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“Mesopotamian Epic.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mesopotamian Epic

Scott B. Noegel

It is difficult to find a consistent definition of epic in the scholarly works on Mesopotamian literature (see Chapter 1, by Martin). Some scholars define Mesopotamian epics rather broadly (Hecker 1974), often including texts that others might label “legends” or “myths” (Kirk 1970; Hallo and Younger 1997). Others define epic less broadly, but include the boastful first-person royal narratives known as *narû*-inscriptions or “pseudo-autobiographies” (Westenholz 1983, 1997). Still others prefer even narrower definitions based on methodological considerations derived from anthropology (Jason 1969) or the study of world folklore (Alster 1974, 1976, 1995; Berlin 1983), themselves fields with differing, indeed changing, definitions of the term (Bowra 1952, cf. Lord 1960).

Reasons for this inconsistency are not hard to find. Mesopotamian languages, after all, do not possess any words that we might readily translate as “epic.” Though the Mesopotamian bards produced many diverse literary texts, they typically labeled them according to the names of musical instruments to which their recitations were set (Michalowski 1995), or sometimes titled them according to the first line of the composition (Bottéro 1995).

Mesopotamian poems also are not composed in meters, as one finds in later Greek epics, nor do they contain rhymes, but depend instead upon other rhythmic patterns, especially syntactic parallelism. They tend to make wide stylistic use of repetition and variation, stereotyped word pairs and idioms, formulaic epithets, chiasm, elevated diction, similes, metaphors, paronomasia, polysemy, and subtle developments in plot. Their vocabulary is often highly erudite, deriving from a long tradition of compiling complex lexical lists.

The length of poems also does not prove useful for classifying Mesopotamian epics since, unlike Greek epics, Mesopotamian poems, especially the earlier ones, are typically short. The Sumerian poems that are often called epics, for example, range from about one hundred to a little more than six hundred lines in length, a fact that has led some scholars to question the validity of the term when discussing them (Moran 1995).

In this essay, I adopt a definition for epic based upon content, one that I believe will facilitate comparisons with other essays in this volume. Specifically I treat as epic all poetic narratives that praise the accomplishments of a heroic figure of history or tradition. I do not include poetic narratives about gods, which I leave to the category of “myth” nor do I include the so-called pseudo-autobiographical texts, building inscriptions, or hymns, though reference to them has been necessary at times.

I have divided the Mesopotamian epics into two sections on the basis of the language in which the texts are composed, Sumerian or Akkadian, and have grouped related epics together under single rubrics (see Chapter 14, by Sasson). For each of the epics I have provided a brief description of its plot, its relationship to other Mesopotamian epics, and, if known, the text's historical context. The two sections on Sumerian and Akkadian epics are followed by two brief discussions. The first comments on the changes that take place in Akkadian epics of later periods. The second looks at the various ways that Mesopotamian epics have been interpreted.

Sumerian Epics

The world's earliest epic literature appears in Mesopotamia in the form of several cuneiform texts composed in the Sumerian language. Most scholars date them to the Third Dynasty of Ur (*ca.* 2112–2004 BCE) even though most of the texts detail the heroic exploits of much earlier kings and come from archives that date to a slightly later time (i.e., the Old Babylonian period, *ca.* 2003–1595 BCE). These dates notwithstanding, we know that the genesis for Mesopotamian epic traditions is far more ancient because of several textual fragments from Abu Salabikh and Fara that relate to these epic traditions and date to the twenty-sixth century BCE (Biggs 1974; Bing 1977).

The kings of the Ur III period, however, appear to have been the first to promote epic traditions widely. They probably did so because the glorification of previous heroes (each of whom was a “Lugal,” a Sumerian term for a military leader and king or “En,” a king with close ties to the cult) created a precedent for the glorification and support of their current regimes. They also legitimated their kingship at Ur by claiming ties to Uruk, a city that Sumerian tradition considered the seat of the first kings (Jacobsen 1939; Klein 1976). Moreover, two of the Ur III kings, Ur-Nammu (*ca.* 2112–2095 BCE) and his son Shulgi (*ca.* 2094–2047 BCE), were deified, and both claimed the epic hero Lugalbanda as their father and the goddess Ninsun as their mother, thus making the famed Gilgamesh their brother. Such claims provide additional evidence that the epics served ideological and propagandistic purposes (Michalowski 1988).

Early Sumerian epics, therefore, must be read on at least two levels: one that praises the heroic accomplishments of the ancient kings they name, and one that uses this hero paradigmatically in a “supra-historical role” to echo or justify the exploits of the reigning monarch (Alster 1974; Berlin 1983, but cf. Cooper 2001). A lack of sufficient information makes it impossible to ascertain to what degree any of the epics were adapted to meet the ideological needs of the kings under whom they were produced.

Enmerkar traditions

Two of the Sumerian epics probably date specifically to the reign of king Shulgi, even though they glorify an earlier deified king named Enmerkar (*ca.* 2800 BCE) from Uruk and his war against the king of Aratta, a city near Hamadan in modern Iran (Majidzadeh 1976). It remains a matter of dispute whether the two Enmerkar epics should be read together as one poem or as two related, but separate poems (Wilcke 1969) analogous to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Alster 1990, cf. Vanstiphout 2002, 2003).

