

Gilgamesh

The world's oldest story - and astronomical text book

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'The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is alive and wriggling. You might as well try and catch hold of an eel in the water as imagine you can get hold of the *Epic*.' [1]

So starts Robert Temple's attempt to restore the oldest story in the world. Set in what is now Iraq, the Epic of Gilgamesh has its origin in the Sumerian era c.3,000 BCE. What has come down to us are various clay tablet fragments written around 1,800-1,600 BCE onwards in the Akkadian cuneiform script, from which academics argumentatively put together a more-or-less coherent whole. How far back the tales stretch into oral tradition we can only speculate, but the enormities of time are overwhelming. Undoubtedly, this is the world's oldest surviving story.

Arguably it is the world's best selling story, too, as the *Epic* remained in circulation for at least 1,500 years. Judging from the numbers of fragments of tablets in different places, it seems to have been the standard text for training pupils in the Akkadian scriptoria. Gilgamesh's saga develops into those of Hercules or even Odysseus in Classical Greece. Aspects of Plato's writings can also be seen to have been seeded by the Sumerian saga. Furthermore, in the Gilgamesh legends is the story of a Deluge and a carefully constructed cubic ark of sacred measurements - the prototype of the Biblical tale, although the cuneiform tablets predate the biblical tale by at least a millenia and a half.

While the Gilgamesh tale still unfolds as a cracking yarn, we would be better seeing the fragments of baked clay as originally being the aide memoirs of actors. This epic was drama - undoubtedly sacred drama - rather as the earliest Greek theatre was also a dramatised ritual. Indeed, it is reasonable to suppose that there was an unbroken tradition between the performances of the *Epic* and the *Bacchae*.

Gilgamesh - the name means 'Gilga the hero' - seems to have been a historical king and priest of Uruk, although direct confirmation is lacking. Yet, at the same time, he is purely mythical. One text states 'Gilgamesh is Nergal, who resides in the underworld.' Likewise, Hercules was also depicted as Nergal. Gilgamesh also gets woven into the Sumerian beliefs which held that their civilisation was founded by beings that were half fish and half men. They, too, were a persistent part of middle eastern myth and were still featured in literature 2,000 years after the Gilgamesh tales were first recorded.

There is no one explanation of the Gilgamesh material which fits. The reader must constantly adjust to different depths of meaning in the tales. The language is more of a code whereby a superficially secular saga could conceal deeper meanings by way of puns, double-entendres and symbolism.

Above all, the tales seem to resound with astronomical lore. The major characters are usually those of the prominent constellations. The Sun God appears throughout the Epic in a leading role. The Moon Goddess pops in too now and then.

Distances are measured in a unit which simultaneously means both time and distance. In one tale Gilgamesh travels the distance of 'one month and fifteen days'; the traversing of 'fifty intervals' [of time/space] recurs. These should be sufficient clues to the fact that the events being described are astronomical, as the movement of stars around the heavens at a constant rate means that distance and time are, indeed, interchangeable units.

At one level, *all* the events described in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* have astronomical connotations. 'One could go so far as to say that the *Epic* is cosmic and celestial at its most esoteric and meaningful level and that its other aspects are relatively superficial.' [2] A German scholar, Werner Papke, has published a translation (into German) of the *Epic* which interprets in great detail this 'astro-poem' [3]. If his arguments are correct then the Babylonians knew sufficient about astronomy to have been able to record such niceties as the precession of the equinoxes - the very long cosmic cycle which causes the sun to rise in a different zodiacal sign after two thousand years or so. This has, of course, entered New Age-speak as entering the 'Age of Aquarius', as we leave (or have already left) the 'Age of Pisces'. The discovery of equinoctial precession is conventionally attributed to the Greek Hipparchos in the second century BCE but, in fact, he was simply translating from Babylonian texts. Out of interest, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was recorded during the 'Age of Taurus'. One strikingly cosmological section in the *Epic* describes the sacrifice of a bull:

Enkidu chased him and the Bull of Heaven.
He seized him by the thick hairy tip of his tail.
He thrust his sword between the nape of his neck
And the horns of his head.
When they had killed the bull, they tore out his heart,
And placed it before Shamash the Sun.

Istah then curses Gilgamesh and Enkidu for slaying the Bull of Heaven.

When Enkidu heard the curse of Ishtar,
He tore loose the right thigh of the Bull of Heaven,
flung it skywards up into her face:
'If I could reach you,
I would do the same to you as to him!
I would hang his entrails by your side!'

This section leaps into focus when it is explained that the constellation which we know as the Plough, Great Bear or Big Dipper was to the ancient Egyptians 'The Thigh', specifically a bull's thigh. 'The Thigh' makes a complete circuit about the Pole Star every 24 hours, a motion resembling being flung [4].

A recurring formulaic phrase describes Gilgamesh as holding an axe and a dagger or sword. But if we see Gilgamesh as the constellation Orion, then the sword or dagger in his belt is plain for all to see.

Orion features heavily in the *Epic*, as does the planet Mercury - especially its complicated motions about the sky which earned it the name 'The Wanderer' and, no doubt, gave the Classical Greeks the notion that he was acting as messenger between

the gods. One tablet bearing a few verses of the *Epic* also contains the astonishingly reliable information that Mercury had 2,673 helical risings every 848 years. We may never be known for certain to what extent the looped movements of Mercury were linked to the Sumerians' favoured divination technique - observations of the convoluted intestines of sheep or lambs specially sacrificed daily. An obscure passage in the *Epic* would seem to be describing the forms of intestines and livers when inspected by augers. Suffice to say that astrology, as a divination technique, came much later than Gilgamesh.

