

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Epics

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Part I : Introduction

Cultural remnants As with all ancient cultures, the cultural remnants of Ancient Near Eastern culture—to which we are indebted for the birth of writing, not to mention the wheel, the first cities, and vast agricultural know how—are scattered, and are still rising to land surfaces, appearing in archeological digs, or yielding to the growing achievements or linguistics and pottery analysis. The written texts of Ancient Near Eastern Literature—of which we introduce four examples below—were largely consigned to clay tablets, on which writing was inscribed by a sharp pointed stylus. These usually broken tablets have regularly needed to be put together with the other parts of the puzzle of a text, and their meaning often comes down to us as in part educated guess work. We can discern, from the quite well preserved texts we consider below, that major parts of human achievement in letters still await us as we learn more about our archaic Sumerian and Babylonian past.

Our four texts The four texts we present here derive from more or less the same period of Ancient Near Eastern culture, that is from the third millennium B.C.E. to the 18th century B.C.E. (The *Descent of Inanna*, the oldest of these texts, shows marks of third millennium origins, but this text too, like the other three, can be tracked with probability to the 18th century B.C.E. For all that similarity in date, the four texts we consider here are sharply different in genre and general tenor. The *Descent of Inanna* is what we might call a ‘liturgical chant,’ a text to be read or chanted in the course of ritual; *The Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)* is a blend of genesis-tale with theology, a record of the origin of the cosmos; *Gilgamesh* is an epic tale whose protagonist, the prince Gilgamesh—pretty certainly a rendering of a real leader, who had passed away and was revered—takes on the world as an adventure in friendship and as a search for immortality, and whose quest to discover the meaning of life is among human history’s most significant imaginative enterprises; Hammurabi’s *Law Code* is a carefully organized legal text, the crown jewel of the many achievements of this imperial leader, who promoted education on every front, while securing for his people a legal code in which social equality could be realized. It would be safe to say that Hammurabi’s *Law Code*, and the epic of *Gilgamesh*, are impactful elements in world culture, while the *Enuma Elish*, the *Epic of Creation*, belongs with the greatest of the Ancient Mediterranean’s several efforts—the *Torah*, Hesiod’s *Theogony*—to account for the presence and unfolding of the universe.

Discussion Topics

The works of Homer and Virgil are still attractive to the general reader in our culture, and are popular texts in University classes. Is *Gilgamesh*? Look at http://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/new_haven_07.02.01_u for a sample of the brilliant efforts currently being made to teach *Gilgamesh* to middle school students. Google *Gilgamesh in the classroom* for a further eye opener. But are there residual problems, with understanding that 3rd millennium epic, which we cannot rapidly do away with? What are they?

Would you, as a citizen of ancient Mesopotamian Uruk, have been happy with Hammurabi’s law code? Would it seem to you have promoted law and order in your society? How about individual rights? Could we live with Hammurabi’s code today?

The Epic of Creation probably dates, originally, from the first half of the third millennium. Does it present an imaginatively coherent cosmology? What kind of leadership does Marduk exercise among the gods? Can you compare this cosmology to the Genesis tale in the Abrahamic religions? Is there historical ‘progress’ in this passage from earlier to later account?

Part II : EPICS

The archaic in writing The ancient literature of Mesopotamia is preserved on clay tablets, inscribed in cuneiform characters on clay. Both the cuneiform writing system, the world's first systematic writing, and the mindset of the remaining texts, force us back to archaic levels of the human cultural experience.

Vast time span of Mesopotamian culture From the earliest Sumerian writing to the neo Babylonian writing that marks the ending of ancient Mesopotamian culture, is a period of three millennia, the time span that separates, say, Homer from William Faulkner—a period during which huge shifts of sensibility and even culture, have defined human development. Into a time span that vast we need to place the handful of what we could call literary texts, from ancient Mesopotamia.

The texts Can we detect an underlying unity to the three most substantial literary texts remaining to us from ancient Mesopotamia: *The Descent of Inana* (2000 B.C.E.); *The Epic of Creation* (1800 B.C.E.); the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (1800 B.C.E)?