The first of these epics, “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta,” tells of how Enmerkar outwitted the king of Aratta in an effort to obtain tribute from him. After wooing to his side the king's spouse, the goddess Inanna, Enmerkar is advised by the goddess to send a courier to Aratta to instruct its king to send luxury goods and ore to refurbish the temples of Uruk, Kullab, and Eridu. If he does not obey, Enmerkar warns, Aratta will be

destroyed. The king of Aratta, realizing that Inanna is no longer protecting him from military threat, responds by saying that he will obey, but only if Enmerkar accepts a challenge of wits. Enmerkar is to send the king grain, not in tightly woven sacks, but in open nets. Enmerkar outwits the king in this seemingly impossible task by sending grain that has germinated. It thus holds together and does not slip through the mesh. The king then requests that Enmerkar send a scepter made of no known wood or ore. Enmerkar grows an exotic plant that yields him the needed scepter. Finally, the king asks him to send a champion to duel with an athlete from Aratta. The king stipulates that the champion must wear clothes decorated in a color unknown to humankind. Enmerkar's champion is sent dressed in undyed cloth. Having outwitted the king at every turn, Enmerkar then threatens to annihilate Aratta by sending a written missive to the king. Since we are told that Enmerkar invented writing just for this purpose, we must again see this act as a demonstration of his superior intelligence. Having lost the battle of wits, the king then sends Enmerkar the tribute he desired.

The epic contains three features that remind us of the later rule of king Shulgi. The first is that of Aratta. Like Enmerkar, Shulgi's long reign was marked by a huge territorial expansion, much of it into ancient Iran. The second is the goddess Inanna's special relationship with Enmerkar. During the Ur III period the kings represented the god Dumuzi when performing the sacred marriage rite, and thus were regarded the husbands of Inanna. The third feature is the invention of writing, a detail that echoes Shulgi's later and unique claim of mastery of the written arts.

The second tale belonging to this cycle of traditions, "Enmerkar and Ensukheshdanna," opens with a demand by Ensukheshdanna, the king of Aratta, that Enmerkar acknowledge him as the goddess Inanna's preferred ruler of the land. When Enmerkar disobeys, Ensukheshdanna seeks the advice of his counselors. One of the counselors proposes that a magician from Aratta perform a spell that causes the milk-giving animals of Eresh to withhold their produce. When this is successful, two shepherd twins step in and request the aid of Utu, the sun-god. Utu responds, and it is decided that a fishing contest will be held to settle the issue of which king is superior, Enmerkar or Ensukheshdanna. Pitted in the contest are the magician, representing Aratta, and an old woman, representing Uruk. Though the magician is able to catch five creatures from the river, the woman catches larger ones, each of which devours the magician's smaller catch. Enmerkar is recognized as superior, and therefore the favorite of Inanna, and the magician is drowned in the river.

Lugalbanda traditions

Two Sumerian epic poems involve a hero named Lugalbanda, the successor of Enmerkar. Though both Ur-Nammu and Shulgi claimed Lugalbanda as their father, the historical evidence for Lugalbanda, and it is meager, suggests that he reigned some time around 2800–2700 BCE. Like the Enmerkar tales, the plots of these two epics are so interconnected that many read one against the other as two parts of a longer epic tradition, even though they are the work of two different authors.

In the first, "Lugalbanda in Hurrunkura," Aratta once again takes center stage, this time in a war waged by Enmerkar. Eight brothers are selected to lead the war, the youngest of them being the future king Lugalbanda. When Lugalbanda falls ill while en route to Aratta, his brothers leave him in a cave along with some food; the story goes into great length to describe the food. When he recovers, he receives divine favor after showing his great piety through prayer and food offerings (here again the food is described in detail). He then leaves the cave and makes his way back to his brothers and the war, overcoming a number of other obstacles along the way.

The second related epic, “Lugalbanda and Enmerkar” (also referred to as “Enmerkar and the Imdugud [or Thunder] Bird”), was perhaps used as political propaganda to flatter envoys from ancient Iran when visiting the court of Ur (Jacobsen 1987). It tells of Lugalbanda’s encounter with the mythical Anzu bird, a giant raptor with special powers whose very flight frightens wild oxen and mountain goats. Upon finding the bird’s nest while the bird is hunting, Lugalbanda feeds its young and straightens its nest. When the bird returns he is so taken with Lugalbanda’s deeds and smooth talking that he offers him a number of special gifts, including wealth and strength in battle, all of which Lugalbanda refuses, with one exception – the ability to run quickly. The bird grants him this gift but tells him that he must tell no one how he received it. Lugalbanda then speeds to Aratta, where his brothers have been waging an unsuccessful year of siege. When king Enmerkar requests that someone embark alone on a dangerous journey to Uruk and obtain advice on how to proceed from the goddess Inanna, Lugalbanda steps up to the challenge. He races off and, in one day, arrives at Uruk where Inanna reveals to him how to defeat Aratta. Through a ritual act of what appears to be sympathetic magic, she advises Enmerkar and his troops to catch and eat a certain fish associated with Aratta. They eventually do so and Aratta is defeated. Its precious stones and raw materials are transported back to Uruk.

