancient epics and folktales. *Gilgamesh* shows an advance in this respect over earlier Gilgamesh stories, but that doesn’t make it *Anna Karenina*.

In their experiments that demonstrate the child’s ability to imitate facial expressions—like sticking out the tongue in imitation of an adult gazing at the infant—as early as 42 minutes old, Meltzoff and the others redefine that key idea in the Western literary and artistic tradition, *mimesis* or “imitation” and provide a new understanding of empathy. The concept of empathy has become increasingly important in sociological studies and even in diplomacy. (Robert MacNamara foggy knowledge of Vietnamese culture finally cleared years after the war when he actually spoke with a Vietnamese general.)

An important application of the concept, one which differentiated modern Western and Middle Eastern cultures, was made by Daniel Lerner. He referred to “psychic mobility.” Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl have found an even more useful characterization of the concept.

**A Definition**

Cognitive Science considers empathy in this way. Recall Alison’s almost two-year old—and the “terrible twos” who demonstrate that their actions are not always therapeutic.

To be genuinely empathic, you have to understand how other people feel and know how to make them feel better, even when you don’t feel that way yourself. You have to know that the other person needs some Band-Aids, even if you don’t—just as you know that the other person wants broccoli, though you don’t, or that she wants you to stay away from the lamp cord that seems so desirable to you. Real empathy isn’t just about knowing that other people feel the same way you do; it’s about knowing that they don’t feel the same way and caring anyway. Babies aren’t born with this deep moral insight, but by the time they are two, they already have begun to understand it.131

**A Social Perspective**

On the basis of an infant’s crying when the infant hears another sobbing, Darwin thought “global empathy” the foundation stone of the moral code in the child.132 For sociologist Daniel Lerner133 a high degree of empathy characterizes “modern” (or “participant”) society. While Lerner was attempting to find the factors that transformed traditional Middle Eastern societies into “modern” ones, certain of the values he identified might have, in their own fashion, have transformed Uruk into the new urban society it was late in the 4th millennium BCE. For us, the values of economic development, urbanism, literacy, media, and political participation have formed a society where “most people go through school, read newspapers, receive cash payments in jobs they are legally free to change, buy goods for cash in an open market, vote in elections which actually decide among competing candidates, and express opinions on many matters which are not their personal business.”134 He calls the condition of the empathic modern “psychic mobility.” This is how he describes empathy and “psychic mobility.”
The mobile person is distinguished by a high capacity for identification with new aspects of his environment; he comes equipped with the mechanisms needed to incorporate new demands upon himself that arise outside of his habitual experience. These mechanisms for enlarging a man’s identity operate in two ways. **Projection** facilitates identification by assigning to the object certain preferred attributes of the self—other are “incorporated” because they are like me. (Distance or negative identification, in the Freudian sense, results when one projects onto others certain disliked attributes of the self.) **Introjection** enlarges identity by attributing to the self certain desirable attributes of the object—others are “incorporated” because I am like them or want to be like them. We shall use the word *empathy* as a shorthand for both these mechanisms. (p. 50-51)

### The Representation of the Inner Life

One of Lerner’s most interesting observation is the novel, “the typical literary form of the modern epoch,” is a “conveyance of disciplined empathy.” Storytellers ancient and modern have engaged their audiences by focusing on characters who are unusual in one way or another. The modern novel tends to favor *character* over the *roles* figures play in a story, and it does this frequently by representing the inner life of characters. Techniques such as interior monologues, the “stream of consciousness” (in the phrase invented by William James), and shifts in point of view depend on empathy to persuade us that there is an individual consciousness in the fictional constructs. One of the earliest attempts is to represent the suffering of characters, the kind of “global empathy” we have known since early childhood. Melancholia is a state that lends itself to such fictional representation.

The literary representation of melancholia is quite old. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg see the representation of an “inner experience” a decisive change in Western narrative, and the earliest examples (mainly Greek romances of the Hellenistic period) are of women who have lost their loved ones. Even earlier, though, the Bible had provided a clear portrait of the melancholic: Saul (I Samuel 14-23). Mayer Gruber found ancient symbolism of melancholy in the way Cain responds to God's withdrawal of favor, in Genesis 4.

The disorientation suffered by the hero Gilgamesh is not represented in Akkadian poetry in an “inner” way, as we have come to expect in modern realistic fiction. The epic rarely shows a character's thought patterns except in a highly stylized fashion, and rarely in soliloquy. Siduri and Utnapishtim think about the strange Gilgamesh before them, but they do so in a dialogue with themselves. Wherever possible, what we like to think are “inner” states, Mesopotamian poets prefer to indicate through dialogue and through “outward” behavior, symbols.

The second quest of Gilgamesh is what we might expect a modern writer to represent as an “inner” journey—as Doris Lessing does, for example, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, or as R. D. Laing does in *The Politics of Experience*. Jungians have noted the importance of the second stage quest (the “archetype of initiation”). After establishing a “name” (ego; self-worth; integrity), the hero is plunged into a “dark night of the soul.”
Gilgamesh represents this two-stage quest in a way that cannot fail to move even the modern reader. Faced with the loss of the "friend," Enkidu, Gilgamesh responds in a manner consistent with melancholia: a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings. In Gilgamesh we can see the guilt, anxiety, irritability and hostility of the disruption of the “attachment bond.” Gilgamesh’s “identification” with his love-object is complete, as soon as Enkidu dies; and it was foreshadowed earlier in the emphasis upon Enkidu as the earthy “double” of the civilized hero.

The quest of Gilgamesh is usually seen as a failure. After all, Gilgamesh does not conquer death. As Enkidu died, so he must die. No immortality of the kind Utnapishtim enjoys is possible for him. Nor has he recovered the “friend,” Enkidu. Nevertheless, the judgment that the quest is a failure is surely overstated. In a profound way, Gilgamesh is “healed” in the quest. The marks of the animal (matted hair, skins, roaming the wilderness) give way in Enkidu through the initiation of the temple prostitute; they give way later through the purification of Utnapishtim. Cleansed, clothed in the “garment, the robe of life,” the beauty of his body restored, his hair bound--Gilgamesh has been transformed. He has found his way home, and he returns home as king, his thoughts on the good of the community rather than on himself. The return, which is narrated at the end of Tablet 11, is serene, calm, ordered. The poet returns to the opening lines of Tablet 1.

Libido

Dylan Thomas called it “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower.” It was driving his “green age,” he thought (in 1934), to his destruction. The Sumerians had a word for it: *hili*. The ones who wrote in Standard Akkadian translated it as *kuzbu*. We find the term a half dozen times in Tablet 1 of *Gilgamesh*. Its power persists through the Gilgamesh stories.

We, too, have a name for it: libido. It is a measure of our nervousness with sex—at least until recently—that the word popularized by Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung was known for centuries in the form “libidinous,” which carried a strongly negative charge. For Freud it meant the instinct energy or force contained in that mainly unconscious part of the psyche he called the *id*. (Translators wrestled with translating *das Es* as “the It,” which survived in the It Girl of the 1920s.) Jung rather thought libido was psychic energy, which expressed itself in symbols. While it still is most often thought of as the urge to engage in sexual activity, 20th century psychologists saw in it the energy to strive as well as to desire.

The Sumerian word *hili* is often used, not surprisingly, in the love poetry that celebrates the passionate affair between Inanna and Dumuzi (Semitic Tammuz), the model of an intimate relationship. She is the very embodiment of *hili*, but it is important to see that it is seen in males as well as females, humans as well as deities. In *Gilgamesh kuzbu* is used to characterize Gilgamesh himself (1:237) and the women like Shamhat (1:230). The Akkadian term ranges in meaning from attractiveness and sexual vigor to the beauty and
rich adornment of buildings. Every sort of abundance and luxuriance can exhibit *kuzbu*. A bilingual text even to the “abundant waters” carried from canals to the irrigation ditches essential to agriculture, such as in Uruk the date palms and barley fields. It is the force employed by Shamhat in seducing Enkidu and maintaining their incredible sexual relations, but it is also the energy of Gilgamesh in his heroic adventures.

**Bipedalism, Sex and Gender**

Socrates (in Plato’s *The Statesman*) famously defined “human” as a featherless biped. While paleoanthropologists are no more likely than Diogenes, who plucked a chicken and presented it to Socrates, to accept that definition, they still look to the ability to walk on two feet at the divide between humans and our nearest family members. A skull found in the deserts of Chad and dated to seven million years ago, more than twice as old as “Lucy” discovered in East Africa, is thought to be our oldest ancestor—because the creature walked upright. To the untrained observer the reconstructed creature looks more like a bonobo than a chimpanzee, which would fit contemporary thought that the bonobo shares even more, and more critical, DNA than chimps.

In early Proto-cuneiform times—that is, seven million years later but old from an historical perspective—we begin to see humans represented in art, and they are standing, sometimes walking on a ground line. Numerous cylinder seals show the en on a ground line heading for a temple. The famous Uruk Vase has a whole register devoted to “stout, nude males” walking in line, carrying offerings to the temple. Even larger and more prominent is the uppermost register, where the en and his two attendants meet with woman (or goddess)—clearly the central event celebrated on the Uruk Vase—and all the figures stand firmly, feet exposed, on a ground line. Later kings and soldiers walk proudly with at least their muscled calves exposed. Legendary heroes run swiftly, and King Shulgi of Ur is celebrated in verse for his exceptional distance running. We can thank those bonobo-like ancestors for this delight in bipedalism.

Walking upright created problems for us as well. Sore backs are a minor inconvenience next to what the paleoanthropologists call the Obstetrical Dilemma. Bipedalism affected the pelvic bones and made the birth of human infants, with their large skulls, a traumatic event for mother and infant. All humans are born prematurely and have to spend an inordinate amount of time maturing outside the womb. The terribly dependent infant may well have determined the structure of the primitive family, especially in the advantage given to offspring—and mother—when the father stayed nearby to protect and provide for the others.

