Prologue(s) and Epilogue(s): Tablets 1, 11 and 12

Early and Late Versions

The collection of stories we call *Gilgamesh* developed over time—a great deal of time, in fact. The copies that are used to reconstruct the ancient text are mainly from the royal libraries of Assyrian kings in the 1st millennium BCE (that is, Before the Common Era, or BC). The “standard” edition of the stories, though, are thought to be earlier than that, from about 1200-1000 BCE, some five hundred years before the Assyrians gathered them into their libraries. By then the collection was considered the work of a famous author from the city of Uruk, one Šin-leqi-unninnī (or Šin-liqe-uninni). Parts of *Gilgamesh* go back to much earlier poems in both the Akkadian and Sumerian languages.

The language of *Gilgamesh* is a Semitic language known as Akkadian. (The term derives from the earliest texts in the language yet discovered, the language used in the “Akkadian” period in the 3rd millennium BCE when Akkad, or Agade, was the capitol of the empire founded by Sargon the Great.)

The historical Gilgamesh is even earlier than that. He was thought to have been king of the Sumerian city-state of Uruk, in what is now southern Iraq. Uruk has been called the First City, since so many features of “civilized” life are first seen there even earlier than Gilgamesh. The earliest texts of “true” writing, which developed beyond pictographs (or picture writing) to capture the words of a language (Sumerian) have been found in Uruk.

When we refer to “early” and “late” versions of the Gilgamesh stories we are distinguishing between the Sumerian and Akkadian versions from the earliest written texts through the Old Babylonian period from about 1800-1600 BCE, the “early” texts, and Middle Babylonian through Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, Persian, Greek (Hellenistic) and Parthian periods. The latest Gilgamesh texts are dated from 200-100 BCE.

What we call the *Gilgamesh* collection—often referred to as the “Epic of Gilgamesh”—is “late,” much later than the historical Gilgamesh and the incredible prosperity of the First City.

The distinction between “early” and “late” versions becomes important as soon as *Gilgamesh* opens. The 1st Tablet opens with a formal prologue (lines 1-28) that was added centuries after the earlier, Old Babylonian, collection. The earlier prologue (lines 29-60) has a different emphasis than the later one, which fronts it. To make things even more interesting, the later prologue is reflected in identical lines that conclude the 11th Tablet.

This is a formal framing device that clearly indicates the beginning and ending of something.

What that “something” is is the matter of considerable debate. From an aesthetic standpoint it would appear that *Gilgamesh* concludes with the 11th Tablet. On the other hand, considerable textual evidence points to a 12th Tablet. The 12th Tablet is certainly an anomaly. For one thing it breaks the chronological sequence of events that marks the episodes of the first eleven tablets. Each episode leads to the next one in time. In the first
eleven tablets, Gilgamesh’s great friend, Enkidu, dies. The 12th Tablet narrates the death of Enkidu in a very different way.

Without solving the aesthetic problems, we suggest that the framing device that binds Tablets 1 through 11 is one Prologue-Epilogue, while the 12th Tablet is another epilogue. The implications of this unusual structure will be taken up later.

Tablet 12 is the most controversial addition to the series, *Gilgamesh*. There is considerable evidence that, at some point in the development of a standard text, *Gilgamesh* consisted of twelve tablets. Five different texts (A, B, C, D, and e) contain Tablet 12, and others mention a twelfth tablet in the colophons to Tablet 11.

Nevertheless, many scholars consider Tablet 12 an unnecessary, late addition to the series of tales, and drop it entirely from their translations (notably the translations by Benjamin R. Foster and Andrew George). They do acknowledge that Tablet 12 is a translation of a Sumerian poem and include the Sumerian poem in their editions.

Their objection to Tablet 12 is largely aesthetic. First, Tablets 1-12 seem to be complete, as Gilgamesh returns to Uruk and the poet repeats lines from Tablet 1 exactly at the end of Tablet 11. Second, and more importantly, Enkidu’s death was presumably narrated in Tablet 7. The final thirty lines or so have still not been recovered, but they no doubt told of Enkidu’s death, since Tablet 8 opens with Gilgamesh mourning the death of his friend. Tablet 12 tells a very different tale of Enkidu’s death. There he enters the underworld in order to recover two lost items and is literally trapped in the world of the dead.