Epic of Shulgi

A more straightforward epic in honor of King Shulgi appears in the form of another poem sometimes classified separately as a “hymn” because of the hymns it contains. It is roughly six hundred lines long and referred to by scholars as “Shulgi the Avenger” (Westenholz 1983). In this text, which opens with a hymn in honor of King Shulgi and an account of Shulgi’s miraculous birth and ascension to the throne, the king decides to avenge the death of his father, Ur-Nammu, by annihilating the Gutians who had killed him while waging a raid against Sumer. Before launching his campaign, Shulgi receives a dream from the god of dreams, Zaqar, in which the gods of Sumer promise to aid him in a battle. After the successful battle, Shulgi travels to Sumer’s major sanctuaries, sharing with them some of the items obtained from the war. There then follows a long hymn placed in the mouth of the goddess Inanna praising Shulgi as a lover. The epic then closes with another hymn, again in praise of Shulgi. Though often not classified as epic because it praises a contemporary ruler, “Shulgi the Avenger” underscores how blurry the boundaries of ancient literary genres can be, and anticipates an important direction that Mesopotamian epics will take at a later date (see below).

Gilgamesh epic traditions

Gilgamesh (originally Bilgamesh), the famed king of Uruk and subject of a much later and longer series of epics written in the Akkadian language, appears first in a number of Sumerian epics. Though we cannot place the Sumerian epics in a certain chronological order, their transmission, if not also their compositions, probably also date to the reigns of Ur-Nammu and Shulgi since it is they who made the widest use of Gilgamesh in their royal ideologies (Falkenstein 1951; Klein 1976). Recall that both Ur-Nammu and Shulgi claimed Gilgamesh as their brother. Such a claim, however, does not fit well with what we know about Gilgamesh as a historical figure, since Gilgamesh appears to have been king of Uruk around 2700 BCE, roughly six hundred years before the Ur III kings. Moreover, about one hundred years later his name appears in a cuneiform list of gods. Thus, even though Ur-Nammu and Shulgi certainly helped to popularize the heroic stories of Gilgamesh, and possibly may be credited with composing some or all of these epics, his fame certainly preceded them by several centuries.

Ironically, his fame also surpassed and long outlived them, and indeed all of Sumerian civilization, since epics about Gilgamesh continued to be written, copied, and even translated into other languages until the second century BCE (Tigay 1982). The enormous popularity and longevity of the Gilgamesh tradition are probably related to its tragic vision (Jacobsen 1990), its themes of mortality and the overcoming of the fear of death which all of the Gilgamesh traditions have in common – themes that hold a universal and timeless significance (Mills 2002).

The first of the Gilgamesh Sumerian epics, “Gilgamesh and Agga,” relates the story of a siege upon Uruk by Agga the king of Kish that Gilgamesh brought about when refusing to acknowledge Agga’s lordship over Uruk. Though the elders of Uruk advise Gilgamesh not to rebel against Agga, the younger men of the city support him, and so Gilgamesh asserts his political independence from Kish. This incites Agga’s ire, and he and his army quickly come downstream in boats and lay siege to Uruk. After one of Gilgamesh’s contingents fails to break up the siege, Gilgamesh sends his servant Enkidu to the front lines. Enkidu is successful and drives Agga’s soldiers back to their boats. It is there that Enkidu captures Agga. Gilgamesh has Agga released, however, as an act of political kindness, and in repayment for a kind act Agga once did.

In “Gilgamesh and the land of the living” (also known as “Gilgamesh and Huwawa”), the king sets out to establish his name for all eternity by searching out and destroying Huwawa (known later as Humbamba), a monstrous semi-divine guardian of the cedar forests. With the help of seven constellations shown to Gilgamesh by the sun-god Utu, he and his army navigate their way to the cedar forest, crossing seven mountain ranges along the way. When he arrives at the forest, his men begin logging its lofty cedars while he naps. The logging disturbs Huwawa, who comes to the camp hurling his frightening auras upon the men. This wakes Enkidu, who in turn wakes Gilgamesh, who quickly attempts to flatter Huwawa. After disarming the monster, Gilgamesh eventually enters Huwawa’s home, and through a ruse suggested to him by the god Enki, tricks Huwawa out of his auras of power by persuading him to exchange them for a marital alliance with his sisters, and for a number of luxury items. Once he is stripped of his powerful auras, Gilgamesh takes him captive. When Huwawa calls to the god Utu for help, Gilgamesh shows clemency and releases him. This does not sit well with Enkidu, however, who in a moment of anger and fear cuts off Huwawa’s head. The two then bring the head in a leather sack back to the god Enlil, thinking that it will please him. Enlil is enraged, however, and promptly removes the auras of power from Gilgamesh and bestows them upon a number of places and things (e.g., field, river, lion, woods, etc.). The remaining auras he keeps for himself.