Helen Fisher’s early book, *The Sex Contract*, does not mention bonobos, but does mention chimpanzees and gorillas. The central chapter, “The Sex Contract,” does, however, open the argument. More recently, she has used the material. “Gorillas live in harems,” Fisher points out. The “harem is led by a single adult silverback” with at least two “wives.” Young males avoid incest with full siblings, and often move away to join another group or attract a young female. In spite of their close relationship to humans, gorillas have major differences in sexual and reproductive habits.
Bonobos are quite different from gorillas in those respects—and in many ways closer to humans. For these pygmy chimps (*Pan paniscus*), the females have a lengthy monthly period of heat, and sex is not confined to estrus. “Sex is almost a daily pastime,” according to Fisher. They bribe one another for sex. They “engage in sex to ease tension, to stimulate sharing, to reduce stress while traveling, and to reaffirm friendships during anxious reunions.” Females engage in sexual play with other females and females with males. Moreover, bonobos kiss, copulate in the missionary position about seventy percent of the time but also use the rear-entry position. And they gaze at each other during sex.

Bonobos, too, differ in some important respects from humans. They do not form permanent pair-bonds or raise their young as husband and wife—though, of course, not all humans do either. Fisher is particularly interested in the patterns of adultery in bonobos and humans, an aspect of Mesopotamian life that does not concern us in this study. But bonobos demonstrate that the alpha male ruling over a harem is no more inevitably “natural” to animals than to humans.

Riane Eisler likewise did not use the evidence of bonobo sexual activity in her early work, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), but devoted many pages to the topic in developing her theory of cultural transformation. Eisler proposes a new theory of hominid and early human cultural evolution, one that is not monolithic “but allows for the evolution of various types of social organization.” For Eisler, human development of social organization “did not follow one single linear path but rather a variety of paths—some orienting primarily to a dominator model and others orienting more to a partnership model.” She uses “the uncommon chimps,” that is, the bonobos, as evidence that variety can be seen even in the primates with which we share more DNA than with any other animals. (And bonobos are closer to us in that respect than even chimpanzees.) This theory challenges the “baboon-derived hominid models,” popularly known as “man the hunter” theories, and even a chimpanzee-derived model that focuses on the sharing of food between mothers and children.

**Ardipithecus Ramidus**

With the discovery of a hominid a million years older than “Lucy,” speculation has begun about evolutionary advantage of bipedalism. The recovery of the pelvis and femur of a mature female *Ardipithecus ramidus*, nicknamed “Ardi,” the very limitations of upright walking have called into question the survival of what seems to be a very inefficient form of locomotion. The authors of the scientific report on Ardi’s pelvis and femur, primarily C. Owen Lovejoy, point out that, “Virtually no other primate has a human-like pelvic girdle—not even our closest living relatives, the chimpanzee and bonobo.”

Lovejoy does not speculate about the advantage upright walking provides, but others have. Ardii is important because *Ardipithecus ramidus* shows that the common hypothesis that humans evolved from the great apes has been invalidated. Ardi is already on a different track than our closest relatives. The relatively complete skeleton of Ardi indicates that she was not a knuckle-walking primate. She possessed feet that were
anatomically figured for climbing trees, but the pelvis and femur showed that she walked upright. Running would have been difficult for *Ardipithecus ramidus*. One possibility is that *Ardipithecus ramidus* was well-equipped for gathering food at a distance from "home." The male may have been carrying it back to the female and their offspring, which would have spent much of their time in the protection of the tree. The male may well have been trading food for sex.

The paleoanthropologists also noted that teeth used as weapons and for aggressive display by the great apes are strikingly smaller and blunted in both male and female *Ardipithecus ramidus*. This suggests that, just as Ardi could not easily run down prey, they were not as aggressive as their relatives.

The habitat for *Ardipithecus ramidus* was also unexpected. The widespread idea that our earliest ancestors lived in a relatively treeless savanna has also been dashed. There were plenty of trees about and a great variety of animals like bats that indicate a heavily wooded area in which Ardi lived. *Ardipithecus ramidus* probably lived in the trees that provided them security.

If *Ardipithecus ramidus*, especially the males, were less aggressive than apes, a partnership between males bringing food to the females allowed a different kind of bonding to develop, one that allowed the kind of family relationships that tied males, females and their offspring together in a mutually advantageous situation. The great apes today are almost extinct, while the survival of humans has been so successful that we worry about overpopulation. It appears to have been a problem even in the ancient world, at least in certain cities, as we shall see. The greater intimacy in the family would seem to have been a major factor in growing the human population.

**Sacred Pleasure**

In her 1995 book, *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body*, Eisler explains that the phrase "sacred pleasure" kept suggesting itself to her as a way of conceptualizing both the sacred and pleasure far differently than has been the case in the West. The phrase does not refer to the self-inflicted tortures men and women subjected themselves to in medieval Europe or to a Freudian notion of pleasure derived from degrading a sexual object. Rather she slowly came to a recognition that what the mystics describe as a spiritual journey was not opposed, as we had been led to believe, to the body.

I began to recognize that my most important and most deeply felt spiritual moments—the moments when I most intensely felt that inexpressible awe and wonder at the mystery of life—had been possible not because of my social conditioning to associate the sacred with some all-powerful ever-judging entity, but despite it. I also began to see that spiritual development is not something different and apart from such earthly pleasures as sexual ecstasy and loving touch—be it of a child or a lover. On the contrary, I gradually began to understand that these experiences were at the core of my own spiritual development. And I also began to understand, not just on a theoretical but on an experiential level, the
urgency of my need to untangle what I had been taught about both pleasure and the sacred.\textsuperscript{161}

The untangling—which led Eisler to a notion of “partnership spirituality”—came largely from her reading of evolutionary biology. In contrast to much of modern sociobiology, the “biology of love” Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela develop emphasizes certain differences between human and animal sexuality in the evolution of the human brain.\textsuperscript{162} Two features in particular distinguish the human condition to produce a “biology of cooperation and a linguistic coordination of action,” namely, the utter dependency of the infant for food and shelter—and the physical caring of touch—together with the extremely long period of early helplessness; and the female’s ability for year-round sexuality, not limited to reproductive needs.\textsuperscript{163} The emergence of language “as a human tool to facilitate sharing and cooperation” is related, by Maturana and Varela, to this sexual freedom, since it would have tended to promote sustained and cooperative contacts between females and males. The biologists also link these differences between humans and the animals closest to humans to the awareness of self (distinct from and interconnected with others), consciousness itself.\textsuperscript{164}

The pleasure of loving and of being loved may well derive from the chemical rewards to the body from substances such as endorphins. At a certain point in evolution, the chemicals came to function not only in a fight-or-flight situation, but to promote bonding involved in caretaking. In many activities that we tend to separate, from the infant’s response to a loving touch to the mystic’s states of euphoric bliss, pleasure derived from the evolution of the brain is an often unrecognized factor. For Eisler, “the pleasure we feel in moments of creation, discovery, aesthetic contemplation, and helpfulness to others” is part of a large evolutionary “movement from the primacy of the punishment of pain to the primacy of the reward of pleasure—and very specifically, pleasure from love.”\textsuperscript{165}

Within this evolutionary movement, the place of early agrarian societies has been much debated. Jerrold S. Cooper has noticed a curious pattern in Sumerian mythological poetry that he ties to the agricultural economy of the Mesopotamian south, where fresh water irrigation was essential. The high god who was associated with the fertile waters, Enki, is praised in a very blunt way for the way he raises his penis and ejaculates over the land, filling the Tigris and Euphrates with “(ever) flowing water.”\textsuperscript{166} Cooper describes Enki as “god of sweet waters, organizer of the universe, master magician, helper of last resort, ardent tippler, incestuous abuser of his own daughters!”\textsuperscript{167} In more than one mythological text, Enki asserts his power through his sexual organ, especially in his contest with the mother goddess, Ninmah, where he proclaims his triumph over her by proclaiming, “Let now my penis be praised, and serve as a reminder to you!”\textsuperscript{168} Enki’s most powerful competitor in these mythological poems is no doubt Inanna, who gets the best of him in “Inanna and Enki: The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization from Eridu to Uruk.” In that story Inanna wrests the divine me from Enki through a combination of seduction, trickery, and magical force (the very weapons Enki normally uses) for her city, Uruk.\textsuperscript{169} As she prepares to visit Enki, she admires herself while she considers her vulva.\textsuperscript{170} Cooper
points out that there are frequent references to female organs in Sumerian love poetry, much of it dealing with Inanna and her lover Dumuzi. The references are generally more subtle than in the Enki myths. The major difference, though, is surprising. The Inanna-Dumuzi love poetry may relate to the copious produce of gardens, fruits, and salads—but has virtually nothing to do with divine or human reproduction. Cooper states it explicitly: “Conception and birth have no role in the Inanna-Dumuzi cycle.” Since the love poetry is both explicit in its praise of sexual experience and provides a woman’s voice in Sumerian poetry, the contrast with the Enki poetry is all the more striking: Enki’s often autoerotic display of his sexual organ, which Cooper calls his “phallocentricity,” is always associated with reproduction: reproductive, Cooper claims, “on both the metaphoric and concrete levels.” The “tender, sensuous sexuality” of the Inanna poetry contrasts sharply with the “raw, often violent, phallocentric” sexuality of Enki.

The very large and important question of the rise of patriarchy (or patrimonialism) will be considered later. (It is a major theme of Riane Eisler’s *Sacred Pleasure*, who deals with Mesopotamian materials somewhat, and is the major concern of Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s *In the Wake of the Goddesses*.) It has been observed many times that the literature of Inanna/Ishtar is relatively unconcerned with reproduction. It may even have been the case that Inanna earned a place in the powerful foursome at the head of the Sumerian pantheon by replacing the mother goddess. Inanna’s independence is a central concern in her literature, of course, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky has made much of the undomesticated, fierce and wild goddess.

Whatever Mesopotamian literature tells us about the rise of what Eisler calls a phallocentric Dominator society, the other side of Inanna’s sexuality should be noticed. If the Enki myths suggest the Name of the Father, to use a Lacanian expression, the Inanna poems celebrate sacred pleasure that is separated from reproduction, cultivated, as it were, for its own sake—and the sake of bonding and communication. Nothing could be further from a Puritanical rejection of sexual experience—or from the notion that sex is legitimate only if it furthers reproduction.