The death of Gilgamesh himself is not told in *Gilgamesh*. There is, however, a Sumerian “The Death of Gilgamesh” story in which the gods reveal that when Gilgamesh dies and descends into the world of the dead he will be met there by gods, priests, family members and famous people who had died before him. Enkidu is one of those who will greet him. “The Death of Gilgamesh” explicitly urges Gilgamesh not to lament his fate, since he will become in the underworld one of the lesser gods, the governor and a judge like the famous “dying god” Dumuzi or Tammuz, who is mentioned in *Gilgamesh* Tablet 6. This quite positive picture of the underworld sharply contrasts with that in Tablet 12.

The Sumerian story that provided the original text for Tablet 12 gives a rather different view of the world of the dead. While all humans end up there, those who leave behind a good number of relatives (mainly sons) to relieve their condition in an otherwise bleak landscape fare better than the ones who leave few, or none, behind. For the most part there is suffering in the underworld. There is no obvious correlation between a virtuous or a wicked life on earth, such as developed in the Christian tradition of a Hell, where the wicked are punished. Even Gilgamesh’s mother and father drink “filthy water” in a place of terrible carnage where both Sumerians and Akkadians died.

The Sumerian “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld” (variously translated as “Bilgames and the Netherworld” and “Gilgamesh and the Netherworld) has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Tablet 12, on the other hand, translates only the part that details the underworld and ends, suddenly, with one of the most discouraging images: the
fate of one who has no one to mourn for him: he eats “scraping from the pot” and bread crusts thrown away in the street.

While it appears to many scholars that Tablet 12 is an “inorganic appendage” to an otherwise aesthetic whole, complete in eleven tablets, others have defended its link to the stories preceding it.

**Episodes: What Happens in the Prologue(s) and Epilogue(s)**

**Tablet 1, Lines 1-28**

As a formal opening of *Gilgamesh*, the prologue focuses on important themes rather than summarizing the actions of Gilgamesh. The dominant theme is **wisdom**. The wisdom attributed to Gilgamesh has been hard earned. In a most arduous journey in which Gilgamesh opened passages and found out secrets, he wore himself out with grief and pain. He “saw it all,” as the first line suggests.

Significantly, when the traveler returned, he literally cut his experiences into stone. Uruk boasted of the achievement that would transform humanity: the invention of **writing**. So it is important that Uruk’s most famous king should translate his experiences into writing. By far most cuneiform (or “wedge-shaped”) writing was inscribed on **clay**. That Gilgamesh would write his experiences on stone—in a later line, a very precious **stone**, lapis lazuli—reflects both his high status and the status of writing itself.

The city to which Gilgamesh returns is seen from the outside in, inviting the reader to imagine it as the traveler encountered it. While Uruk had lost its political autonomy early in the 2nd millennium BCE and the powers that dominated it were increasingly removed from the city—Babylon, Assyria, Persia, and the Greeks after Alexander the Great—it continued to prosper. The population of Uruk, at one time in its early history surpassing 100,000 (that is, ten times the size of most important cities in the ancient world), certainly diminished, but the economic foundations laid down early managed to keep it alive after it had lost the **kingship** exercised early by Gilgamesh.

The most conspicuous contribution of king Gilgamesh is the construction of the city wall, which in the time of the historical Gilgamesh extended some six miles around the city. The walls around Uruk and around other cities of the Early Dynastic period (3rd millennium BCE) certainly served a military purpose. The rise of kingship in this period is clearly related to increased and increasingly organized military activity. The poetic description of Uruk’s wall here, on the other hand, completely ignores the military function and emphasizes rather its incredible **beauty**. From the facing of the upper wall, which gleams like copper, to the lower wall and the stone stairway, the walls is a dazzling construction. (Of all the Gilgamesh stories discovered so far, only one deals explicitly with a military exploit. In it, a rival city tries to take Uruk, but its force is overwhelmed when Gilgamesh appears atop the city wall.)