The Sumerian epic “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World,” tells the story of the goddess Inanna’s request that someone craft her a bed from a *huluppu* tree. Apparently, she has planted the tree in the hope of some day making the bed, but it has since become home to a serpent, thunderbird, and female demon. She calls upon Gilgamesh to help her, which he does by killing the creatures and felling the tree. With some of the extra wood he makes two playthings, a *pukku* and *mekku* (both of which defy precise interpretation). One day, while he is playing with his friends, the two items accidentally fall into the Underworld through a hole in the ground. When his friend Enkidu offers to retrieve them, Gilgamesh warns him not to associate with the dead. Enkidu fails in this endeavor, and hence becomes trapped in the Underworld forever. The gods then help Gilgamesh to raise Enkidu’s ghost, who then describes for him the bleak Underworld. He tells him, for example, that those who have died in fire do not enter the Underworld, and thus cannot receive offerings, and that Amorite tribes harass the shades of the people of Sumer and Akkad. He also instructs Gilgamesh to make statues of his ancestors, and remarks upon the importance of providing grave offerings for one’s deceased parents, since those who die

childless never receive offerings. This news, in turn, informs Gilgamesh how to prepare for his own death, and thus serves to remind him of his own mortality. If this text was composed, as some have suggested (George 1999), after the Ur III Dynasty fell to Amorite invaders, Enkidu's message would have been an especially powerful means of registering resentment against the new regime and of underscoring the importance of connecting to one's ancestors through proper ritual.

There also are a number of fragments that appear to belong to other epic traditions involving Gilgamesh. The fragments of the texts "The death of Gilgamesh" and "The dream of Gilgamesh" are believed to belong to a single epic and concern the death and burial of the famed king of Uruk. The combined tale opens with a lament for Gilgamesh who is lying on his deathbed. While awaiting death, he receives a dream in which he sees the divine assembly debating whether Gilgamesh will become immortal or descend into the Underworld (he is after all semi-divine, the son of a goddess). They decide in the end that he should die like a mortal, but that for his heroic achievements he will become judge over the shades in the Underworld. They also decree that his death will be memorialized in an annual festival of ghosts in which torches are lit and wrestling matches occur. After a break in the text, we next find Gilgamesh diverting the Euphrates river from its natural course in order to build his tomb at a divinely selected location on the riverbed. A macabre passage then follows which describes how his wives, musician, steward, servants, barber, and others of his retinue were laid to rest in the tomb to accompany their king to the Underworld. When Gilgamesh is placed in the tomb, the river is again diverted so as to conceal its location forever, and the people of Uruk mourn. The text then concludes by underscoring the importance of making statues in honor of the dead and of pronouncing their names, both of which allow the dead to live on in the memory of others.

The third epic exists only in poorly preserved fragments and its meaning is unclear. Typically entitled "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven" it is apparently a precursor to the sixth tablet of the later Akkadian Gilgamesh epic (see below). In it, and in a passage that reminds the reader of the sacred marriage rite, Inanna makes a series of sexual advances toward Gilgamesh, inviting him to become her husband. When he refuses she convinces the sky god An to unleash the colossal Bull of Heaven against Gilgamesh. With Enkidu's help, however, he kills the bull and distributes its meat to Uruk's poor.

Epic of Sargon

A final example of the Sumerian epic tradition that dates to the Old Babylonian period concerns the first king of the Akkadian dynasty, Sargon "the Great" (ca. 2334–2279 BCE). According to this epic, Sargon has a dream while serving in the court of Ur-Zababa at Kish. In his dream he sees Ur-Zababa drown in a river of blood, an act that in essence ensures that Sargon would become king. Upon hearing about the dream Ur-Zababa secretly prepares to have Sargon burned alive in a furnace. When this is unsuccessful Ur-Zababa places a secret missive in a clay envelope and sends it by the hand of Sargon himself to Lugalzagesi, king of Uruk. The message instructs the king to kill Sargon. Sargon, however, is able to read the cuneiform document and thus escapes his intended fate. Some have seen the episode involving the letter as a subtle allusion to the invention of cuneiform referenced in the Sumerian epic "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta" (Alster 1995). The end of the story is unfortunately missing, but most scholars assume it related the ascension of Sargon to the throne. The epic shares features with a number of other ancient Near Eastern stories including the biblical stories of Joseph (Gen. 39–41) and of Uriah (2 Sam. 11: 14–15) (Cooper and Heimpel 1983; Alster 1987). The latter account tells how King David sent Uriah to his death by his own hand, a motif that appears also in the *Iliad's* account of Bellerophon and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Akkadian Epics

After the Ur III period the Akkadian language gradually replaced Sumerian as the lingua franca of Mesopotamia, and consequently epic poems began to appear in Babylonian and Assyrian (both dialects of Akkadian).

Gilgamesh traditions

Of the more famous Akkadian epic traditions are those concerning the hero Gilgamesh, the earliest of which dates to the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2003–1595 BCE). Though they are fragmentary, we know that the Old Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh* contained more than one thousand lines of poetry. Its collation of diverse earlier textual traditions is fluid and complex, and as a unified epic, it constitutes a remarkably original composition (Kramer 1946; Komoróczy 1975; Tigay 1982).