**Pointers on Human vs. Animal Sexuality**

For much of Mesopotamian culture, sexual mores and marriage laws were much like what is found, say, in the Middle East today. As in other important matters, the high gods and goddesses, like the powerful Enlil, projected human values onto a higher order of beings. Enlil and Ninlil, “husband” and “wife,” were both powerful figures, but their powers were not shared equally. He was the King of the Gods and the master of his household. Myths and rituals reinforced the value of having children.

The great exception in Mesopotamia was Inanna/Ishtar. From her “house,” the temple complex Eanna that she wrested from her “father” An/Anu, she dominated the Uruk countryside. And she was not alone. By at least the period in which *Gilgamesh* was written, she had four companion goddesses, some of whom dwelt with her in the Eanna, who received regular offerings of dates, barley, meat, jewelry, clothing and other items
valuable in Uruk society. And Inanna/Ishtar was surrounded by an unusual group of temple personnel, male and female.

The key point is not that anyone found Inanna of Uruk “bestial” or “unnatural.” And she was not obsessed with sex. She had, among other virtues, a fierce fighting spirit. She helped Urukeans in battle, and she could punish them when she was angry. The sexuality of Inanna/Ishtar is a sign (not a “representation”) of the difference between human and animal sexuality.

The development of animal husbandry, i.e., the domestication of wild species (esp. the “wild bull,” the aurochs—and also sheep and goats) allowed humans to observe closely the important differences between themselves and the animals they domesticated. While the differences occurred much earlier in time, and researchers have naturally focused on our nearest primate relatives (gorillas, chimpanzees, and especially bonobos), I rather think that Mesopotamians did not observe them.

From visual representations and (later) texts, Inanna is represented as owner/master of buildings (temples, birthing huts), as humanlike, as female, and as the one who controls and changes gender and sexual differences. The storehouse (for barley, especially) is the essential feature of Uruk’s first temple complex. Inanna is seen as having power to influence “fertility” (of animals and crops), but as many commentators have noticed, she is almost never seen as the mother of offspring (divine or semi-divine).

She and her companions were called upon to restore potency to males who had lost it, but the rituals that were used were not directed to reproduction. Here is an example.

Among the anxieties Mesopotamian men suffered for which cures were sought is impotence. By the mid-2nd millennium, in Kassite times, a group of potency incantations was standardized into a series, though the potency incantation is attested earlier than that period. An Akkadian text, not surprisingly, refers to Inanna/Ishtar and her lover Dumuzi in order to restore proper sexual functioning to a man.

Incantation: Power! Power! I prepared a bed of power: What Ishtar did for Dumuzi, What Nanaya did for her lover, What Ishhara did for her husband let me do for my lover! Let the flesh of NN son of NN tingle, let his penis be erect! Let his “heart” not become tired, night or day! At the command of cunning Ishtar, Nanaya, Gazbaba and Ishhara. The formula for an incantation.

Incantation for Potency.

The four goddesses who are mentioned in the text are, if not aspects of Inanna, closely related to her, her Companions. Ishtar is, of course, her most familiar Akkadian name. Nanaya and Ishhara are goddess usually identified, as in the text, as goddesses of love. Gazababa is the unusual name. Elsewhere she is identified as the daughter of Nanaya and, so, may share her mother’s most conspicuous characteristic. In the incantation
series, *Shurpu*, she is called “the ever-laughing one” (*sajahitu*), that is, libidinous. Three of the four goddesses were thought to dwell in Uruk. Ishhara, who is named in the 2nd tablet of *Gilgamesh*, apparently as another manifestation of Ishtar herself, was originally a Semitic deity who came to be equated with Ishtar.

The Great Goddess of Uruk is, however, seen as the one who selects human males (the *en*) and raises them to a divine or semi-divine status, giving them power (throne) and offering herself sexually (the bed), both iconic pieces of furniture located in her storehouse. In return, humans provide her with things, mainly food and drink and animals. Both wild and domesticated animals are brought to her.

This is not entirely unique in Mesopotamian religion. The feeding of the divine image was what A. Leo Oppenheim, who otherwise objected to defining the multifaceted Mesopotamian religion, considered the central act (I would say ritual) in Mesopotamian religion. Inanna is right in line with this aspect of the larger culture.

What makes Inanna different (and her relationship with the human different) from other powerful gods and goddesses (especially the mother goddesses, whom she may have supplanted early on) and vastly complicates her “character” is the way she offers sexual experience that does not lead to reproduction. That, of course, is what separates humans from our nearest relatives, even the bonobos.

The recent (and controversial) work by Bruce Lahn on the evolution of the human brain (changes in the ASPM gene as recently as 5800 years ago) may have influenced the religious concepts of Urukeans (as writing and city development may have been influenced by the greater cognitive abilities of human at the time Uruk develops). Most of the features that differentiate human and animal sexuality probably developed much earlier.

In addition to her studies cited above, Helen Fisher has reinforced her views in a documentary film on the subject that has been shown on television at least twice.) While her interest in the book is mainly on the reason why women (and men) stay together on average about three years and then often stray (a point that could be made about Inanna’s notorious fickle behavior), I am interested in more obvious points that Fisher makes. By Sumerian times humans had long developed:

- Face-to-face copulation, allowed when women developed the “downward-tilted vagina” (vs. all other primates)
- The greater intimacy such copulation permitted; importance of kissing
- The ability of humans to copulate around the clock; sex not timed to ovulation
- The importance of the clitoris
- The “Obstetrical Dilemma”: the very large head of the human fetus (a development from about a million years ago) meant that humans are necessarily born with a big head and a weak, undeveloped body (in sharp contrast to, e.g., bovines, whose
offspring need to stand up within minutes of birth in order to be fed). The Obstetrical Dilemma was a consequence of bipedalism

- The helpless human infant is better served by a father who remains attentive to the mother (because of increased intimacy and affection) and protects the family through the crucial 3-5 years of early development. (This, again, is in sharp contrast to the animals ubiquitous in Mesopotamia, bulls and rams, which are more likely to ignore or attack their offspring).

- The importance, then, of a perceived attachment between father and offspring (the concept of paternity)

- The later development of the Big Man, as shown for us in early cylinder seal impressions of the en, whose many activities assist the goddess, build complex society, and maintain order (without an emphasis on warfare, though)

- The Big Man, standing tall, is another consequence of bipedalism

- The development of weapons (staff, bow, net) for hunting and fighting

- Once artists invented the ground line, narrative art develops, and the Big Man is placed in a story that is visualized.

- For our purposes the en is prior to thelugal in Uruk; Gilgamesh is the figure at the transition from one to the other, hence his attractiveness to and also his conflict with Inanna. With kingship comes an increasing development of patriarchy.

- The development of agriculture, especially with the plow (vs. the hoe), which greatly increased productivity, as humans were able to employ domesticated animals as a help to men (with greater upper body strength than women typically possess) as they plowed the long rows that yielded Uruk’s great barley surplus. (The plowshare, now considered a problem in maintaining soils but for five thousand years greatly expanded the productivity of the plow, is thought to have been invented in Uruk.)

- Among other views of the en (overseeing other activities, including the work of scribes, for example) he appears in a sled pulled by animals.

- The development of symbolic thought, writing, art, other utensils and the like, some earlier than our Uruk period perhaps, but certainly evident by ca. 3000 (now thought to be even earlier)

- A tragic dimension is introduced with the representation on cylinder seal impressions of severed heads, usually bovine.

- One might add the practice of culling herds of all but a few bulls and rams (kept for reproduction) as soon as the males are fit enough to be slaughtered for food;
alternatively, as in the case of temple herds in Uruk, bulls and rams could be castrated, making them useful while greatly lowering their aggressiveness. In the case of sheep and goats, castrated males developed fine wool and hair. The presence of roughly equal numbers of males and females indicates that they were kept for the important textile industry in Uruk. The castration of animals (and the observation that animals may be hermaphroditic or sexless at birth) possibly influenced the Sumerian notion that there were more than two genders in humans as well. Possibly the castration of men (usually prisoners of war) was carried out after the observation of the effects of castration on animals.

By the early 2nd millennium BCE (at least) small, molded terracotta plaques showing visual erotica were produced, perhaps by the thousands. According to Julia Assante, the images fall into three categories. In one, a woman bends over and a man penetrates her from behind; often she is drinking beer from a tube as this happens. One might think such an image was appropriate to the Sumerian taverns, where under the aegis of Inanna the harimtu, such as the woman who seduces Enkidu, were often to be found. These and other explicit images were found, however, mainly in the private homes of the non-elite. No doubt they pleased Inanna and were thought to increase libido.

Assante calls the first image The Drinking Scene. A second shows a couple in intercourse en face, usually in bed. “The lovers are locked in a mutual gaze.” A third image shows a nude female “in postures of sexual display, with or without an outsized, disembodied phallus between their legs.” Such erotic activities are also described in myths, literary texts, and incantations. Assante suggests that “arousal and inebriation, frequently in tandem,” were considered “magical in themselves.” While Assante analyzes Old Babylonian terracotta plaques, the first two themes can be found much earlier in the cylinder seal impressions of Archaic Ur. In one of the “Drinking Scenes” a fully clothed woman assists a woman while a man prepares to penetrate her from behind. Both parties to the sexual act are depicted with bovine heads, perhaps masks worn for a ritual. [See “Illustrations”: Fig. 10: “Drinking Scene” from Archaic Ur #368]

The second, the “Bed Scene,” frequently shows a naked couple having intercourse on a bed or mat. Male and female are depicted in almost identical fashion, with minimal gender differences on display. They are usually the same height and build, and they face each other intently: often the eyes are wide open and exaggerated in size.
Assante’s first two images, especially, point to a striking development in the Gilgamesh stories: the *harimtu* Shamhat’s seduction of Enkidu (at the suggestion of Gilgamesh), which begins the process of humanizing and civilizing the wild man; and Inanna’s offering of herself to Gilgamesh. Both events are related to Uruk as the city of Inanna. A third event takes place at a distance as far removed from Uruk as could be reached by foot: Gilgamesh encounters a woman in a tavern. Like Circe in the *Odyssey*, the woman
preface: the case for intimacy

provides Gilgamesh a key piece of information that will enable him to make the most dangerous part of his quest for “life.”

