**Tips for Reading Tablets 1 and 2**

**Sex for the City: Tablets 1 and 2**

**Early and Late Versions**

Tablets 1 and 2 of *Gilgamesh* both run to about 300 lines of poetry. Tablet 1 has been almost completely restored. Large gaps in Tablet 2, however, are usually filled in with texts from hundreds of years earlier, from the Old Babylonian Period at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE. The story line in both Tablets 1 and 2 can then be seen clearly. Where Tablet 1 can be read on its own, with comparisons with the earlier versions, texts of Tablet 2 so far have to be read with the help of the Old Babylonian versions, and close comparison between early and late is less certain.

**Episodes: What Happens in Tablets 1 and 2**

**Tablet 1, Lines 63-91: Gilgamesh Oppresses Uruk**

The “evolution” of the *Gilgamesh* story can be glimpsed in one simple example. The people of Uruk cry out for relief from the “oppression” of Gilgamesh. What this “oppression” consists of is much debated. One of the gods hears the complaints and takes action. (The gods will create Gilgamesh’s rival and friend, Enkidu.) Unfortunately for us the name of the god cannot be read on the tablet. “The god [     ] listened to their complaint” (I.76). In the blank, where a word is missing, almost everyone fills in the name, Anu, the sky god. An earlier version even includes a four-line speech that *may* be the response of Anu. (The god in not named in the four lines.) For whatever reason, *Gilgamesh* drops those lines. While it is reasonable that the high god Anu would intervene, it is still possible that another god is responsible for the response. If we keep in mind that the city, Uruk, in the Standard *Gilgamesh* is identified as the city of Ishtar, and earlier versions sometimes identify the city as the dwelling of Anu and Ishtar, it is possible that our *Gilgamesh* is effacing Anu from this episode. We await more discoveries to decide the case.

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

Exactly how the king oppresses his people has been a matter of much controversy. Gilgamesh keeps the young men of the city exhausted with unending contests of some sort. The young men are kept from their fathers. At the same time Gilgamesh does not allow the young women to return to their mothers (and possibly the married women to their bridegrooms). This suggests that Gilgamesh tyrannizes over the people by exaggerating his roles as a military commander and as the “lord” (*en*) who sexually initiates brides before they cohabit with their bridegrooms. While the details of the oppression of Uruk are not entirely clear, this version differs from the earlier, Old Babylonian, versions of the story.
Both the oppression of Uruk and the solution to the problem involve a view of sexuality and its importance to an Urukean understanding of “civilization,” ideas that to many seem very foreign to the modern West.

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

**Tablet 1, Lines 92-104: The Creation of Enkidu**

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

**Tablet 1, Lines 105-112: The First View of Enkidu**

We then get our first glimpse of the new man. Or, rather, we have two views of him. The first describes Enkidu, mainly in terms of his long, shaggy hair. He lives with beasts in the wilderness, feeding on grasses and drinking water.

**Tablet 1, Lines 113-21: The Second View of Enkidu**

The second view is given to us by an unnamed hunter, who freezes in terror upon seeing Enkidu. His reaction to Enkidu will be repeated much later in the story in describing Gilgamesh when he loses his friend.

**Tablet 1, Lines 122-66: The Father and Gilgamesh Advise the Hunter**

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

**Tablet 1, Lines 167-203: Shamhat Seduces Enkidu**

Where the hunter had fled in fear of Enkidu, Shamhat calmly waits for him at the waterhole and strips before him. In one of the more sexually explicit passages in Mesopotamian literature, once he sees her, the two have an intense sexual encounter that lasts six days and seven nights.

**Tablet 1, Lines 204-39: Shamhat Teaches Enkidu**

When he is fully satisfied, Enkidu turns back to his companions, who now flee from him. His knees now weakened, he cannot return to them. Shamhat, having literally made a man of him, then gradually leads him step by step into a “civilized” life. Like an infant, Enkidu finds speech (and voices a challenge to the one who will become his friend).
**Tablet 1, Lines 240-300: Gilgamesh’s Two Dreams**

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

After Shamhat tells Enkidu of Gilgamesh’s dreams, they once again make love. That brings Tablet 1 to an end.

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**Tablet 2**

**Tablet 2, Lines 1-64: Shamhat Civilizes Enkidu**

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

**Tablet 2, Lines 103-117: Enkidu vs. Gilgamesh**

Enkidu is then enticed to go to the city itself, where in a great festival, he will be able to meet his rival. Gilgamesh is about to enter a building, a “wedding house,” where he presumably would deflower a woman before her husband sleeps with her, when Enkidu stops him. The two have a furious match. It appears that in a very even wrestling match, Gilgamesh prevails. The two men kiss and become friends.

**Tablet 2, Lines 162-77: Enkidu Introduced to Ninsun**

Gilgamesh then introduces Enkidu to his mother, the goddess Ninsun.

A line drawn across the tablet indicates that a new episode begins at this point. Suddenly Enkidu and Gilgamesh begin to speak of the first great adventure in *Gilgamesh*, the journey into the wilderness where they will confront the giant guardian of the forest, Humbaba. This adventure takes up the rest of Tablets 2, 3, 4, and 5, and will be considered in the next chapters. The sudden turn in the narrative intrudes upon the introduction of Enkidu to the household of Gilgamesh. The story that brings Enkidu into
the protection of Ninsun is again taken up in Tablet 3. In effect the adoption of Enkidu completes the civilizing of Enkidu.