The Old Babylonian version of Gilgamesh opens by characterizing Gilgamesh as an oppressive king, placing onerous demands on the people of Uruk, though just what these demands were remains a matter of debate (Tigay 1982; Klein 2002). Following a well-known ancient Near Eastern literary motif, his oppressed subjects call to their gods for help. The gods respond by creating the figure Enkidu, who is intended as an equal match for Gilgamesh. Enkidu, we are told, is a hairy savage, more beast than human, walking on all fours and eating with the animals of the steppe. After he has caused problems for trappers and hunters, a prostitute is sent to “civilize” him. After seven nights of love-making, Enkidu finds himself bathing, dressing in human clothes, drinking beer, and even singing; he is thus now completely humanized. He enters Uruk and acknowledges Gilgamesh as king. After they become close friends, and perhaps lovers (Cooper 2002), in an effort to make his name immortal, Gilgamesh launches an expedition with Enkidu to the cedar forests to kill its primordial guardian Huwawa. Their campaign is successful, but in punishment for their slaying of the monster, the gods cause Enkidu’s death, which forces Gilgamesh to confront his own mortality. The latter two episodes thus depart significantly from the earlier Sumerian tale “Gilgamesh and the land of the living.”

Gilgamesh’s desire for immortality compels him to journey beyond the periphery of the known world to find Utnapishtim (Sumerian Ziasudra), the Mesopotamian counterpart to the biblical Noah (Heidel 1946), the only mortal known to have achieved immortality. At this point, the story becomes fragmentary, and we are at a loss to know how the epic ends (though some scholars reconstruct it on the basis of a still later version of the epic). Nevertheless, it is clear that Utnapishtim issues Gilgamesh a test; he must stay awake for seven days. Gilgamesh fails the test and after sleeping for seven days again is reminded of his own mortality.

Evidence for the ancient appeal of the Gilgamesh story (in broad outline more than details) appears in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE throughout the Levant where fragments of the epic have been found composed not only in Babylonian, but in the Hittite, Hurrian, and Elamite languages (see Chapter 17, by Beckman; also Wilhelm 1988; Diakonoff and Jankowska 1990). It is not until the seventh century BCE, however, that we find our most complete copies of the Gilgamesh epic at Nineveh in the libraries of King Assurbanipal (ca. 669–627 BCE). Owing to the general uniformity of these copies, which probably reflects the epic’s gradual “canonization” under the auspices of a scholar named Sin-leqi-unninni, scholars have dubbed this exemplar the Standard Version (Tigay 1982). It consists of more than three thousand lines composed on twelve tablets, though about a thousand of these lines are lost or fragmentary (tablet XII is often understood as a later appendage, but see Vulpe 1994).

The Standard Version opens by informing us that Gilgamesh committed all of his experiences to writing and placed them in a chest on a tablet made of lapis lazuli called a *narú*. The author further encourages readers to open this chest and read the *narú* for themselves. Typically the word *narú* signifies a genre of Mesopotamian texts inscribed on stelae that are often called pseudo-autobiographies (Gurney 1955; Longman 1990; Noegel 1993) because of their heavily didactic and fictitious first-person accounts of contemporary kings. This has encouraged some scholars to include *narú* texts in discussions of Mesopotamian epic (George 1999; Westenholz 1983, 1997). Others have seen the reference in the Gilgamesh epic as the author's clue on how to interpret the text, namely to read it didactically and see the life of Gilgamesh as providing lessons on how to live life wisely (Foster 1987; Moran 1991, 1995, cf. Jacobsen 1990). The author's invitation to read the *narú* also demonstrates the self-referential nature of many Mesopotamian texts; the very story that Gilgamesh recorded is, in fact, the tablet that the reader is holding (Foster 1991).

The Standard Version of the Gilgamesh epic also differs considerably from the earlier traditions in a number of ways. First, it characterizes the hero differently: Gilgamesh is now far more human than divine, though he is now gigantic in stature, and his achievements, once based on his personal strength and aura, are attributed to his knowledge and wisdom. The Standard Version also assigns a greater role to the sun-god Shamash in instigating the slaying of the forest guardian (now Humbamba).

In addition, this version adds a new episode in which the goddess Ishtar (Sumerian Inanna) makes a series of sexual advances toward Gilgamesh, an addition related in part to the earlier Sumerian epic "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven." Gilgamesh, unimpressed by her charms, insults her with remarks that characterize her wedding invitation as an invitation to death (Abusch 1986). Ishtar responds by having her father, the sky god Anu (Sumerian An), send the Bull of Heaven to attack him. In turn, Gilgamesh and Enkidu respond by killing the Bull, thus bringing upon them the wrath of the gods. After a celebration of their victory, Enkidu falls ill and dies twelve days later.

As in the Old Babylonian version, Enkidu's death forces Gilgamesh to face his own mortality, and he embarks on a distant journey to meet the immortal Utnapishtim. Here details differ again: in the Standard Version Gilgamesh encounters a being who is part human and part scorpion who warns him not to continue. He goes on, however, and finds himself under the earth in complete darkness. This trek takes him to a garden whose trees are bedecked with precious stones. Shortly thereafter he meets a tavern keeper named Siduri who reluctantly directs him to a boatman named Urshanabi. It is Urshanabi who ferries him across the waters of death and brings him to Utnapishtim, who in turn tells Gilgamesh of how he escaped a cosmic deluge by constructing a boat into which he placed his family and a number of animals. Utnapishtim informs him that after surviving the cataclysm, the gods bestowed immortality upon him and his wife and relocated them on the distant island. Upon hearing this Gilgamesh realizes that he can never obtain immortality.

Though the Old Babylonian version of the epic contains an encounter with Utnapishtim, it is unclear how much of the flood story it once related. Most scholars, therefore, see this section (the eleventh tablet) as the work of the seventh-century editor who based the addition upon an earlier source known as the "Atrahasis Epic" (see below).