The females visualized on the plaques and cylinder seal impressions may or may not be goddesses or represent a goddess like Inanna. (The females do not wear the distinctive headdress of a deity that was commonly shown in the visual arts by the Old Babylonian period.) In *Gilgamesh* the harimtu Shamhat is a woman, not a goddess. It is not clear if the woman in the tavern, Siduri, is a deity. They are certainly related to Inanna in some way. I think, though, that the unusual combination of the Great Goddess with her human lover, whom she selects, is symbolic of the many changes that took place in Uruk. At the same time that the worship of Inanna (and her connection with Akkadian Ishtar) spreads throughout Mesopotamia, the development of the *lugal* (perhaps first at Ur) and the increasing power of the palace (vs. the temple) makes the Urukean model of the city-state give way throughout Mesopotamia, even in the south. The Nippur model and later the Babylonian model tend to make the great goddess of the city at most a “consort” of the great god (and the wife of god and of king models of motherhood). 188

A question for anthropologists: would the models of Babylon, perhaps of Nippur (and Assyria?) show that their societies were chieftainships rather than the model of early rule in city-states like Uruk and maybe Eridu and Ur? Is the great king a reversion to an earlier, widespread type of human society? The chief is the great bull in the herd, animal or human. What differentiates the model based on analogy with other primates from the divine/human relationship found in Uruk is the human capacity for intimacy and a continued concern for spouse and offspring.

The conflict between Gilgamesh and Ishtar in the Standard *Gilgamesh*, already a possibility in the Sumerian Bull of Heaven story, becomes central to the series of Gilgamesh stories. I still think that the conflict is resolved when Gilgamesh reenters Uruk at the end of Tablet 11, but I know others may disagree. The other possibility is flat despair on Gilgamesh’s part because his quest has failed.

**visual representations of the ruler**

The early cylinder seal impressions from Uruk and other places, especially Susa, show in theme and style the importance of the Big Man. The Uruk Vase represents the theme on a larger scale.

The clarity with which figures on the Uruk Vase are represented, each item, human, animal, agricultural product, or inanimate object, separated from the others in a way that presents the figure and indicates its relationship to others, is not so surprising on a nearly yard-tall vase. It is surprising on the tiny cylinder seals. Holly Pittman has studied both themes and stylistic features of the Uruk period seal impressions. Where northern Mesopotamia preferred geometric forms on the seals, the Sumerian south developed figural representation. 189 The style of these southern seals also differs from the style of seals in the region at a later period. Like the Proto-cuneiform texts of the period, which retain vestiges of early pictographs, the cylinder seals are, as Pittman points out, “very
clear, very easy to read, very distinct.” In contrast, “at the end of this period, we move into a time when there are only two major scenes instead of more than a dozen. One is a combat scene among which it is impossible to distinguish, and the other is the banquet scene. And so I do not see the Uruk style or the Uruk figural expression as the wave of the future.”

The later combat scene already speaks of the increasing interest in warfare and the rise of strong kings. In contrast, the “Late Uruk” period presents the figure usually called, for convenience, a “priest-king,” since he appears to combine religious and political functions. (Both the “priestly” and the “kingly” aspects have to be explained.) Pittman describes both the style and function of the seals in this way.

I do not understand these images as representations of specific events. I mean them as representations of repeated events that were, represented in an idealized and economical manner so that everyone who needed to understand what was going on. And their purpose is to show that this is the priest king, and that he has relation with specific people and with specific events.

The question of whether the priest king on the seals from Uruk is the same as the priest king on the seals from Susa—at least to my mind—has major implications for understanding the structure of the Late Uruk period. If we see this as a representation of a person (office) who is in charge of the Uruk polity we have an entirely different situation than if we see him as a representation of the person who is in charge of Susa and the other colonies....

But one of the functions of imagery—and we assume that it was an important function in the earlier periods—was to define boundaries. It was to define boundaries between people, between polities, between communities.
A good example is an Uruk seal impression that shows the en (or “priest-king” and his companion” carrying goods toward a temple. The scene is much like the one shown earlier (Fig. 1), but where in the first example the procession is leading to a symbol of the goddess Inanna, the second image shows the two men approaching the temple, and the en carries, not a constructed figure of a quadruped, but the body of an animal whose feet have been cut off. The scene suggests that the animal has already been butchered in preparation for a ritual meal or sacrifice: in either case, an offering. (Living quadrupeds are presented behind the en and his acolyte. They are in a field of vegetation.) The style and the figures themselves are very close to the upper ring on the Uruk Vase, which will be considered later.
Contrast this with a contemporary piece from Susa. A figure much like a “priest-king” is shown shooting arrows into nude persons, one of whom is fleeing toward a temple.195 The two images may come from the same period and may be in the same Uruk style, but the image from Susa (in the highlands east of Sumer, in what is now Iran) appears to be the harbinger of the more warlike period of the war-lord kings. The bowman is one of the earliest human figures in Mesopotamian art, but he is usually shown taking aim at wild animals, especially lions. The Urukean images for the most part emphasize the large figure of the *en* literally “overseeing” the activities that made Uruk such an economically productive and prosperous city. [See “Illustrations”: Fig 14: Hero Protects Cow from Lion, Goff image #271]196

Among these early cylinder seal impressions is one that shows a man with a stick protecting a cow in the process of giving birth. The human fights off a lion. Behind the man is the severed head of a bull. Beatrice Laura Goff sees symbols of life and death in this unique seal.197 “It would be hard to find a more suitable direct expression of fertility than the calving cow of this seal. If the cow is under attack, the symbolism is not lessened but increased, for a threat to the welfare of the herd is thereby expressed.”198 Goff also observes the severed head of a bull in the scene. It has no obvious connection with the scene, since the man is fighting off a lion, but Goff understands the severed head figuratively as recalling “the sacrificial cult, which seems to have given expression to ideas of ‘life’ and ‘death’ through its ceremonies just as the art did in its designs.”199

The severed head of a bull also appears on the Uruk seal mentioned above and on the Uruk Vase in a similar assemblage of items to be taken into the temple. One might go a step farther than Goff and suggest that the man protecting the cow from a dangerous predator emphasizes the importance of domesticating animals. In the domestication of animals, humans have not only taken the place of the animals, leading and protecting them, but also humans have introjected the power of the bull? Bulls in herds are, of course, the ones that are “sacrificed,” to keep order in the herd; otherwise, for their usefulness to humans, bulls and rams are castrated—a sacrifice of their ability to be parents.

The relationship between humans and animals takes us back to the scenes shown on plaques in the Old Babylonian period discussed by Julia Assante and the even earlier seal impressions from Ur. The Bed Scene shows the sexual partners in face-to-face encounters. The partners come closer to “equality” since both males and females are represented as hairless and of equal size than to a representation of the domination of one sex over the other. The Drinking Scene, on the other hand, shows the male penetrating the female from behind, sometimes pulling the woman’s hair. The woman’s drinking beer through a straw also suggests fellatio. In some of the Drinking Scenes both male and female are shown with heads (or masks) of animals. Both may be ritual scenes. In the Ur seal impressions the two scenes are sometimes represented on a single seal. One might suggest that the Drinking Scene is an image to induce pregnancy, while the Bed Scene involves the kind of sex scholars call the “sacred marriage,” with no particular concern with reproduction.
A note on a man protecting a cow from a predator: I consulted not only books and web sources but also friend Joel Kutz, a veterinarian whose practice changed radically from large farm animals to pets over his career in Upstate New York. Kutz assured me that cows, when they are ready to give birth tend to retreat from the herd and find a private place. If the cow is threatened by a predator, she would more likely to be helped by other cows than by the bull. Bulls take no interest in the birth or in the development of the calf. If anything, a bull might attack the calf as a rival. The domestication of cattle, sheep and goats required a reconfiguration of herds. In the process extra males were either “sacrificed” for food or castrated for work (or for sheep and goats, for wool and hair).

Representations of Gender

One of the more puzzling features of *Gilgamesh* is its treatment of sex and gender. Most of the difficulties derive from its resistance to the dichotomy of mind and body favored in the West since the Greeks. As in many other ways *Gilgamesh* preserves very early Sumerian, especially Urukean, concepts wrapped in Akkadian images. The Standard Akkadian *Gilgamesh* was composed long after Mesopotamian society had turned in the direction that looks much like the Middle East today, a strongly patriarchal view of gender differences: powerful masculine forces protecting women who are seen as essentially feminine in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. *Gilgamesh* reflects these changes to some extent, but more interestingly complicates the issues in holding onto much earlier social norms.

Not surprisingly, the goddess Ishtar has received a great deal of attention by modern scholars because she challenges our views of sex and gender. But the two heroes, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, have also generated much discussion, largely because of their intimate relationship. In addition to the metaphorical identification of Enkidu as the wife of Gilgamesh, there is the conspicuous transformation of the creature into a human being through the vigorous sexual initiation by a woman in the service of Ishtar.

Enkidu’s “birth” is appropriate to the one who is called the *lullú*-LÚ (Tablet 1, line 178). The first part of this compound, *lullú*, is an Akkadian word borrowed from the Sumerian *lú*-lu18 followed by a Sumerian logogram for “human being,” to be read amēlu in Akkadian. The two parts of the compound reinforce each other. Both refer to humankind (“human-human”) rather than “man.” Sumerians had a notion of a human, like Adam, a first person, but “human” is marked before gender. This is usually translated as “primitive,” or better, “primal” humankind. (The next line in the poem describes him in a different way, as a GURUSH, usually read in Akkadian as *etēlu*, a “young man,” certainly male. The line describes him as a “murderous” man, which is why he strikes the humans who see him as such a dangerous figure. When Gilgamesh goes mad—or better, goes wild—he too will be seen as such a terrifying killer.)