The Descent of Inana. There is a narrative curve to this tale, in which the goddess Inana, who was widely worshipped in the ancient Near East, makes a trip to the underworld to visit her evil twin sister, and to rise again, fertility escaping from the darkness of death and winter, and in the course of the seasons to send back a substitute for herself, and to die ritually in her place, every year. Is this a work of imagination? There is a firm and often bloody narrative, yet it reads (or listens) like a piece of religious ritual. Is this a story? Could this have been a best-seller, in ancient Mesopotamia? At the end we are left wondering how well we are able to read other-culture texts like this, the end product of which is clearly to promote the recurring of the fertile cycle of the seasons?

The Epic of Creation *The Epic of Creation*, composed almost a millennium after *Inana*, replicates the traits of the earlier epic-religious conception: vast mythical figures, moving over equally vast and religiously envisioned, landscapes—heaven, hell—and all that for the purpose of retelling and resupporting the cyclical energies of nature. The emergence to supremacy of the greatest among competing gods, Marduk, involves mortal struggles, not least with his violent mother Tiamat, from which emerge a new reign of fruitful power: 'He (Marduk) suckled the teats of goddesses/the nurse who reared him filled him with awesomeness/proud was his form, piercing his stare/mature his emergence; he was powerful from the start.' From the ripeness of the man grew the ripeness of the life of the earth.

Epic of Gilgamesh This great epic, composed around the time of the *Epic of Creation*, openly tells a story, through the hugeness of mythical figures, which rivals Homer's work in empathy for the human condition. The two earlier texts, just surveyed, dealt with the promotion of natural cycles and cosmic strengths, while *Gilgamesh* is all about the passions of the human life, its search for physical satisfaction, then (in vain) for immortality, and finally for resignation. The cycles of nature, which dominate the first two texts—*Inana* and *The Epic of Creation*—are replaced here by the eternal cycle of the ages of a single man, who sets out on the adventure of life, and ends up with resignation before the impossibility of immortality.

Readings

Wooley, Leonard, *A Forgotten Kingdom*, London, 1953.

Chiera, Edward, *They Wrote on Clay, The Babylonian Tablets Speak Today*, New York, 1956.

Discussion questions

Do you detect a literary imagination in the three texts we have mentioned? Does any of those texts tell a transformative story after which you read your own reality in a different light?

Is there any humor in this Mesopotamian literature, or is it beyond us to answer this question? In what mode of response did the Mesopotamian reader process the battles among the gods, in *The Epic of Creation*?

Is it possible to extract a literary history from such a small number of texts as we have above? Is there a consistency in these expressions of Mesopotamian literature, that helps you to feel a single character in the culture?

Liturgical Chant Inanna (3rd millennium B.C.) Sumeria

The Descent of Inanna The *Descent of Inanna* is an ancient Sumerian liturgical text, discovered on shattered clay tablets in Sumer, today's Iraq. The oldest of the tablets date from the early second millennium B.C., but are presumed, from such internal evidence as their line and syntax structures, to derive from oral works created in the 3rd millennium B.C. That would make this Sumerian text older than even the Indian Vedas, which are otherwise the oldest sacred literature, and date mostly from the second millennium B.C.

Mother Goddesses Inanna herself was a mother goddess figure, and as such was venerated widely through the ancient Near East. (The worship of her as cult figure brings to mind ancient cultic worships such as those of Artemis, the ancient Cycladic mother goddess figures, Kwan Yin, The Virgin Mary or Fatima.) Many texts touch on Inanna, yet her most famous—and well preserved—appearance among us is 'documented' in the *Descent of Inanna*, which describes the passage of the goddess into the underworld, which her recently widowed sister rules; Inanna's brutal death there, as she attempts to join her sister; Inanna's rescue by earth-sent forces; her return to earth; her steps toward finding the man and woman who would henceforth share between them the challenge of spending half the year with the forces of hell and darkness, half the year in the sunlight, and whose mutual alteration would assure the continuation of the major cycle of the seasons.

Agriculture The ritual-agriculture themes of this poem abound, and we should probably avoid the word *poem* in describing the material. One might rather say, *liturgical text to be recited*, danced and sung to, and created for the purpose of promoting the agriculture sequence of the seasons, and the reliable richness of the harvest. Sympathetic magical thinking lies heavily on this kind of work, the very narration of which is conceived as a means of promoting the productivity of the land.