Like the earlier Old Babylonian version, the Standard Version includes the account of Gilgamesh's attempt to overcome his humanity by avoiding sleep for seven nights. Unlike the earlier account, however, Utnapishtim afterwards directs Gilgamesh to the bottom of the sea to obtain a plant that will restore his youth. After much effort, Gilgamesh seizes

the plant, but while bathing himself afterwards, sets it down, only to have it devoured by a serpent, a detail that provides an etiology for why serpents shed their skins.

The twelfth tablet of the Standard Version contains a partial translation of the earlier Sumerian epic "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World," and the reasons for its inclusion are not altogether clear (but see Vulpe 1994). It is possible that it intended to lead into and explain Gilgamesh's later role as king of the Underworld, but this remains speculation.

Of all of the ancient Mesopotamian epics, *Gilgamesh* was clearly the most widespread. Not only have fragments of the epic been discovered beyond Mesopotamia proper (e.g., at Boğazköy, Amarna, Ugarit, Emar, and Megiddo; see Chapters 14 and 16, by Sasson and Wyatt), but the epic continued to be copied as late as the second century BCE. Moreover, the epic's influence was remarkably pervasive after this period since we find it in refracted forms in a number of later literary works. Thus, we find Gilgamesh appearing with Humbaba (=Humbamba) and described as a giant in the Enochic text known as "The Book of the Watchers" found among the Dead Sea scrolls (this description matches an earlier Hittite version in which he stands 11 cubits tall). Humbamba also appears as Hobabish in a later Manichaean work known as the "Book of the Giants" (a book that survives only in late medieval fragments). Aelian, a Greek rhetorician writing in the second century CE, makes reference to a king of Babylon named Gilgamos in his *On the Characteristics of Animals* (NA, vii, 21). Gilgamesh also appears in the eighth century CE as Gmigmos in the Syriac writings of the Nestorian writer Theodore bar Konai. Whether or not the Gilgamesh epic played an influential role in Homer's *Odyssey* (Lord 1990; Burkert 1982, 1992; Abusch 2001b), the *Alexander Romance*, or the tales of the *Arabian Nights* remains an ongoing discussion (Tigay 1982; Dalley 1991).

Atrahasis epic

The *Atrahasis* epic, which provided the source material for the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh epic, was composed sometime in the first half of the second millennium BCE (Lambert and Millard 1969; George and Al-Rawi 1996). The tale provides the mythic origins and primordial history of humankind, and details the account of one man's survival (i.e., Atrahasis) from a cosmic flood, a story that appears in a number of forms in the ancient Near East (Schmidt 1995; Greenstein 1998). It opens with a number of younger gods staging a coup against the older divinities because of the onerous tasks they imposed upon them. The older gods put down the revolt and kill its leader. With his blood and some clay they fashion the first human beings, seven pairs in total, and command them to perform their manual labors. However, the humans reproduce at such a fast rate and create such a noise that they anger the sleeping god Enlil. Enlil thus tries to wipe them out by sending plagues, drought, and famine, but is outsmarted at every turn by the god Enki, whose interest in saving humankind is unexplained. Eventually, Enlil and the assembly of gods decide to send a devastating flood, and so Enki leaks the news to a man named Atrahasis (Utnapishtim is called Atrahasis also in the Gilgamesh epic) through a series of elaborate word plays (Hoffner 1976; Noegel 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997). Enki further instructs Atrahasis to build a boat that will save his family and a great deal of animal life. For his wisdom and ability to understand Enki's secret message (the name "Atrahasis" means "exceedingly wise"), he is spared. The flood lasts seven days and nights and concludes with Atrahasis leaving the ark and performing sacrifices to the gods. The assembly of gods is then moved to a compromise position; instead of completely annihilating humanity, they decree that sterility, infant mortality, and other forms of childlessness will forever trouble humankind.

Epics of Sargon

We also possess several fragments of Akkadian epics that concern King Sargon (*ca.* 2334–2279 BCE). Two of these epics, “Sargon the conquering hero” and “Sargon in the lands beyond the cedar forest,” date to the Old Babylonian period (*ca.* 2003–1595 BCE). The first of these is so fragmentary that it defies easy translation, though it is clear that it glorifies nine of Sargon’s military victories, one of which, in a way reminiscent of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, required that he traverse a land of deep darkness. The second Sargon epic, also reminiscent of some passages in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tells of Sargon’s quest to the cedar forests beyond the Amanus mountains. There he apparently requests a divine omen, to which the goddess Irnina responds by encouraging him to destroy the land of Maldaban.

Among the cuneiform texts discovered at Amarna in central Egypt that date to the fourteenth century BCE is a copy of another short epic which scholars refer to as “Sargon and the Lord of Purushkhanda” (its ancient title was “King of Battle”). It tells the story of how the merchants of Purushkhanda, a city in central Anatolia, called upon Sargon of Akkad to save them from the oppression of their own king Nur-Daggal. Despite the concerns of his own officers, Sargon launches on the distant trek, a motif the story perhaps borrows from the *Gilgamesh* epic (Franke 1995). Sargon arrives at the city, and while Nur-Daggal and his army are feasting and becoming drunk, he storms the city, tears down its walls, and kills its mighty men. Nur-Daggal capitulates and so Sargon retains him as a puppet king, returning home three years later (see also Chapter 17, by Beckman).