This is an interesting sequence, since it shows Enkidu as having been formed by the goddess Aruru and the god Anu, female and male, each contributing a specific part of the creature. The creature, though, is first seen as a human being, and only then as male. The birth of Enkidu is a repetition of the birth of Humankind—and thus the birth of all
humans. The goddess has made him particularly strong, like the warrior god Ninurta. But he is described mainly as a creature with long hair. This feature links him to animals but also to deities, and that in turn complicates Enkidu’s gender. The hair of his body is likened both to the grain-goddess Nisaba and to the cattle-god Shakkan (or Sumuqan).

Julia M. Asher-Greve has provided us with a remarkable study of “The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body.” Like many Assyriologists Asher-Greve sees gender constructions changing in Mesopotamia once kingship—and with it the militarization of society—limit the roles women are expected to play. The exclusion of women from warfare is likely the single most important factor in the change of gender status. The law codes and “increasingly numerous representations of nude females” in late 3rd millennium BCE and the early 2nd millennium exhibit these changes.

We will examine these factors in detail later, but it is important to note here that Asher-Greve demonstrates that Sumerian society recognized not two, but at least four gender categories. In addition to masculine and feminine, they understood an ambiguous, gender-neutral category and persons who were sexless. Sumerian ideas of the body are exhibited in a close study of key words in the Sumerian language and in the visual arts. An important conclusion is that for the Sumerians the body was not considered somehow separate from mind. The closest one gets to mental operations is the geshtu, or “ear” for understanding. Otherwise the body is the locus of matter and spirit, emotion and reason, the temporal and the eternal. (The ghost-spirit that survives after death retains certain features of the human form, seen as articulated by the skeleton.)

Asher-Greve gives some consideration to the Akkadian language. She points out, for example, that the creation of humankind in Atrahasis contains a pun on the ghost-spirit, etemmu, derived from flesh, and the ūmu, a kind of ordering mind, from blood. The Akkadian term for “flesh,” šīru, Asher-Greve points out, is much like Sumerian su and ša3, in the way it metonymically stands for “body,” “person,” “self,” perhaps the total body, including the bones.

For our purposes what is so remarkable about Asher-Greve’s analysis is the extent to which the key Sumerian terms find their equivalents in the Akkadian of Gilgamesh. In the curious descriptions of that other hero, Gilgamesh, we usually find ourselves baffled by our mind/body dichotomy and the way divine and human principles intersect in the hero.

It is puzzling enough that the hero who is identified by the oxymoron, the “joy/woe man” (more accurately “joy/woe person,” amēlu, human being), is defined elsewhere as “2/3rd god and 1/3rd human.” Exactly what the proportion means may still be open to question, though the conclusion is not: Gilgamesh is not enough divine to escape the fate of all mortals (with rare exception, as we shall see). The line about his being only 2/3rd divine, articulated by the spouse of a Scorpion-Man follows upon the Scorpion-Man’s perception that Gilgamesh has the “flesh of the gods in his body.” Just to make the point of the conservative nature of the writing system (and Mesopotamian society more
generally), the poet writes the Akkadian word for “flesh,” shīru, with the Sumerogram UZU and the word for “deities” with the Sumerogram DINGIR.MESH.

The DINGIR sign also points up an important difference between the Sumerian and the Akkadian languages. While Akkadian is like other Semitic languages in regularly indicating grammatical gender, Sumerian nouns like “god” do not. The DINGIR sign often appears at the beginning of names, and the names can as easily point to females as to males. There is a parallel in the visual arts. At a certain point in Mesopotamian history, the visual representation of gods, male or female, is indicated by stylized horns of bulls.

The use of the DINGIR sign in the expression, “flesh of the gods,” then, does not at all distinguish male gods from female gods. (Note that English has both “god,” which could signify male or female, but also “goddess,” which designates only a female, though the nouns themselves are not inflected for gender.) Whatever the “flesh” of gods may have meant to Sumerian or Akkadian speakers—a problematic construction since we in the West are tempted to see gods as primarily “spirit” rather than “flesh”—it did not of itself carry any implications that, for example, “flesh” is more likely to characterize goddesses than gods.

Asher-Greve comes to the important conclusion that for Mesopotamians, “the human body was a divine, genderless creation.” Humanity was created prior to sex or gender and contained all possible genders. The distinction between the creation of humankind and the subsequent development (construction) of gender is neatly compressed in two lines that describe Enkidu.

The visual arts of Mesopotamia can make very clear distinctions between sexes and genders. The earliest Proto-cuneiform signs for male and female are stylized depictions of penis and vulva. Visual representations of gods and goddesses, like humans, can carry gender markers, not just on the body but also in the clothing they wear and the implements they carry. The great goddess Inanna/Ishtar is perhaps the great exception to the rule. Just as she is the goddess who can change male into female and female into male, she can required those in her service wear, for ritual purposes, the clothing conventionally worn by both men and women. But Asher-Greve points out a number of artistic pieces, like a statue of the singer Urnanshe of Mari, where the usual sexual markers are combined on a single figure. In addition, we might note the companion of the en in early Uruk cylinder seals and on the Uruk Vase is of indeterminate gender. (What appears to be the interior of the temple on the Uruk Vase also presents figures of indeterminate gender.) [See Fig. 15: Persian Period from Eanna, date palm and kneeling figure.]

A particularly interesting piece was discovered in Uruk in the Inanna/Ishtar temple, Eanna. A stamp seal depicted a date palm laden with a heavy burden of dates. In front of the date palm, but facing away from it is a kneeling figure who, though nude, is not obviously male or female. He/she is facing what appears to be a gigantic serpent (or dragon), whose tail almost appears to be penetrating the kneeler.
The stamp seal was found in the context of Uruk in the Persian Period (6th century BCE), a few centuries later than the Gilgamesh texts found in the north at Nineveh. The motifs on the seal—date palm and especially the kneeling figure and the serpent—are frequently seen in the visual arts of Elam, to the east of Sumer. (Elam is the territory from which the Persians who conquered Babylon, as readers of the Bible know from accounts of the Babylonian Exile.) In Elamite art, too, gender ambiguities are found in enough examples that scholars debate whether certain figures can be identified as male or female. [See “Illustrations”: Fig 16: The “Jeweler’s Seal” from Susa]

The “Jeweler’s Seal” from Susa shows no fewer than four kneeling Mother Goddesses and a number of figures that are clearly female—but some others that may combine masculine and feminine features.²⁰⁷

We might add that Gilgamesh employs terminology about the body (zumru, shīru and the like) that could equally be applied to male or female. The beauty (dumqu) of the body, its form (binūtu), and its erotic energy (kuzbu) are equally features of males and females. They are used to describe Gilgamesh as well as the women in the service of Ishtar and Ishtar herself. And the words used for the interior of the body, karshu, for example, which can be “stomach” as well as “mind,” or the “heart” that can also work the way we think the brain works, are also genderless.

In short, we have to be careful in projecting the sexual and gender categories privileged in the West upon the literary and visual representations of gods and humans in ancient Mesopotamia.

The Search for “Life” and Renewal

Illness and death figure prominently in Gilgamesh. Literary works are notoriously ill designed, if you pardon the pun, to document medical practices, and one would be rash indeed to see Gilgamesh as in any way a medical text. Even in our own times, when authors take pains to present a realistic picture of life, we find curios like Theodore Dreiser’s short story, “Free,” in which a woman is given a transfusion of horses’ blood as a cure for a leaky heart valve!

In the most conspicuous case in Gilgamesh a character, Enkidu, sickens and dies, apparently because the gods decree it. No cure for his mysterious disease is suggested; none is possible. But in the sudden collapse that occurs just at the moment of the heroes’ moment of perfect “joy,” Enkidu is healed of the disorder into which he has been tossed.

And in the case of Gilgamesh himself, I would argue that what has been called melancholia in the long Western tradition is presented in the story and that he is healed, if not cured, by the time he returns to Uruk and takes up his responsibility as king and en of the city. Exhibiting this will show both the strength and weaknesses in our own tendency to split man into heterogeneous elements and principles, a split which makes it difficult to see man as a unified whole.
Distinctions we have grown comfortable with in the West, distinctions between physical, psychological, spiritual and moral states do not seem very clear in ancient Mesopotamian culture. This is nowhere as obvious as it is in Mesopotamian medicine. Although the study of Mesopotamian ideas of mental illness is only beginning, the medical texts that have survived form a bewildering complex of drug-lists, rituals, incantations, omen-books and mythological works. Medicine shades off into magic and magic into literature in ways that disturb us. Symbols and stories play a part in the healing process that would be the despair of modern, rational medicine. A few examples will make the point clear. Yet in the background stands the Joy/Woe Man to return us to holistic considerations that challenge modern distinctions of mind and body, physical and psychological ailments.

The term *melancholia* is Greek, for “black bile,” not Mesopotamian, and the term itself suggests a major contrast between Greco-Roman and Mesopotamian medical theory. Melancholia was one of the four “humors” in a theory that saw illness largely coming from within the body while Mesopotamia largely saw illness coming from the outside. Mesopotamian healers used pharmaceuticals while the Greeks mainly employed bloodletting and emetics. The long-held view in the West that Greco-Roman medicine was “rational” while Mesopotamian medicine remained dominated by the irrational (gods and demons) has been challenged recently.

One of the difficulties in dealing with Mesopotamian thinking on mental distress is that no case study has been discovered. Diagnosis and cures have to be inferred from the narratives and images used by their expert, the *ashipu*. Fortunately for us, the diagnosis of melancholia has once again been “resurrected” after its disappearance from the DSM-III, so the symptoms can once again be discussed in the medical community.

The Literary and Cultural Milieu of *Gilgamesh*

*Gilgamesh*, as we shall see, conserves ancient *Urukean* traditions, not just generally Sumerian traditions. Very early on, when Uruk was the First City with an exceptionally large population and an influence that spread beyond Mesopotamia itself, many aspects of the Urukean tradition became so widespread that it is often difficult to distinguish it from others. Now it is clear that the Sumerian city-states differed in important ways. Nippur, Lagash, Eridu and Uruk generated ideologies that persisted in some cases long after their political and economic influences declined. When *Gilgamesh* was composed, the famous city had lost its independence, and its rulers were increasingly remote from the city. This would continue even after *Gilgamesh*, when Seleucid overlordship allowed something of Greek culture to penetrate Uruk.