Challenges to understanding The modern reader of this text will face fundamental challenges of understanding. Among the challenges of understanding are the abundant use of repetition—what is its function?—and the profusion of such concepts as the *me*, or the curious presence of figures like the *galatur* or *kurgarra*, who collaborate in the operation to rescue Inanna from the underworld. We cannot easily grasp these elements of text construction, from a world whose traditions were shaped five millenia before ours. If we are comfortable with the discomfort, which such an alien discourse can bring us, we can embrace the foreignness of such a work for the violence it exercises against what, in western literary criticism, was for a while thought to be the supreme achievement of poetry, the well turned artifact, the well-wrought urn in the formula of Cleanth Brooks, during the American New Criticism. The literary historian in us may scratch his/her head, when trying to explain Inanna to his class, while the poet in us may revel in the boisterous language and provocative verbalism of this archaic jewel.

Reading *The Descent of Inanna*, translated by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, in *Bedford Anthology of World Literature: The Ancient World, Beginnings-100 C.E.*, pp. 23-39.

Discussion questions

1 Inanna's husband, and the individual chosen to make the annual trip between the Underworld and the sunlit Overworld, is a farmer. What is significant about that occupation, for this ritual figure? What special relation do you see between this ritual text and the fertile agricultural setting of Uruk, and of the rich alluvial plain of the Tigris Euphrates river valley?

2 The annihilation of Inanna, as she attempts to visit her evil sister in the Underworld, assumes what is (to us) grotesque form, when Inanna's corpse is shrunken and hung up on a nail on the wall. 'Inanna was turned into a corpse, a piece of rotting meat, and was hung from a hook on the wall.' How do you explain this treatment of Inanna, which we have to consider abusive? How would the original reader of the text have understood and interpreted the present passage?

3 Inanna herself goes through trials and tribulations in the present text, before she becomes the mother goddess again—after her dreadful trip to the underworld. How does she get out of the underworld? What kind of demons attempt to prevent her escape? Why does she so brutally beat her husband Dumuzi, when she first emerges from the underworld?

Theology *Epic of Creation: Enuma Elish* (1894-1595 B.C.) Babylonia

Clay tablets This epic creation story is preserved on seven clay tablets and runs to a little over a thousand lines. The first discovery of the tablets was made in the Library of King Ashurbanipal (668-630 B.C.) between 1848-1876, and subsequent finds, throughout ancient Babylonia and from dealers in antiquities, have enabled scholars to restore what they take to be a nearly complete (but often hard to interpret) version of the original. The date of the original is hard to determine, because the complete version we have constructed is based on many earlier tablet examples. It is probable, in any case, that the original dates back to at least 1800 B.C.

The epic narrative The epic opens onto a time when nothing existed except the sweet water ocean and the salt water ocean and the mist rising up between them. These natural forces are personified as Ur- gods. Apsu and Tiamat are the names of the first two gods. This god pair begat a lively brood of Baby Boomer gods—including Enki, the god of magic and the master brain of the Mesopotamian divinities. The lesser gods made such a racket that Apsu decided to kill them, but instead—*he* was the master brain—Enki intervened to kill Apsu—he spared Tiamat—and to set himself and his wife up in a grand mansion. There they gave birth to Marduk, the supreme god to be, and the single hero of this entire epic, the figure whose radiance and splendor will dominate the remainder of the epic. (It will interest those familiar with early Greek cosmogony, as we find it in Hesiod, to compare the Kronos-Rhea, Ouranos-Gaia, Zeus-Hera sequence with the Babylonian: natural forces meld raucously into a humane personscape in the mythic generation of the cosmos. A conduit opens from the Ancient Near East to the Hellenic.)

The Power of Marduk On subsequent tablets we learn that Tiamat, seething at the destruction of her spouse, and spurred on by restless agitators, determines to avenge Apsu's death. Enki is informed of this threat, and goes to war against Tiamat, but in vain, and then, equally vainly, sends his son Anu to try peaceful reconciliation with Tiamat. Again no luck. At this point Marduk appears willing to destroy Tiamat, is acclaimed by the gods in a rowdy festival, and assumes supreme power over heaven. In bloody battle, egged on by his cohorts, Marduk wipes out the forces of Tiamat—the primal order of things—and goes even farther, creating man out of the blood of the most fractious rebel against his authority. At this point the modern reader, eager to see the birth of a kind of *Genesis*/humanism, is startled to see the emphasis of the epic turn back onto Marduk, praising his astounding power. No attempt is made to conceptualize Marduk himself; the tale turns back into the mythical divine.