The transformation of Akkadian epic traditions

Beginning in the eighteenth century BCE we begin to see some important changes in the way some Mesopotamian poets composed their Akkadian epics. In a marked departure from earlier traditions, save for the Sumerian *Shulgi* epic (see above), these new epics extol the heroic exploits of living kings, not past heroes. Moreover, they constitute literary hybrids in which elements of royal inscriptions are interwoven with sophisticated literary tropes and genres found in the more ancient epics. The mixture of the ancient and the contemporary has led scholars to label them as “historical epics.”

Three such texts exist, the first of which, the *Epic of Zimri-Lim*, details the military deeds of Zimri Lim (*ca.* 1776–1761 BCE) king of Mari, a city located on the central Euphrates river (Charpin and Durand 1985), and therefore on the periphery of Mesopotamia. The second, the *Epic of Adad-Nirari*, lauds the military accomplishments of the Assyrian monarch Adad-Nirari I (*ca.* 1307–1275 BCE). The third, the *Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I*, praises the Assyrian monarch Tukulti-Ninurta I (*ca.* 1244–1208 BCE) for his victory over Babylon in 1235 BCE (Weidner 1939/41; Machinist 1978). The tradition of composing historical epics continues into the following centuries and is exemplified perhaps best by a poem praising the Assyrian monarch Shalmanezar III (*ca.* 858–824 BCE) and his conquest of Urartu in eastern Anatolia.

Interpreting Mesopotamian Epic

Mesopotamian epic as folklore

It has for some time been common practice in scholarship to interpret Mesopotamian epics in accordance with advances derived from the study of world folklore (e.g., Limet 1972; Komoróczy 1974; Alster 1974, 1976, 1995; Berlin 1983; Edzard 1994). Such an approach seeks to identify universal, or nearly universal, narrative techniques, structures,

and themes (Thompson 1955–8), sometimes called “mythic patterns” (Lord 1990; see also Chapters 14 and 3, by Sasson and Edmunds). A number of these patterns have been identified and represent “firsts” in world literature. One often finds, for example, a special relationship between the goddess and the hero (e.g., Enmerkar and Inanna, Gilgamesh and Ishtar) who is frequently semi-divine (see Chapters 6 and 7, by Nagy and Louden). Often this hero has miraculous origins (e.g., the births of Shulgi) or is saved from grave danger while still an infant (e.g., Sargon). Sometimes he is even an unlikely choice for a hero (e.g., Lugalbanda is the youngest of eight sons). An adversary often demands the surrender of the hero’s community, which leads to the summoning of a messenger (e.g., Lugalbanda), and causes the hero to prepare for a threatening encounter (e.g., Lord of Aratta and Enmerkar). The encounter frequently requires that the hero undertake quests to distant and dangerous places (e.g., Lugalbanda to Uruk, Gilgamesh to the Underworld, Sargon to Purushkhanda) which distinguish him from ordinary men. These travels are filled with exotic things and fabulous creatures (e.g., Gilgamesh visits the Scorpion-man and a garden of jeweled trees). The return and reintegration of the hero often marks a transformation of character (e.g., Gilgamesh’s new understanding of humanity (Afanasjeva 1974)) and often confers upon him a special status (Lugalbanda obtains “saintly” status (Vanstiphout 2002)). While on their journeys one also finds heroes performing miraculous feats that force their adversaries to admit defeat (e.g., Enmerkar’s contests with the Lord of Aratta). The hero also demonstrates superior wisdom and cunning at critical moments in the story (Enmerkar beguiles the Lord of Aratta, Lugalbanda outwits his jealous brothers), but nevertheless shows unexpected kindness toward his adversaries (e.g., Gilgamesh does not kill Agga, Sargon does not kill Nur-Daggal).

Scholars often use such themes to demonstrate how Mesopotamian epic draws upon popular oral traditions (see Chapter 13, by J. Foley) and interpret them as serving didactic purposes, especially to demonstrate the superiority of knowledge and wisdom over physical might. Thus, some epics have been read as didactic tools for teaching important lessons in life, an assessment that finds support from a close reading of the literary development of heroes’ characters (Afanasjeva 1974; Moran 1995).

Mesopotamian epics as propaganda

Scholars also have long examined Mesopotamian epics as propaganda since they appear to function as paradigms for justifying the military campaigns of later rulers (Alster 1974; Klein 1976; Renger 1978). Indeed, there can be little doubt that the increasingly powerful institution of kingship played a significant role in the creation and promulgation of the earliest epic poems (e.g., Sumerian epics and the Shulgi epic). As propaganda they would have served to promote a sort of nationalism (Landsberger 1960; Berlin 1983), and would have been disseminated through the royal court, possibly in the form of entertainment, and through the scribal academies, in the form of textual models for emulation and education. It is possible that the royal house encouraged some epics to circulate orally in the general populace as well, though we cannot know this for certain (Laessøe 1953).