The Urukean tradition predates the others—at least according to the records—and predates the historical *Gilgamesh*. The two major sources of information about early Sumerian storytelling were invented in Uruk. Writing is, of course, the most important invention. The cylinder seal, which allowed complex images to be rolled out over clay, provides us with the most useful images, but the Uruk Vase and other sophisticated products of the visual arts remain important resources for studying the First City. Sadly, the late 4th millennium BCE that produced writing did not apply the invention to
storytelling. That use comes later, at a particularly important moment for the Gilgamesh tradition.

We see in the visual arts the elements of a “weak kingship” (the so-called “priest-king”) when the en of Uruk was selected by Inanna to be her “spouse” and the territory of the city-state was considered the property of the Great Goddess herself. Emblems of the goddess even travel with the en even into remote mountain regions where, among other activities, he “masters” the animals by protecting them and feeding them—and no doubt domesticating the animals in the process.

Very early on the Mother Goddess (or goddesses) of Uruk gave way to Inanna. There is no evidence in the four aspects under which Inanna was worshipped in the 4th millennium BCE that she was or ever aspired to be a mother. A later period will introduce a new element into the city, a palace and a goddess-mother of Gilgamesh, Ninsun. Elements of friction between the old order of the en and the new order of the lugal-king survive in the uneasy relationship between Inanna and Ninsun.

Inanna and Uruk are both featured in the literature modern scholars call the “sacred marriage” and the extensive love literature that deals mainly with Inanna and Dumuzi-Amaushumgalanna. The relationship between the en and the goddess is the prototype of intimate contact between male and female and human and divine. It hints at a different kind of marriage, “entrance marriage,” that may have existed in early Sumerian times and contrasted in many ways with what became—and still is—the dominant form of marriage in the Middle East.

Inanna is, in Mesopotamian myth, responsible for the creation of one of the most curious figures in Urukean society, the gala (Akkadian kalû). The gender of the gala is ambiguous. Usually he is described by modern scholars as a eunuch. His specialty is the chanting of lamentations in a dialect of Sumerian, eme-sal (literally, “female-tongue,” the speech of women). The lamentations in this Sumerian dialect were preserved for many centuries after Sumerian had ceased to exist as a living language. By the 1st millennium BCE the gala had become the scholar par excellence, master of Mesopotamia’s greatest compendium of astronomical lore. Mythologically the gala was formed by the god Enki in order, in one version, to permit Inanna, dead in the underworld, to be resurrected. In another story, the gala is formed to soothe the angry heart of Inanna. (Like other deities Inanna is frequently represented as being persistently angry.)

Gender diversity challenges the other model, the alpha male. There is still a tendency to think that human sexuality derives from primates who form families dominated by the powerful male. The primate with which we share the greatest amount of DNA, the bonobo, however, has a much different social and sexual life, one that allows much greater intimacy between male and female and directs the libidinal drive to male-male, female-female bonding as well as to sexual activity that has no particular aim in procreation. The love literature of Sumer may derive from the observation that animal sexuality—even among the primates that share much of the DNA of humans—is significantly different from human sexuality. Sumerians may not have known the bonobo, but the ideology of
gender that is represented in the religion of Inanna and her retinue is far closer to our closest primate cousins than of the wild bulls and wild cows that often appear in Mesopotamian art and literature.

Another conspicuous feature of the Inanna-Dumuzi love songs is the way its imagery derives from animal husbandry and agriculture, the twin bases of Uruk’s (and much of Sumer’s) prosperous economy. The temple owned large flocks of sheep and goats. While some of the meat was fed to the temple personnel (after first being offered to the gods), the main use of the animals in the temple herds was not food but to produce wool and hair. One may expect that the rivalry between males, which can lead to much conflict, would lead to the killing of young male animals (for food) so that only the primary male would remain. The earliest Uruk texts show, however, that the flocks included as many males and females. This was made possible by castrating the males, which made them not only docile but kept them alive to produce fine wool. The Uruk textile industry made use of wool, hair, and flax and apparently produced goods that were traded throughout the “Uruk World System,” as it has been called. (The practice of castrating young males, such as the gala, for ritual purposes might well have derived, as suggested above, from close observation of domesticated animals.) Not surprisingly, the beloved Dumuzi is most often represented as a shepherd. “Shepherd” (sipa) later became a royal title.

The most important agricultural implement that has been in use since it was invented in Uruk some five thousand years ago is the plowshare. Possibly the plow itself, which is represented in early art, was also invented there. Without metals and stones to be made into tools, Sumerians made clay tools like the hoe. (A lively literary debate between “The Hoe and the Plow” has survived.) The presence of Urukeans in places far to the north and west of Uruk was demonstrated by archaeologists who found clay sickles in areas where metal sickles were in use.

The development of the plow is thought to have had a greater impact on gender differences than any other invention of the ancient world. Uruk took advantage of the plow, which required teams of men and oxen, to plow long rows that could be watered by the elaborate system of river, canals and ditches. In The Second Sex (written before Assyriologists knew of the connection between Uruk and the plowshare), Simone de Beauvoir had written eloquently about the role of tools in the ancient world, for her a tragic loss of power in the lives of women.

Man learns his power. In the relation of his creative arm to the fabricated object he experiences causation: planted grain may or may not germinate, but metal always reacts in the same way to fire, to tempering, to mechanical treatment. This world of tools could be embraced within clear concepts: rational thought, logic, and mathematics could now appear. The whole concept of the universe is overthrown. The religion of woman was bound to the reign of agriculture, the reign of irreducible duration, of contingency, of chance, and of waiting, of mystery; the reign of Homo faber is the reign of time manageable as space, of necessary consequences, of the project, of action, of reason. Even when he has to do with the land, he will henceforth have to do with it as workman; he
discovers that the soil can be fertilized, that it is good to let it lie fallow, that such and such seeds must be treated in such and such a fashion. It is he who makes the crops grow; he digs canals, he irrigates or drains the land, he lays out roads, he build temples: he creates a new world.\textsuperscript{213}

Urukeans made the important decision to cultivate barley, though it was not the finest grain, because barley was resistant to the salts that, then as now, present problems for farming the land. The extraordinary yields of barley enabled the surpluses (stored in the temple) of Uruk to invest in other enterprises as well as providing the population with their staples, bread and beer. Barley rations constituted the first “money,” before silver and then gold came to be used for the purpose. The temple, which administered a good part of the Uruk economy, might best be considered a national bank. The cultivation of barley was so extensive that it largely crowded out flax, which required very different forms of labor, and increasingly took over marginal lands. It was probably the single most important cause of the great prosperity of the First City.

Why did this have an impact on gender differences? “The Hoe and the Plow” reflects the intrusion of the plow into the cultivation of crops by using the hoe, which could be used by men and women—and most likely was used extensively by women. The cultivation of flax, a complex process that required the use of many hands in the community, was useful not only in producing valuable linens but different fibers were used for other purposes as well. Women were clearly important in the cultivation of flax and, as with wool, with linen. As grain production became more important to the community, the muscles of the gurush--the young men who became the soldiers in a later time when the military increased in importance--and the animals domesticated for the purpose marginalized the labor of women.

Documents from the 1\textsuperscript{st} millennium BCE tell of agricultural processes that may well have been developed thousands of years earlier. In the Uruk region, a road was cut near the bank of the river or a canal. (The Sumerians invented the wheeled cart.) Along the road would be stands of date palms. Behind the date palms were the fields that were plowed, seeded and irrigated. The date palm was particularly important to Inanna/Ishtar, as we shall see, and the Eanna temple had date palms right along its border.

Date palm cultivation involved a careful and sophisticated use of male and female plants. As with the domestication of sheep and goats, Sumerians knew that a single male date palm, its pollen transferred to as many as one hundred female plants, was far more productive than leaving the process to nature. And then, as now, humans were essential to the process. Humans, mainly men, climbed the trees and transferred the pollen. It was yet another inventive connection between the human and the non-human world.

Uruk certainly created many of the conditions Simone de Beauvoir identified: the new world of \textit{Homo Faber}, which both fascinated and horrified de Beauvoir. Certainly Uruk initiated a process that, eventually, took Mesopotamia in the direction de Beauvoir observed. Her detailing of the use of \textit{metal} tools reminds us, though, that in the Sumerian floodplain where metal was scarce, \textit{clay} tools survived even when others had been using
metal. The kind of agriculture and animal husbandry developed in Uruk managed to maintain a partnership between male and female, masculine and feminine, in ways that were lost elsewhere in Mesopotamia. The happy coincidence of extraordinary invention in a city dominated, not by a “strong” king but an en that owed his position to Inanna, kept the pressures off Uruk at least until the time when figures like Gilgamesh appeared on the scene. Vestiges of this early Urukean culture persisted in the early Common Era.

Conflict, however, was always known. The rivalry between the Shepherd and the Farmer became an important point in the repertory of Sumerian love songs. We will see in certain key passages of Gilgamesh that the rivalry between male and male, the relationship between male and female, and the very distinctions between the primitive and the civilized life are raised in the passages. The shepherd remains a liminal figure, while the farmer/gardener is closely tied to the city itself. The conflict between Ishtar and Gilgamesh in Tablet 6, which I consider the thematic center of Gilgamesh, is particularly rich in this material.

Another conflict in Gilgamesh has its roots in a much earlier age. Gilgamesh is hailed as the greatest of kings. Kingship has now become such a transparent concept that it will take a good bit of analysis to show how Gilgamesh the king sits uneasily with Gilgamesh the en of Inanna.

In the earliest documents kings may have been the spokesmen for the able-bodied men who did much of the heavy physical labor of the community and were periodically pressed into service to defend the territory. As walls were built around cities, a sure sign of increased raiding by neighboring city-states, tribes, and groups outside Sumer itself, kings increasing gained strength in the communities until, after many centuries, the relative power of temples shifted to palaces. The historical Gilgamesh is thought to have reigned in Uruk during what archaeologists call the Early Dynastic Period of the 3rd millennium BCE. The largely secular kings brought with them profound changes in Mesopotamian society. “Dynastic” captures a good number of them. The term points to the principle of succession through the male line. A key document, The Sumerian King List, is organized by that principle. A lineage rules until armed conflict forces a change from one city to the next. Uruk remained prosperous, but periodically lost its dominance in the Early Dynastic Period, according to The Sumerian King List.