Origins of the Creation Epic The origin of the text of the *Enuma Elish* is probably at least a millennium older than the date of the tablets we possess, and thus goes back into the founding efforts of the Babylonian State; in this case the effort to consolidate the supremacy of Marduk, as supreme god and ruler—and, conjecturally, as a model for the stability of the ruler of Babylon himself. The text was of course anonymous, but seems to have had a clear social function. The text—which was poetry, and rhythmic—was recited by the high priest before the central statue of Marduk, on the fourth day of the festival of the supreme god, and then again during that festival, for the express purpose of releasing the god from captivity. The chanting of the epic is here apparently intended as a magical aid in Marduk's deliverance from imprisonment. Though we don't know exactly what this means, we can guess that the purpose was to protect Babylon against its enemies—as Tiamat was subdued by Marduk—and perhaps to ward off the threat of the annual flooding of the Tigris/Euphrates rivers.

The language of the text The language of this text deals in awe with events in the heavens. Belief and hypothesis seem to blend in such language, where human destiny is sketching itself out across a long arc of suppositions. What do we feel eventually about the role of the human, Marduk's offering to his culture? Is the language of this text a quest to isolate or refine the notion of the self? How we answer will depend on whether we are tempted to 'psychoanalyze' a text of such great antiquity and ritual rooting. From one perspective, at least, the *Enuma Elish* can be seen as an inquiry into the bloody throes of our human origins, and a reaffirmation of the power and violence of the elemental setting from which we set forth on life.

Reading

Heidel, Alexander, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*

Origins: Creation Texts from the Ancient Mediterranean, edited and translated by Doria and Lenowitz, pp. 182-236.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What is the role of the human in this epic by which the human labors to portray its own origins? (After all, one purpose of the creation of the epic seems to have been to protect the human community.) Does the human, as portrayed in this creative text, have the interests of the human at heart?
- 2 What do you think of the portrayal of the assembly of the gods, in the present text? You will notice that on two occasions the gods are rowdy and noisy. Do they seem to behave like incorrigible teen-agers? If so, how do you explain this? Are they forces of nature, turbulent and needing control? What relation do you see here between nature and culture? Is this universe ruled by values or only by forces?
- 3 What do you see as the ‘motivation’ behind a creation story like *Enuma Elish*? Has that motivation to do with what we are calling the language peculiar to the Man/God relationship? Does that language rise from increasingly sharp self-definition of the individual, who—as part of a growingly self-aware society—thereby longs to address the progenitors he finds inside himself, as well as longing to define his ultimate sense of dependence? If these seem to you plausible accounts of creation-tale establishment, how do you explain the rough god-level conflicts that surge brutally through the *Enuma Elish*? Is conflict in heaven the path to characterizing the struggles within the self, to give a compelling account of its path into social consciousness?

Gilgamesh (18th-7th Centuries B.C.) Babylonia

Ashurbanipal If any text of Ancient Near Eastern *imagination* has crossed into the cultural mainstream of the Hebraic/Greco-Roman tradition, it is *Gilgamesh*, an Akkadian/Babylonian epic of 2900 lines, found on eleven clay tablets, dating in its most complete form to the seventh century B.C., and in that form best preserved in the Palace and Temple libraries of the ruler of Assyria, King Ashurbanipal (685-627 B.C.). (The oldest fragments of the text probably go back to the 18th century B.C., and a variety of versions stud the intervening centuries.) Six or seven other versions of the ‘text’ have been found in Iraq, but the epic itself been known to the world only for the last century and a half. This fact could go far to explaining the partial *but only partial* incorporation of this epic into our literary canon, though a degree of cultural otherness plays a part in the difficulty of our access to this work. Famed though *Gilgamesh* is for its universal human values, and now internationally known and studied, the looming figures, the potent epic forces at work here remind us of another epic created nearer to our time, but equally ‘strange,’ *Beowulf*. The chief manuscript of *Beowulf* was destroyed in a fire in the early 18th century A. D., and only introduced into our cultural awareness in 1815, thanks to the work of editors and scholars.