The interior of the city is even more impressive (and ancient), as the poet sees it. At the center is the **temple** complex, Eanna, the **dwelling-place of Ishtar**. Its base, a terrace
that required millions of bricks, is itself monumental. The poet imagines that the core itself was made up of oven-fired bricks. Uruk had little native stone, and its grand public buildings as well as its homes were built of brick. But since fuel was always in short supply, it would have been remarkable indeed if the core of the structure was made of fired bricks rather than sun-dried bricks. The design is credited to the Seven Sages themselves.

From the high **terrace**, which served a very practical purpose in a city located on a floodplain, and Ishtar’s temple at the very center of the city, one could see with the poet that Uruk appeared to be divided into **four parts**: a square mile of city, a square mile of gardens (probably groves of date palms), and a square mile of clay pits. The Eanna temple complex is said to cover half a square mile.

The magnificent brickwork of Uruk leads then to a very special small box at the foundation of, presumably, Eanna itself. The foundation deposit is a box made of copper (or, in another translation, cedar, another precious commodity); its ring-bolt clasp is made of bronze; and the secret hidden inside is the very account of Gilgamesh’s painful wisdom, inscribed on lapis lazuli).

In this late prologue, then, Gilgamesh is celebrated as king, but his kingly achievements are not so much military as they are the even more ancient duties of Uruk’s lords. Sumerian rulers are often depicted as what might be called the First Worker, carrying bricks to the gods and goddesses of the cities—in other words, recognizing their duty to the deity and the need to construct public buildings. The brickwork celebrated in this opening passage ties together the creative work not only in the buildings themselves but in the orderly arrangement of the city itself. Bricks, like stone, serve yet another purpose, in providing the medium for writing itself. Although not all Sumerian and Akkadian kings boast of their ability to read and write, the Urukean rulers do on occasion recognize the importance of their city as the inventor of writing.

The poet envisions an opening of the foundation deposit to find the precious tablet that contains Gilgamesh’s own account of his experiences.

**Tablet 1, Lines 29-62: The Earlier Prologue**

The second introduction to Gilgamesh emphasizes what the West came to value as “heroic” qualities: power, courage, and leadership in battle. He is physically strong and strikingly beautiful, befitting a human (“1/3rd human”) who is the son of the goddess Ninsun and another legendary hero, Lugalbanda. In addition to these influences, he was formed by the Mother Goddess, who provides the “image of his body,” while the crafty god Ea has perfected his figure. (Female and male creator gods are required, just as female and male parents. The creator gods usually provide features related to the gender of the gods: females providing something like Aristotle’s “matter” and males providing “form.”)

The second introduction also summarizes achievements that go back to the earliest Sumerian poetry. Gilgamesh is credited with opening passages in the wilderness,
especially in the dangerous mountains. He digs wells and crosses the ocean to the farthest reaches of the earth, always searching for “life” (balātu), a key word, since it could mean anything from “life,” “long life,” to “eternal life.” The passage is noteworthy in specifying that Gilgamesh will seek out Utnapishtim, since earlier versions of the story do not make the sage the object of Gilgamesh’s quest.

The poet emphasizes two achievements that characterize the ideal Mesopotamian king: he restored holy places destroyed by the Flood, and he established religious rites for the people. Restoring temples and establishing rites that had been lost or ignored continued to be important duties of kings even long after the palace had gained power at the expense of the temples in Mesopotamia. The lines follow Gilgamesh’s encounter with Utnapishtim and so may praise the king for his activities after he had returned to Uruk.

Gilgamesh can surely boast that he is the king par excellence. His fate was established by his birth. Physically perfect, he approximates the perfection of primal living creatures formed by the male and female creator gods.

There is a short break in the text, followed by fragmentary lines that appear to specify the great size and beauty of Gilgamesh: a great stride, beard, locks of hair—perfection.

After such an extended portrait of the ideal king, the poet turns immediately to narrative, to a story that ironically highlights the way Gilgamesh oppresses his people. The storyline begins, then, with very violation of kingly rule that leads to the first crisis in *Gilgamesh*.

The prologues will be treated in greater detail in Chapter One.