As a specific example of how this information is encoded in the *Epic*, consider the statement which translates that Gilgamesh is 'two-thirds god, one-third man'. But parents come in pairs. Nobody could be two-thirds English and one-third Irish. Clearly, we are being asked to look into the symbolism. As Gilgamesh was associated with Mercury, perhaps this is an attempt to embody the observation that this planet does not move through the whole zodiac. Instead, it moves through two-thirds of it.

Other statements relating to Mercury are even more complexly encoded. One tale involves the god Huwawa, cedar trees and a door or gate. The latter word is cognate with 'origin' or 'commencement' and (in another early language of the region) 'vagina'. The word for 'cedar' in Babylonian seems to have originally meant 'the continual doer' - a very apt epithet for Mercury. Moving on to the early Egyptian texts, the word for 'cedar' is 'set', the same as that for the planet Mercury and also the name given to a strange dog-like animal with a prominently forked tail. Masks depicting Huwawa (otherwise known as Hubaba, and whose name may mean 'the wicked one') show the face covered with convoluted intestines - as noted, this mimics the complex path of Mercury in the sky. Similar cosmic complexities abound when the *Epic* refers to pillars, gateposts, bolts and such like.

The Babylonian name for Mercury - Bibbu - might link with the Egyptian word *beb* 'to go round', 'to revolve', 'to circulate'. However, Bibbu was also used to refer to Mars and Saturn. Perhaps the original meaning may have been something akin to 'circler', just as the Greek word for 'planet' originally meant 'wanderer'.

There is an obscure word, *allak*, which recurs in the *Epic*. While *allaku* means 'wanderer' and 'messenger' - as noted, an apt description of the planets, especially Mercury - *allak* seems to mean 'rim of a wheel', although early translators have tried to force the sense into 'road' or 'way', despite their being other words with this exact meaning. But if, instead, we regard this wheel-rim as another reference to cosmic orbital motion, the texts translate without contradiction.

Three gods feature in the *Epic* - Anu, Enlil and Enki. At one level they are grandfather, father and son (in the same way as the Greek gods Uranus, Cronus and Zeus). At another level the names should be interpreted as three separate bands of the sky. Enki's was the southern sky, which contains the star Canopus in the constellation Argo. Interestingly, Anu and Enlil are associated with 'doubles' living in the Underworld. Is this astro-poetic speak for the astronomical observation of these sky bands continuing 'under the horizon'?

The nearest we have to our present zodiacal characters are the Bull and 'Scorpion Man'. Not a Sumerian comic strip hero, but what we know call Scorpio. In the *Epic* the scorpion people are the guardians of the gates of the rising and setting sun.

In the eighth of the eleven reconstructed tales is the repeated refrain:

'On the horizon there appeared
The first intimations of dawn . . .'

This is not for purely poetic purposes but reflects the obsession of early astronomer/priests with what are known as 'heliacal risings' of stars and planets. That is, when the star or planet rises over the horizon at the same moment as dawn breaks.

But above all, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* concerns the activities of the star we know as Sirius, but to the Babylonians as the 'Arrow Star'. This is situated just beneath the feet of Orion (Gilgamesh). Should this surprise us? After all, ancient Egyptian sacred astronomy maintained this emphasis on the heliacal rising of Sirius, basing the new year of their calendars on this event (rather than giving prominence to solar or lunar calendrical events). Sirius (at the latitude of Egypt) is invisible for seventy days. Egyptian myths record in detail how the star progresses through the Underworld during this timespan, before its 'rebirth' on the visible part of the great sky wheel.

For all this emphasis on the archaeoastronomy, we should not forget that *The epic of Gilgamesh* is a true literary masterpiece, with a rich fund of sub plots developing throughout the story, and more than a few passages that provide a poetic insight into the human dilemmas being related. The tales also 'work' at other levels at the same time. For instance, Iris Furlong has argued that the *Epic* (in its earliest written form) betrays a marked antagonism between Gilgamesh as priest-king of Uruk and Ishtar or Inanna, who was the city's goddess [5]. There are veiled references to the traditional Sumerian rites of the sacred marriage of the king with the goddess. Yet Gilgamesh is a ruler whose power lies in his own heroic achievements. Although it is frightfully difficult to identify humour in an ancient or alien culture, there may be elements of a lampoon aimed at the outmoded and discredited concept of kingship based on worship of an all-providing goddess. Furlong also provides a useful simplification of the story which makes excellent preparation for reading Temple's full translation.

Temple's early book - *The Sirius mystery* [6] - understandably met with hostile criticism. Unlike *The Sirius mystery*, Temple's more mature offering does not attempt to link a vast number of complex myths into a tenuously-connected plethora of speculation. Nevertheless, on his own admission he is willing to offer daring guesses to help fill the gaps - but he does warn the reader when the ground is less than certain, and the overall result is frankly academic compared to his youthful Sirius fantasies.

References

- 1: *He who saw everything - a verse translation of the Epic of Gilgamesh*, Robert Temple, Rider 1991. Unless otherwise attributed, all the information in this article is taken from this book.
- 2: *ibid.*
- 3: *Die Sterne von Babylon*, W. Papke, Gustav Luebbe Verlag, 1989.

4: The major importance of the Plough in early astronomy has been discussed in Sir Norman Lockyer's *The dawn of astronomy*, Cassell, 1894 and Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend's *Hamlet's Mill*, Macmillan, 1969.

5: Iris Furlong, 'The mythology of the ancient Near East' in Carolyne Larrington (ed.), *The feminist companion to mythology*, Pandora, 1992.

6: *The Sirius mystery*, R. Temple, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1976.

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