The center of a league of city-states shifted from Uruk to Nippur, the holy city where, apparently, assemblies of the city-states convened. Nippur itself appears not to have been militarily or economically dominant, but it was clearly the center of power. Not surprisingly, its main god, Enlil, was exalted as the King of the Gods.

Enlil’s consort, Ninlil, opens another window onto the changing social landscape. The Sumerian titles, En-lil and Nin-lil, suggest a relationship like the Urukean en and his female equivalent (either Inanna or her proxy). Enlil and Ninlil are frequently seen not only as husband and wife, but as parents of important deities, like the warrior Ninurta. The Enlil family looks quite a bit like the patrimonial family that will become the norm for Mesopotamia. A close examination of economic texts show that Ninlil was not the
equal of her powerful husband. Even when they constitute a “sacred marriage” the marriage is far different from the marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi.

The Akkadian pronunciation of the name Enlil suggests that the King of the Gods was a concept influenced by a different social order. As “Western” (primarily Amorite) peoples entered Mesopotamia from what is now Lebanon and Syria, the patrimonial concept of a strong kingship was clarified, intensified, and normalized. By the Old Babylonian Period of the early 2nd millennium BCE the elements of our own idealized view of kingship was well established in the Middle East.

The evolution of kingship had other consequences. *Gilgamesh* is, of course, a written text, and Gilgamesh is imagined there as a writer himself. While we have no evidence that the historical Gilgamesh was literate—one a few kings over the millennia boast of the ability to read or write—kingship inspired much of the literature that has survived from the 3rd millennium on. The earliest writing of individual names seems to have been prompted by the idea that writing the name (in a way that could be pronounced) would actually provide the king with a kind of immortality. We will see how this idea is important to the Gilgamesh tradition.

Women were not excluded from this early preservation of names. Kingship emerged as a strong force in the neighborhood of Uruk, at Ur, and among the earliest written names at Ur we find the woman, Pu-abi, whose grave goods indicates a very high status. Besides her name excavators found the kind of jewelry valued by Inanna, as we see in the love poetry. Among the gold are beautiful representations of a palm branch laden with dates. The earliest authors known to us are women, most notably Enheduanna, who was selected as the en of the Moon God Nanna in Ur. It may be that the nin, who at Ur becomes the consort of the king, gradually loses power over time, but the en-priestesses of Ur maintained their high status until at least the early part of the 2nd millennium BCE.

Different categories of women who served the temple, like the nadiitu, also maintained their elite status in the society until their importance was diminished. The professionalization of high status occupations like scribes reduced, if not eliminated, the ranks of women in many professions by the time *Gilgamesh* was written. But *Gilgamesh* retains the earlier high status of women in the time when Uruk was still a dominant city-state in Sumer.

Since we do not have literary documents as such from the earliest period of writing, the Early Dynastic Period some centuries later is yielding the first evidence of literature. Royal inscriptions from the period (known by textual scholars as the Presargonic Period) praise kings and constitute for several thousand years the key evidence historians use to reconstruct Mesopotamian history.

For the study of the Gilgamesh tradition the Early Dynastic (or Presargonic) Period has recently provided the earliest documents related to the hero, “The Birth of Gilgamesh” and “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh.” These brief literary pieces give us a
glimpse into the transition from an older age to the age of kings, especially in the mythology of heroism.

From that period on the Gilgamesh legend can be traced, often in great detail.

Much of our knowledge of Mesopotamian literature—both Sumerian and Akkadian—is known from texts composed or copied in the Old Babylonian Period. Probably the one Mesopotamian king known to people today is Hammurabi. Ironically the First Dynasty of Babylon, an upstart city, was responsible for ending the idea of “deified” kings and for ending the independence of Uruk. Uruk’s strong tendency to hold onto very ancient customs and traditions was no doubt reinforced by the loss of its political autonomy. Uruk was largely abandoned for several centuries, but returned and prospered until the early Christian era. It remained in the shadow, though, of Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian and Greek hegemony.

The term “Babylonian” in what is usually called The Standard Babylonian Epic ofGilgamesh presents no difficulty for Assyriologists, but it can throw off nonspecialists. “Standard Babylonian” refers to the dialect that became the standard written language of Mesopotamia for centuries, the way “Standard Written English,” the English dialect spoken in the triangle formed by London and the great English universities, Oxford and Cambridge, reflected the growing political and economic importance of that region. Gilgamesh was in no way a “Babylonian” king. The historical figure lived many centuries before Babylon emerged as the center of an empire. But key texts related to Gilgamesh have survived from the Old Babylonian Period.

In any event it would be a mistake to casually project Babylonian cultural values onto Gilgamesh. Babylon was primarily a Semitic culture, though, and one development in the Semitic tradition is very clearly reflected in Gilgamesh: the increasing importance of the Sun God.

The Sumerian Sun God, Utu, whose “house” was in the neighborhood of Uruk, at Larsa, was always one of the high gods of Sumer, but he had nothing of the exalted status in other societies—including Babylonian culture. His exaltation in Mesopotamia was tied to the sacred city of Sippar, far to the north, which gave a kind of political cover to the new power, Babylon. As judge and as a protector of travelers in the wilderness the Sun God entered the Gilgamesh tradition at an early date. Literary analysis shows that the kind of “wisdom” exhibited by the Sun God informs much of Gilgamesh, though it is eclipsed in the second half of the story by a different kind of wisdom, that of the “crafty” god, Enki.

Detailing the architectonics of Gilgamesh is the main purpose of this study of the literary masterwork. The tensions developed in a story that combines both Sumerian and Semitic traditions are introduced in the prologues, which introduce major themes and leitmotifs that carry through the poem. The themes and motifs converge in the central episode, where Ishtar invites Gilgamesh to become her en and where Gilgamesh and Enkidu end up fighting The Bull of Heaven. If, as I suggest, the tensions are resolved in the work
depends on a reading of *Gilgamesh* as a brilliantly crafted unity of very diverse materials. Identifying very early Urukean materials is key to the interpretation offered here.

The First Prologue, rather like the so-called Priestly opening of Genesis, is juxtaposed to a Second Prologue, and like the biblical accounts of Creation, the First Prologue presents a later, rather different view of Gilgamesh than does the Second Prologue that follows it in the text.

The First Prologue and the early episodes that follow it emphasize the setting of the story, the city of Uruk and its walls, which divide the civilized world from everything outside it. This sets up the marginal, liminal figures who appear in different episodes. The hunter-stalker who sees Enkidu in his wild state and the avatars of Ishtar who are able to function in the border regions, like Siduri in her beer-hall are but two examples. The extent to which *Gilgamesh* pursues the distinction between civilized and “primitive” societies reflects the early importance of the First City.

At the exact center of Uruk, according to the First Prologue, is the goddess Ishtar. In the first reference to the goddess we are already drawn to the theme of intimacy that, as I read the poem, is the heart of the complicated story.

Whether the tensions developed in *Gilgamesh* are resolved, whether the heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu suffer from a recognizable condition, whether they are healed, whether Enkidu becomes the substitute for Gilgamesh—indeed, if the work as a whole should be considered an “epic” poem—these are the questions that are raised already in very beginning of a story about a hero, a goddess and the city they shared.

### Notes to the Preface

1. Amiet, #642, after L. Delaporte (1923), keyed to Delaporte (1910). A large sampling of these images can be seen in Pierre Amiet, *La Glyptique Mésopotamienne Archaique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1980), e.g., Pls. 13 bis A, 43 #637-B, 44 #639, 640, 643, and 48 bis B.


For the text, see Marc J. H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice* (Leiden: Brill/Styx, 2004), 238-44. Linssen is careful to note the problem with finding the énu in Hellenistic times and the problems reading the key line; for his comments on the officials and the king, see 16-19. The figures who are especially connected with Inanna/Ishtar, notably the assinnu, kurgarrû and urmahullû, are rarely to be found (in documents that largely deal with the cult of Anu), but they do appear in some rituals.

Note that among the forty-two Temple Hymns attributed to the poet Enheduanna in the 3rd millennium BCE, no temple to An is mentioned.

Genesis 4:17. See E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964). 34. Since Uruk was sometimes called Unug, perhaps there is a recollection of the name in “Enoch.”

For Enki’s Eridu as the prototype of Babylon, see the “Creation Epic” *Enuma Elish* Tablet 1, where Nudimmud (Enki) establishes the place where the Babylonian high god Marduk is born, and Tablet 5, where Marduk in turn establishes Babylon itself, the center of religion. See Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: University Press, 1989), 235, 259. Eridu is the first city in one of the traditions found in *The Sumerian King List*.


Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 208. They note that primitive epics often begin with the birth of the hero and sometimes end with the death of the hero. For the displacement of these narrative elements in *Gilgamesh*, see below.
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24 Lyotard, xxxi.

25 Lyotard, xxxi-xxxi.

26 Lyotard, 17.


28 Readings, 19.

29 Readings, 20.

30 Readings, 25.

31 Readings, 29.

32 Readings, 32.

33 Readings, 36.


See The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD) 12.496-501 for examples under pūhu, the Akkadian equivalent of sag (or ni-sag). The Substitute King is a shar pūhi.


There is some question about the god who urged the heroes to defeat Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven. For Andrew George, Enlil is the god responsible, but Gary Beckman thinks the Hittite version identifies the Sun God Shamash himself as the one, and Enkidu is therefore innocent of the charge.


The translations of the Temple Hymns are based on the transliterations and translations of Oxford’s The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, Hymns 4.80.1&Display. For a full introduction and elegant translations of the Temple Hymns, see Meador, Princess, Poet.

See also Meador, Princess, Priestess, Poet, 117-18.


This is our argument in Samuel Noah Kramer and John Maier, Myths of Enki, The Crafty God.