**Tablet 11, Lines 318-27**

Tablet 11 is a long and complex narrative. It concludes the quest of Gilgamesh begun in Tablet 9. The complexity of the narrative, which includes a retelling of the Flood story familiar to the West from the Bible, will be taken up later. We are interested at this point in the final nine lines of Tablet 11, which many take as the ending of *Gilgamesh* itself.

What makes the final lines of Tablet 11 important is the way they repeat the “later” prologue in Tablet 1. In Tablet 1 the poet invites the reader to consider the magnificent wall around Uruk and view the divisions of the city from the perspective of the high wall. The language in Tablet 11 is identical with lines 18-23 of Tablet 1, with one difference: here it is Gilgamesh himself inviting the boatman who has taken him to visit the sage, Utnapishtim, and has returned the hero to his city. Once again the city is identified by the formula Uruk-of-the-Sheepfold.

Readers will have to interpret for themselves the success or failure of Gilgamesh’s search for “life.” That requires a careful reading of Tablet 11 in its entirety. But the narrative of Tablet 11 ends without a comment by the author—just a symbolic return to the prologue. As in the prologue, the two items that are repeated are, first, what was considered by tradition the great achievement of Gilgamesh, the walls of the city, and second, the city itself, centered on the famous and ancient temple of Ishtar.
Tablet 11 will be treated in greater detail in Chapter Eight.

**Tablet 12**

Tablet 12 remains the most controversial part of *Gilgamesh*. While it is clear from the colophons—the indications at the end of one tablet of the first line of the next tablet and, at the end of a text, often comments that the series is complete at that point and sometimes precise dating of the copy and indications of the scribe who produced it—that the “standard” text of the *Gilgamesh* was complete in twelve tablets, Tablet 12 is so different from the preceding narrative that many find it unacceptable. The editor of the definitive scholarly edition of *Gilgamesh*, Andrew George, for example, removes Tablet 12 entirely and provides the reader instead with the Sumerian original upon which the Akkadian tablet is based.

What is most striking about Tablet 12 is that it narrates the death of Enkidu in a far different way than was told in Tablet 7. In both cases the death is unusual. In Tablet 7 Enkidu dies as a result of a decision by the gods: one of the heroes must die, and Enkidu is selected while Gilgamesh is spared. This means that, while all humans are by definition mortal, Enkidu is not killed in the usual way young persons die, either through disease or in combat.

In Tablet 12 Enkidu is seized by “fate” when he enters the dreaded underworld and is unable to return to earth. Gilgamesh, at this point having gained a sure grasp of the secrets of the underworld, gives detailed instructions to Enkidu so that his friend will be able to return. Enkidu ignores every instruction and as a consequence is seized by the underworld.

The reason for Enkidu’s journey into the underworld is still in question. He embarks on the journey in order to retrieve the mekkû and pukku, two items that have fallen into the underworld. What these items are has been debated for many years, and no consensus has yet been reached about their nature. In Tablet 1, lines 65 and 82, a *pukku* is used in some way to oppress the young men of the city. (There is no mention of a *mekkû* in that context.)

Much of Tablet 12 indicates different fortunes for the people in the underworld depending upon the circumstances of their deaths and the number of persons they left behind.

Tablet 12 will be considered in greater detail in Chapter Nine.

**Key Words**

Key words in *Gilgamesh*, mainly names that are unfamiliar to most readers, but also concepts that derive from a very different culture from our own, are identified as they appear in the text.

A few names are so important to the story that mentioned here:
Humans

Gilgamesh, the hero, though “2/3rds” god, the son of a goddess, is nevertheless mortal.

Enkidu, created as a rival to Gilgamesh, becomes his great friend.

High Gods

Among the many deities mentioned in *Gilgamesh* (only a tiny few of the more than a thousand gods known in Mesopotamia), watch for four in particular.

Ishtar, whose Sumerian name is *Inanna*, was one of the greatest gods in ancient Mesopotamia from at least the 4th millennium BCE (Before the Common Era). Ishtar is goddess of love and sex—but also a goddess of war.

Shamash, the Sun God, is a dominant figure throughout the first half of the story. Although he has an equivalent among the Sumerian gods (*Utu*), his rose in importance in the 2nd millennium BCE, possibly owing to his traditional importance for the Semitic people who entered Mesopotamia from the west.