Story of Gilgamesh The epic of *Gilgamesh* ‘concerns’ certain exploits of an Assyrian king who flourished around 2700 B.C.; in other words we deal here with an historical figure of the—already at the time of the writing of the epic—distant past, a figure whose exploits are cast onto the screen of mythical thinking, and through whose destiny we rehearse many of the profound rites of the human condition. (This text is more than a quest for selfhood; it is an exploration of the depths of the human condition: the meanings of friendship, the love of adventure, the fear of death and longing for immortality, the exhausting delights of lust.) These rites will make themselves clear to the reader as he/she passes through the reading of this epic.

Gilgamesh as a developing person Through many versions of the text Gilgamesh remains the perceiving center. From the start ‘the hero’ speaks to us from under a cloud—he is guilty of having mistreated the citizens of Uruk, oppressing the men, invoking the *droit du seigneur* with the women. To tame him the mother goddess creates Enkidu, a force of nature, mankind in the primitive state of oneness with nature ‘before the fall.’ This formulation of the nature-culture divide—which reminds us of the imagination of Jean Jacques Rousseau—enriches itself throughout the epic, as Gilgamesh ultimately joins Enkidu in close friendship, in searing adventures, and ultimately in the terrifying experience of his friend’s death. Gilgamesh’s consequent dread of death leads him to seek immortality, in classic encounter with the Ur-Noah, Utanpishtim, who has survived death, but who in the end cannot rescue Gilgamesh from the common fate.

Reconstructing the Text From clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform, and broken repeatedly through the centuries, we inherit a text full of lacunae, which must be reconstructed in places or left for lost, depending on the

judgment of the editor. The text with which we are left acquires a certain additional power and archaic depth from the stark brokenness of the tale. The search for selfhood, which drives Gilgamesh, replicates itself in the tenacity with which 'scholars' have struggled, for over a century, to reconstruct these eleven tablets, on which some of the boldest human self-analyses are worked through.

Reading

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Translated, with an introduction, by Maureen Kovacs

Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us*

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 1. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*
--*Gilgamesh, Book 1, 791-7*

Discussion Questions

Idea: Different Perspectives - What seem to you the chief differences in perspective, between the Gilgamesh vision of the world and that of Hesiod and Ovid? Is Gilgamesh a mythological poem? What kind of archaic religious perspectives seem to you embedded in this work?

Theme: Friendship - What draws Gilgamesh and Enkidu together? In what ways do their characteristics help them complement each other?

Theme: Journey - What stages does Gilgamesh undergo in his quest for immortality? What obstacles does he encounter? Does he learn anything at a particular stage to help him in his further quest? Which of Gilgamesh's qualities would make him a hero in the modern world? Do any recent figures exhibit those qualities?

The German/Swiss philosopher/psychologist, Carl Jung, established an influential theory of archetypes, pervasive and repetitive patterns of human psychology, which dominate the deeper strata of our mental life; one of his followers, Maud Bodkin, transferred his basic notions into the study of literature, and of the archetypes to which great works of literature give expression. It is plausible to view the major themes of *Gilgamesh*—the love/friendship relationship, the quest for immortality, the heroic defeat of the monster-giant, the vulnerability to the sexual passion—as examples of such archetypal patterns, by which masterpieces from world literature can reveal certain interrelationships. What do you think of this idea of Bodkin's, and how explanatory do you find it, for a text like *Gilgamesh*?

In *Gilgamesh* human themes are deeply plumbed—as we imply in the previous question, above. Do you *feel* that *Gilgamesh* is a work embedded in an historical situation, expressing group memory and attitude, or do you *feel* you are dealing with an individual creator's work? Whichever *feeling* you have, can you support it with some hard evidence? If not, why not?

Utanapishtim, Humbaba, Innana, Enkidu: in these 'minor characters' *Gilgamesh* displays what at first sight seems almost a novelist's skill at perception and depiction. Have these 'characters' that concrete universal richness which brings, say, a Shakespearean character (Falstaff? Hamlet?) to unanalyzable life? Or are these figures in archaic epic more nearly abstractions, representing distinctive *roles* in the human condition?