Be this as it may, Mesopotamian epics were probably not written simply to justify the military efforts of contemporary kings, for the military exploits extolled in these texts often say less about a particular royal ideology than about competition for land, water, and labor, and about access to natural resources (Liverani 1995). Moreover, the heroic achievements of the kings whose names these poems celebrate often are predicated upon their obedience to the gods and their omens, and in some cases the hero in question is an En, a “priestly king.” Thus, we also must understand these epics as serving the theological and political ideologies of Mesopotamian ritual experts (Moran 1995; Parpola 1998; Vanstiphout 2002). It is probable that Mesopotamian epics enjoyed multiple

audiences and thus served many different purposes (Alster 1992; Cooper 2001). Some of these epics might even contain elements of political opposition (Michalowski 2003).

Mesopotamian epics and literary criticism

The pervasive influence of literary criticism has also shaped the way scholars approach Mesopotamian epics by shedding light on their sophisticated literary forms and devices (e.g., Abusch 1993a, 1993b; Moran 1987; Hallo 1990; Kilmer 1996; Maier 1997; Noegel, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997). These changes in perspective have been accompanied by a concomitant change in the way we understand the historical contexts of these texts (e.g., Klein 1976; Frahm 1999; Abusch 2001a, cf. Berlin 1983). They also have led to, and have been influenced by, a more thorough knowledge of the close interaction between written and oral modes of textual transmission in Mesopotamia (Vanstiphout 1992; Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992; Alster 1992, 1995). These changes in perspective, coupled with a greater appreciation for the interdisciplinarity of the ancient scribal profession (see Chapter 10, by Haslam), as well as an increased knowledge of changing literary tastes, have led scholars to question the often rigid (and almost always western) classificatory schemes that distinguish one literary genre from another.

As a result scholars have begun to see the generic boundaries of Mesopotamian epic, indeed of much of Mesopotamian literature, as far more fluid. It is now seems likely that when composing their epics, Mesopotamian bards utilized a stock repertoire of literary expressions and features common to other genres as well (e.g., hymns, prayers, proverbs, love songs, letters, didactic literature, historical annals, and myths (see, e.g., Hallo 1990)). Depending on the historical period in question, therefore, one or more of these genres had a greater impact upon, or were impacted by, the epic traditions. Thus, while monumental building accounts and autobiographical inscriptions, in particular, may have provided some of the literary influences on early epic (Alster 1995), in later periods, epics appear to have influenced historical annals and hymns (Liverani 1995), as well as *narû* inscriptions (Renger 1978; Westenholz, 1983). This rather fluid state of exchange between genres makes some texts difficult to categorize (see, e.g., Volk 1995).

Mesopotamian epic and other modes of interpretation

Changes in the interpretation of Mesopotamian epic also have come about under the influence of feminist criticism and ritual theory. The former has given scholars a clearer understanding of the cultural stereotypes and the literary roles that women play in Mesopotamian epic (Harris 1990; Frymer-Kensky 1992). The latter has allowed them to read the epics as representing rites of passage (Falkowitz 1983; Vanstiphout 2002; Mills 2002, but cf. Alster 1990) and to see them as confirming cultural values concerning the sacred (Capomacchia 2001).

As new methods of analysis are brought to bear upon Mesopotamian epics (e.g., discourse analysis, see Buccellati 1990, and poetics, see Michalowski 1996), they undoubtedly will yield additional insights into the cultural values and literary tastes of the ancient Mesopotamians. New methods of interpretation, however, can only confirm what scholars of Mesopotamian literature and the ancient Mesopotamian scribes themselves have always known: that Mesopotamian epic traditions are as rich in meaning as they are timeless.

FURTHER READING

Good general introductions to Mesopotamian epic

Alster 1995; Bottéro 1995; Jacobsen 1976, 1987; Komoróczy 1975; Limet 1972; Michalowski 1995; Renger 1978; Schmidt 1995; Westenholz 1997; Wilcke 1971.

Translations and textual analyses of Sumerian epics

Alster 1973, 1990; Berlin 1979; Bing 1997; Cohen 1973; Cooper and Heimpel 1983; Edzard 1991; Ellis 1982; Falkowitz 1983; George 1999; Hallo 1983; Hallo and Younger 1997; Hruška 1974; Jacobsen 1976, 1987; Katz 1993; Klein 1983; Kramer 1938, 1944a, 1944b, 1946, 1949, 1952; Kramer and Jacobsen 1954; Römer 1980; Shaffer 1983; Vanstiphout 1992, 1998, 2002; Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992; Volk 1995; Wilcke 1969, 1971.

Translations and textual analyses of Akkadian epics

Abusch 1986, 1993a, 1993b, 2001a; Bottéro 1992a; Campbell-Thompson 1930; Cavigneaux and Renger 2000; Charpin and Durand 1985; Dalley 1989; Ferry 1992; Foster 1993, 1995; Gadd 1966; Gardiner and Maier 1984; George 1999; George and Al-Rawi 1996; Hallo and Younger 1997; Hecker 1974; Heidel 1946; Kovacs 1989; Lambert and Millard 1969; Landsberger 1960, 1968; Lord 1990; Machinist 1978; Maier 1997; Mason 2003; Moran 1987, 1995; Parpola 1997b; Sandars 1960; Speiser 1950; Tigay 1982; Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992; Vulpe 1994; Weidner 1939/41; von Weiher 1980, 1983; Westenholz 1983, 1997; Wilcke 1977.