Ea, god of the watery abyss, is known for a certain kind of cunning wisdom, a trickster, a problem-solver among the gods and a creator god. He continued to be known by his Sumerian identity, *Enki*, and by a number of epithets and titles.

Enlil, or Illil, the god of the air, King of the Gods, came to be viewed as the most powerful of the gods during the 3rd millennium BCE as his city, Nippur, came to dominate much of the Sumerian cities in what is now southern Iraq.

For more on the great gods of *Gilgamesh*, see Chapter One.

Key Words in the 1st, 11th, and 12th Tablets

Tablet 1, Lines 1-28: The Later Prologue

The One Who Saw the Depths = Gilgamesh

In the first (“later”) prologue, that is, the first twenty-eight lines of the poem, the “one who saw the Depths” is the hero, *Gilgamesh* himself. The poem opens by anticipating the end of Tablet 11, when the hero returned to his city at the end of his quest for “life.”

The Land = The City-State of Uruk

For one thing Gilgamesh returns to his city, Uruk. The city is identified by name and by its most prominent fixture, that temple complex known as Eanna.

Eanna = The Temple of the Great Goddess Inanna or Ishtar

Significantly Uruk is called “the Sheepfold,” where earlier versions of the stories had identified it differently. At the heart of Uruk-of-the-Sheepfold is Eanna, identified as
“sacred,” as a “storehouse” or treasury, and as the “dwelling” of the Great Goddess Ishtar. As a “sheepfold” with a “storehouse” of grain at its heart, Uruk preserves the two essentials of settled communities, animal husbandry and agriculture.

Ishtar = Inanna
The earliest written texts discovered anywhere identify the Sumerian goddess Inanna as the main deity of Uruk. The importance of Inanna grew even when Uruk declined as the influential power in Sumer. Once Inanna was identified with the northern Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, the female counterpart of the high god, the influence of the Great Goddess spread throughout Mesopotamia.

Seven Sages = The Seven Muntalki
According to some accounts, humanity was first taught the essentials of life by Seven Sages, sometimes imaged as part-human and part-fish. Here they are credited with establishing the foundations of Uruk’s city walls. Gilgamesh himself is given credit for building the immense wall around the city. When the Flood destroyed all but a small remnant of humanity (as told in Tablet 11), the sages were replaced by kings. The idea that kingship “descended from heaven” after the Flood is seen quite early. Uruk had its own view of the outcome of the Flood. In the Urukean version, the temple Eanna was brought down from the heavens (in one case, stolen) by Inanna. The –anna in both Eanna and Inanna could be taken to mean “of heaven.” In any case, the Flood radically changed the religious and political life of Sumer. Both kingship and Uruk’s central temple complex were considered gifts of the gods to humanity. The poet actually uses a variant, “The Seven Advisors,” of the more usual term, The Seven Apkalli.

Tablet 1, Lines 29-62: The Earlier Prologue

Wild Bull = Gilgamesh
Gilgamesh is identified with epithets that link him to his father, to his mother, and to the city itself. He is a “wild bull” (in Akkadian, rīmu) usually considered the immense aurochs, now extinct, a much larger animal than is now found among domesticated stock. The aurochs was known for its ferocity and power, especially sexual power.

Lugalbanda = (Human) Father of Gilgamesh
The paternity of Gilgamesh is complicated by the tradition, referred to later in Gilgamesh, that he had a spiritual or demonic father, perhaps the real father, and a human or legal father named Lugalbanda. Like Gilgamesh, who was deified as judge of the underworld in some periods of Mesopotamian history, Lugalbanda was also deified in some periods. Since Gilgamesh has a divine mother and a rather complicated paternity, the claim that he is “2/3rd god” and “1/3rd human” may reflect that mixed parentage. At any rate, though Gilgamesh is “2/3rd god,” he must, like all humans, die.

Ninsun = The Mother of Gilgamesh
The goddess who is the mother of Gilgamesh is a relatively minor figure among the hundreds of gods known to Mesopotamian tradition, but she is important to the Uruk
tradition as the goddess (NIN) who confers kingship on humans. She is a goddess of wisdom, an interpreter of dreams. The name itself combines the high status of NIN with the Sumerian word for “wild cow” (SÚN). (Another transliteration of the name used today is Ninsumun.)