See also Meador, Princess, Priestess, Poet, 31-40. For a discussion of Temple Hymn #1, see Maier, “The ‘Truth’ of a Most Ancient Work: Interpreting a Poem Addressed to a Holy Place,” Centrum, n.s. 2 (1982), 27-44.

The Literature of Ancient Sumer, 302-303.

Kramer and Maier, Myths of Enki, The Crafty God, 57-68; The Electronic Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL) at etesl.orinst.ox.ac.uk c.1.3.1, t.1.3.1.

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56 The Literature of Ancient Sumer, 298-304; for Enlil literature, see 100-26.


58 See also Meador, Princess, Priestess, Poet, 43-44.


60 See the cylinder seal impressions depicting Shamash in a variety of roles, in Rainer Michael Boehmer, Die Entwicklung der Glyptik während der Akkad-Zeit (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1965), Figs 392-438, 440-61, 466, 473-75, 481, 486-90.


62 See also Meador, Princess, Priestess, Poet, 219.

63 See also Meador, Princess, Priestess, Poet, 102-108.

64 Transliteration (c.4.32.2) and translation (t.4.32.2) in The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature.


66 The playful character of the youthful Sun God is reinforced in two pieces identified as shir-namshubs, incantations of a certain type; see The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature t.4.32.e and f.

67 Transliteration of Temple Hymn #38 based on The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature.

68 The Literature of Ancient Sumer, 362, 371.

69 Translation based on the transliteration in The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature.

70 Translation based on the transliteration in The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature.


72 Enheduanna was the en of Ur, and the temple of Nanna/Sîn (or Suen) is praised in the Temple Hymns. The name of the author to whom Gilgamesh was attributed, Sin-leqi-unninni, begins with the
divine name, but Sin, the Moon God, appears only eight times in *Gilgamesh*, in decidedly minor roles in Tablets 9-12.

73 “The Lament for Sumer and Urim,” The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature t.2.2.3.

74 Cunningham, 8.

75 Cunningham, 61-62, 93-94.


77 CAD 7.95.

78 CAD 7.270-71.

79 Simo Parpola, who identifies the Lady of the Gods with Ishtar as a Mother Goddess, points out that the name Bēlet ilī is written out only once in *Gilgamesh* 1:117, elsewhere as MAH (1:49, 11:163), just as Ishtar is written in three different ways and her avatars like Ishhara and Irnina also appear in the work, *The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 146-47.

80 In addition to the many articles in books and in journals, the journal *NiN, Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity*, has devoted whole issues to Inanna-Ishtar, e.g., 1 (2000), with articles by Julia M. Asher-Greve, Tzvi Abusch, Gebhard J. Selz, Krystyna Szarzynska, Joan G. Westenholz, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, and Zainab Bahrani. Articles by Rivkah Harris, especially “Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic,” which appeared in Tzvi Abusch, et al., ed. *Lingering Over Words* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 219-30, has been widely reprinted.

81 For the development of these complexities, see Gebhard J. Selz, “Five Divine Ladies: Thoughts on Inana(k), Ištar, In(n)in(a), Annunītum, and Anat, and the Origin of the Title “Queen of Heaven,” *NiN* 1 (2000): 29-61, esp. 32-33 and 48 (where he differs from Simo Parpola in this respect).

82 Benjamin L. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 1.78-88; see also Kramer and Maier, 134-36.


84 Parpola, Assyrian Prophecies, xxvi.


Inside America, 69-70,

Louis Harris, 69-70.


*Early Mesopotamia*, 26. The Sumerian Temple Hymns collection celebrates temples in thirty-five different cities in Mesopotamia from south to north and maintains the ideology and individuality of the equal-ranking city states, according to Postgate, 26. Perhaps related to the intense concentration of temples and city-states in the south, the “central role of the temple seems to diminish” as one moves north and west, 140.

Gilbert J. P. McEwan, *Priest and Temple in Hellenistic Babylonia* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1981), 63, provides a convenient list that shows Babylon and Uruk agreeing on 15 titles, but differing on twice as many offices.


In *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu is frequently called the *ibru* of Gilgamesh, a prominent Akkadian equivalent of Sumerian *kuli*. The term *ibru* is used after the Old Babylonian period only in literary texts, where it is often paired with *tappû*. The CAD cautions that *kuli* means “comrade-in-arms” and “social equal,” that is,
“an institutionalized relationship between free persons of the same status or profession,” with implications of following a code of behavior and providing support. Since the term *ibru* was “originally devoid of emotional connotation,” it should not be translated “friend.” Rather, *tappû*, which appears only five times in *Gilgamesh* (and *tappûtu*, “friendship,” or “partnership,” only once, the relationship of Gilgamesh to Enlil in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” may not have the emotional connotation of intimacy (unlike his relationship with Inanna), but may imply equality with the warrior Enlil. See CAD 7.5-7 and 18.184-93. The context in *Gilgamesh* would, however, suggest a close personal relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.


102 This is, I think, the point of Jacobsen’s mapping a “heros” element in *Gilgamesh* in “And Death the Journey’s End.”


105 Niek Veldhius, “The Solution of the Dream: A New Interpretation of Bilgames’ Death,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 53 (2001), 142. Veldhius differs from other scholars, who consider that the “king’s dog” is the one who solves the key problem in the dream, by reading the name of Gilgamesh’s son, Ur-lugal-la, and claiming that the son, not the dog, solves the problem by building a monumental tomb that will keep the name of Gilgamesh alive after his death, 138-40.


111 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 310.


113 Auerbach, 475.

114 Auerbach, 483.


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118 martin joos, the five clocks: a linguistic excursion into the five styles of english usage (new york: harcourt brace jovanovich, 1967 [1961]), 11, 29-32.

119 joos, 29-32.

120 edward t. hall, beyond culture (garden city, new york: anchor/doubleday, 1977 [1976]), 98, 190, 203-205.


123 “an account of the trial,” 289-90.

124 “an account of the trial,” 289.

125 rivkah harris, gender and aging in mesopotamia: the gilgamesh epic and other ancient literature (norman, ok: university of oklahoma press, 2000), esp. chapter one, “the life course,” and chapters five-seven.


127 j. david schloen, the house of the father as fact and symbol: patrimonialism in utgarit and the ancient near east (winona lake, in: eisenbrauns, 2001), esp. chapter twelve: “patrimonial society in the bronze age near east,” 255-316.

128 harris, gender and aging in mesopotamia, xi.

129 tikva frymer-kensky, in the wake of the goddesses: women, culture and the biblical transformation of pagan myth (new york: fawcett columbine, 1992), esp. chapter seven: “the marginalization of the goddesses,” 70-82.

130 alison gopnik, andrew n. meltzoff, and patricia k. kuhl, the scientist in the crib: minds, brains, and how children learn (new york: william morrow, 1999), 38-39.

131 the scientist in the crib, 39.

132 helen fisher, anatomy of love (new york: norton, 1992), 255-56.

Lerner, 50-51.

Lerner, 52.


In a paper given at the meeting of the American Oriental Society, Middle West Branch, in Madison, WI (1976).


Note the many special qualities of hi-li in Yitschak Sefati, Love Songs in Sumerian Literature, 403-404. For Dumuzi/Tammuz, see 38-43.


Denise Schmandt-Besserat, How Writing Shaped Art, that the ground line is visible in pottery painting even earlier than writing, e.g., on a vase decorated with a chariot scene from the first half of the 3rd millennium BCE. The ground lines are important, Schmandt-Besserat claims, “because they signify that the connected figures shared the same space at the same time, participating in one specific event,” 24.

For parallels between the composition of the Uruk Vase and early “Impressed” tablets, see Schmandt-Besserat, 42-46.


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Eisler, 172-73.

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Maturana and Varela, 173.

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Maturana and Varela, 175.

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Cooper, “Enki’s Member, 88.

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Cooper, “Enki’s Member,” 89.

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See Kramer and Maier, ch. 4.

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For the Sumerian texts, see Farber-Flügge, 16.
171 Cooper, “Enki’s Member,” 88.

172 Cooper, “Enki’s Member,” 89.


176 After Biggs, ŠÀ.ZI.GA, 44 (#25).


178 CAD 16: 66.


181 A. Leo Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization.


183 Assante, 27.

184 Assante, 27.

185 Assante, 33.


188 This is the thesis, developed later, of a challenge to an early form of “entrance” marriage with the emergence of the bēlu marriage as the only acceptable form. In Uruk vestiges of the old ways are kept up at least until Hellenistic times, when the “rites of Anu” become at least as important as the rites of Inanna.

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190 Pittman, “Towards an Understanding,” “Discussion.”

191 Pittman, “Towards an Understanding,” “Discussion.”


193 See Pittman, “Towards an Understanding,” 183, and Amiet, #643.


196 Beatrice Laura Goff, *Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), #271. The motif appears frequently in Archaic Ur, e.g., Legrain, #247-57, though it is not clear from those images that the endangered animal is in the process of giving birth.


198 Goff, 65.

199 Goff, 66.

200 A similar construction is found in the earlier story, *Enuma Elish* (VI.6 ff.), and in *Atrahasis*, according to the CAD 9.242.


202 Asher-Greve, 30. She attributes this observation to Amélie Kuhrt.

203 The first in Tablet 1, line 234; the second in Tablet 9, line 51, using the line count of Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh, A New Translation*, which will be used throughout unless otherwise indicated. While scholars will consult George’s edition of *Gilgamesh*, most nonspecialists will use translations such as those by George, Foster, and Dalley.

204 Asher-Greve, 29.

205 Asher-Greve, 15.

206 Finkbinder, Vol. 2 [complete citation for 6th c Uruk seal of date palm, serpent and kneeling figure.]


209 See, for example, the pharmacopoeia from the late 3rd millennium BCE, which lists remedies made from milk, snake-skin, tortoiseshell, salt, saltpeter and from a large number of plants and trees. The text is discussed by Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, 3rd ed., 100-104. See also “Introduction” to *Médecine et médecins au Proche-Orient ancien*, xv-xvii.


Tips for a First Reading of *Gilgamesh*