**Tablet 2, Lines 178-303: The Decision to Fight Humbaba**
Suddenly Enkidu is filled with fear. The giant Humbaba is under the protection of the powerful god Enlil. Gilgamesh, though, persuades Enkidu to join him in the quest, which will establish the name Gilgamesh forever. The Council of Elders advises against the adventure, but Gilgamesh remains confident. (Much of this section is filled in with earlier, Old Babylonian versions of the story.)

**Key Words in the 1st and 2nd Tablet**

**Tablet 1, Lines 63-300**

*Anu* (Sumerian AN, “The Above”) = the **Sky God**, often associated with Ishtar and Uruk.

*Aruru* = one of many names for Mesopotamian **Mother Goddesses**.

*Enkidu* = the friend of Gilgamesh, in older versions his servant or “slave.”

*The Steppe* (*EDIN, edinu*) = sometimes identified as a largely uninhabited place, here the wilderness (as opposed to the city).

*Hero* (*GURUSH, etlu*) = a powerful (“manly”) **young man**.

*Ninurta* = a **god** who appears in myths mainly as a fierce warrior or as a farmer.

*Nisaba* = a grain **goddess**, known also as a goddess of wisdom.

*Sumuqan (or Shakkan)* = a **god** who protects animals, including wild animals, envisioned here as a hairy beast himself.

*Stalker, Hunter, Trapper-Man* = a man who plays a role in bringing Enkidu to Gilgamesh and is later cursed by Enkidu.

*Shamhat* (*shamhatu, the harimtu*) = usually identified as a prostitute, her **name** identifies her one way and her **epithet** identifies in another way; both are women in the service of Ishtar; among their social roles they mourn the dead.
Festival = Enkidu is urged to attend a **wedding festival** in Uruk; Old Babylonian texts indicate that at the festival (of the goddess of weddings) Gilgamesh is expected to deflower the bride before the bridegroom has sex with her.

Joy/Woe Man = a very striking (and unique) summary description of the heroic Gilgamesh; both extremes of behavior are evident, “joy” especially in the first half of the story, and “woe” in the second half.

Shamash = The **Sun God**, first mentioned in Tablet 1, the dominant god in the first half of the story.

Anu, Enlil, and Ea = the **highest gods in the Sumero-Akkadian pantheon**; when a fourth deity is identified, very early in Mesopotamian history the fourth is a **Mother Goddess**; later she is replaced by **Inanna/Ishtar**.

Dreams = **significant or prophetic dreams** are seen as messages from the gods, especially (in *Gilgamesh*) Shamash; the Sun God; they are dangerous to the dreamer and have to be interpreted by someone other than the dreamer. In the first dream something like a rock falls to earth; in the second, an axe is found in the street. Both are interpreted as Enkidu, who will be loved like a wife, a comrade in battle, and a friend, the equal of Gilgamesh.

**Tablet 2, Lines 1-303**

Bread and Beer = the staples of Urukean diet, both made of **barley**, Uruk’s most important crop, the basis of its economic surpluses; **beer** is also an important part of community festivals; gods, kings and queens, and other elite members of the society are depicted on cylinder seals drinking beer through long straws.

Shepherd = the one who herds domesticated animals is a **transitional figure** between the wilderness and the city.

First Night (?) = an Old Babylonian version indicates that Gilgamesh had the privilege of deflowering brides on their wedding nights; there is no independent evidence that this was a Mesopotamian custom; Enkidu challenges the custom when he fights Gilgamesh.

Goddess of Weddings (?) = **Ishhāra**, whose bed is made ready for Gilgamesh, who “like a god,” becomes a **mihru**, a person equal to the goddess; if Ishhāra is another name for Ishtar, the festival appears to be a “sacred marriage.”
Humbaba (Huwawa in older versions) = giant, protector of the cedar forest; although he is in the service of the god Enlil, in Gilgamesh he is identified as “something evil.” In addition to his terrifying appearance, Humbaba’s voice is likened to the Deluge, the great flood (like the biblical flood) described in Tablet 11.

Forest of Cedars = in an older, Sumerian version of the story, the cedar forest is probably located to the east of Uruk, in Elam (now Iran), while this version appears to locate the forest far north and west of Uruk. Wood was especially precious in places like Uruk, in southern Iraq, where few sources of good lumber were to be found.

New Year = a very important and ancient festival celebrated at Babylon in the first month of the year, about the time of the spring equinox, it was celebrated in Uruk for the deities Anu and Ishtar as late as the 2nd century BCE. Gilgamesh boasts that he will celebrate it twice in a year when he defeats Humbaba.

Igigi = a group of gods. Enkidu considers Humbaba second among the Igigi only to the Storm God Adad.

Enlil = Enkidu indicates that Enlil set up Humbaba to terrify humans.

Elders = Councils of Elders are known from a very early period in Uruk.

Adad = a Storm God, known in Sumerian as Ishkur. He is mentioned here and in the story of the Flood in Tablet 11.

Uruk of the Sheepfold/Uruk of the City Square = Gilgamesh uses the first phase to describe Uruk, while the Old Babylonian texts use both, but primarily Uruk of the City Square.

For critical and philological notes on these texts, see George, BGE, II, 778-808.