**Utnapishtim = The Hero of the Flood**
The name is read variously as Utnapishtim, Ut-napishtim, Utanapishtim, or “Uta-napishti.” With his wife, he is the Noah-like human who survives the Flood. He is thought to be a late addition to the Gilgamesh stories, both as the goal of Gilgamesh’s quest for wisdom and as the narrator of the Flood story in Tablet 11. He is usually identified as the king of the city of Shuruppak. In the tradition that saw “kingship” descending from heaven after the Flood, he may have been assimilated to the last of the Seven Sages, who ruled before the Flood.

**Great Goddess**
The logogram dMAH, which means “great” or “lofty” in Sumerian, is usually identified as the Lady of the Gods, Bēlet-ili, one of the names of the Mother Goddess. In a very unusual move, Bēlet-ili is identified with Ishtar in Tablet 11, linking Uruk’s goddess with the Mother Goddess of the Flood story. Here she is said to have drawn the form of Gilgamesh, while the god Ea (or Enki) perfected Gilgamesh’s “build.” Several Sumerian myths show the Mother Goddess cooperating with the crafty Enki to produce living beings.

**Ea = The Crafty God, Enki, Nishshīku or Nudimmud**
The male counterpart to the Mother Goddess is the god Ea. In Sumerian he is called Enki, and just as Inanna/Ishtar is identified as the power in the city-state of Uruk, Ea/Enki is the power in the city-state of Eridu, even farther south in Sumer than Uruk. Very early texts show that Enki was an important presence in Uruk as well as Eridu, and several Sumerian myths, especially “Inanna and Enki: The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization from Eridu to Uruk,” link the Great Goddess of Uruk with her counterpart in Eridu. The epithet Nudimmud emphasizes Ea’s wisdom and its relation to creativity in a great variety of forms.

**Tablet 11, Lines 318-27**

**Urshanabi = The Boatman**
Gilgamesh requires the help of a boatman to cross the Waters of Death in order to reach the place where Utnapishtim and his wife live. He returns from that place to Uruk with the help of the boatman.

**Tablet 12**

**The Carpenter and the Carpenter’s Wife**
There is no further identification of these figures. That the implements lost, the mekkû and pukku, are linked to the carpenter suggests that they are made of wood.

**mekkû and pukku**
Scholars are still debating what these implements are. The Sumerian myth that provides the background of this Akkadian translation of the story, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” indicates that the implements were made from the roots and crown of a tree, possibly a willow tree. (A throne and a bed were made from the trunk of the tree, according to the myth.) Among other possibilities is the well-known double symbol of rule, the rod and ring.

**Underworld = Netherworld**
Mesopotamian thought located the region of the dead below ground, usually in the “Great Below,” that is ki-gal. (Alternatively, the land of the dead is in the mountains east of Mesopotamia.) The dreaded place is described here in Enkidu’s dream, Tablet 7, as well as in Sumerian and Akkadian myths of the descent of Inanna/Ishtar to the world of the dead.

**Mother of Ninazu = Ereshkigal**
The mother of Ninazu, a god of the Underworld, is elsewhere identified as Ereshkigal or Allatu, the ruler of the Underworld. Several myths suggest how she became the ruler of that world. She is usually considered the “sister” of Inanna/Ishtar.

**Ninazu = Tammuz**
Ninazu is a god associated with the Underworld. In the 3rd millennium BCE he was worshiped at the city of Eshnunna, but was replaced there by the god Tishpak. He is sometimes identified with Tammuz.

**Namtar = The Personification of Fate**

**Asakku = Azag**
In Sumerian and Akkadian myth Azag/Asakku is a monstrous demon, repulsive, defeated by the god Ninurta. Magical texts attempt to control the demon, who is responsible for attacking and even killing humans, especially through fevers.

**Nergal = Lord of the Underworld**

**Ekur = The Temple of Enlil at Nippur**

**Ur = City Near Uruk**

**Sin = Nanna = The Moon = Main God of Ur**

**Eridu = City South of Uruk**