

ԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՄԱԼՍԱՐԱՆ
ԱՐԵՎԵԼԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՖԱԿՈՒԼՏԵՏ

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**Հրատարակվում է Երևանի պետական համալսարանի
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գիտական խորհրդի որոշմամբ**

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ՈՐԲ Է». Ո՛Վ Է ՄԵՂԱՎՈՐ ԳԵՐՄԱՆԻԱՅՈՒՄ

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պատմություն, Երևան, 2018, էջ 364.....141-144

Nshan Thomas Kesecker¹

THE HISTORICAL GILGAMESH AND KINGSHIP IN THIRD-MILLENNIUM MESOPOTAMIA

Keywords: Sumer, Akkad, Mesopotamia, kingship, Ancient Near East, Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh remains one of the most important contributions of Mesopotamian civilization. Its wide-ranging influence can be observed in a large number of epic tales and stories, including the Bible. Many scholars have also speculated about the origins of the epic and its main protagonist, Gilgamesh. From the epic, we know that he was a king of Uruk who was responsible for the construction of its imposing walls. But who was the real Gilgamesh and why was he such a memorable character? This study examines the available historical evidence regarding the enigmatic historical figure of King Gilgamesh. Some of the details of the Gilgamesh epic and stories paint the portrait of a powerful, if not exceptional, king of Uruk who was an important actor in the inter-city conflicts that plagued Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, prior to the arguably imperialistic unification efforts of later kings such as Lugalzagesi and Sargon.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is the most famous text from ancient Mesopotamia. It was first discovered and translated in the mid-nineteenth century and became famous due to its section regarding the Flood. It is clear that the Epic of Gilgamesh was highly influential and this can be observed in the Bible and much later epic tales. However, the historical origins of the epic remain shrouded in mystery. The historical Gilgamesh was a king of Uruk in the early third millennium BC, probably around 2800 or 2700.² This article focuses on what we can parse from the epic regarding

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² Benjamin Foster, "Introduction," in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ed. Benjamin Foster (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), xi.

the historical Gilgamesh, the political landscape of the time in which he reigned, and the political developments of Early Dynastic Mesopotamia (2900-2350).

First, let us briefly go over the development of the Gilgamesh epic. The earliest stories related to Gilgamesh are from six known poems in Sumerian that have come down to us from copies made in the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods from around 2100-1700 BC.³ It is important to note that Sumerian was quite likely a dead or dying language at that time. These stories are “Gilgamesh and Akka,” “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” (in two versions), “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld,” “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven,” and the “Death of Gilgamesh.”⁴ Scholars consider these to be separate compositions about Gilgamesh rather than one complete epic. The first known Akkadian version of Gilgamesh comes from the Old Babylonian period, and this is the first version of the Gilgamesh story that is a true epic.⁵ Unfortunately, the Old Babylonian version is not well-preserved and there are numerous gaps in the narrative. However, the Old Babylonian version remains a very important source that even fills in some of the lacunae of the later, standard version of the epic. It was also sometime in the Middle Babylonian period, perhaps around 1200BC, a scribe named Sin-leqe-unnin compiled what became known as the standard version of the epic, in Standard Babylonian Akkadian.⁶ The major modern translations of Gilgamesh follow this version, which is the most complete of all the narratives. Of course, with each version of the epic came several additions and alterations to the original story.

As noted above, Gilgamesh probably reigned in the early part of the third millennium BC. However, the earliest written fragments regarding Gilgamesh we have, the Sumerian poems, are from around 2000BC, with the vast majority of the early texts being from the Old Babylonian period

³ Foster, “Introduction,” xii.

⁴ Douglas Frayne, “The Sumerian Gilgamesh Poems,” in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ed. Benjamin Foster (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 99.

⁵ William L. Moran, “The Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ed. Benjamin Foster (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 172.

⁶ Moran, “Masterpiece,” 175.

(1800-1650). This does not necessarily have to mean that these texts were composed in the Old Babylonian period and it is quite probable that they were copies of late Third Millennium texts, perhaps from the Ur III period (2100-2000).⁷ This is a very important point to note. During the Ur III period, the Sumerian King Shulgi boasted of his academic prowess.⁸ Sumerian literature also underwent a so-called “renaissance” in this period, led by him. In some of his texts, he claims to be a relative of Gilgamesh.⁹ Unfortunately, the scale and scope of these revisions are unknown, making it difficult to say whether the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems were significantly altered in this period from possible earlier forms. It is in fact quite possible that the known Sumerian Gilgamesh poems were composed during his reign.

In the Early Dynastic (ED) period, Mesopotamia was a collection of competing city-states.¹⁰ Though society was literate and there are many documents from this period, they are all economic texts in nature and deal mostly with transactions. However, in the middle of the ED period, we start to see the first few texts that do deal with historical themes: royal inscriptions. Most of the first royal inscriptions deal with construction or temple offerings, but, especially in the late ED period, many kings begin to elaborate on their military achievements. In doing so, they reveal important details regarding politics in Mesopotamia in this period. One of the most important early texts is the Kish prisoner plaque, which was discovered just a few years ago.¹¹ In the text, the king of Kish describes capturing a large number of prisoners after a battle with another city-state. This is very much an echo of a theme in Gilgamesh – his city’s rivalry with Kish. In the Sumerian King List, a text that recounts the succession of kingship in Mesopotamia from antediluvian times, Kish and Uruk often trade places as

⁷ Frayne, “Sumerian Gilgamesh,” 99.

⁸ Jacob Klein, “Shulgi of Ur: King of a Neo-Sumerian Empire,” *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East. Volume 2*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 848.

⁹ Klein, “Shulgi,” 847.

¹⁰ For a summary of the history of ED period, see Nshan T. Kesecker, “Lugalzagesi: the first emperor of Mesopotamia?,” *Aramazd: Armenian Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12, no. 1 (2018), 76-95.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this plaque, see Piotr Steinkeller. “An archaic ‘prisoner plaque’ from kiš,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’Archéologie Orientale* 107 (2013): 131–157.

the main sites of Mesopotamian kingship.¹² We see this theme in the Sumerian Gilgamesh stories. In Gilgamesh and Huwawa, Gilgamesh makes a joke about letting the monstrous Huwawa marry his “sister,” Enmebaragesi.¹³ Enmebaragesi was, of course, the king of Kish and Gilgamesh’s rival. Gilgamesh and Akkai’s entirely about Akka’s siege of Uruk. Akka is the son of Enmebaragesi.¹⁴ These themes are more prevalent in the early Gilgamesh stories and perhaps faded over time as Kish’s early third-millennium political dominance was slowly forgotten.

The most important textual evidence of Gilgamesh’s existence are two very short royal inscriptions from Kish in the early ED period, which mention Mebarasi, a “king of Kish.”¹⁵ This Mebarasi is almost certainly the same Enmebaragesi from the Gilgamesh stories. These texts, from Enmebaragesi himself, show that he was in fact a historical king. Gilgamesh was also probably deified by the late ED period. Besides these texts, we also have the aforementioned Sumerian King List, which refers to Gilgamesh as a king of Uruk in this period.¹⁶ A much later text from a king of Uruk in approximately the year 1900BC states that Gilgamesh constructed the famous walls of Uruk.¹⁷ The walls have been dated to approximately 2700BC, around the time in the ED period when Gilgamesh would have reigned.¹⁸ The Enmebaragesi texts are also from around this time. All of these indirect references show that Gilgamesh was in fact a king of Uruk around 2700BC, though of course there is no evidence from the famous king himself, or his immediate predecessors and successors. This lack of direct evidence makes it difficult to make any concrete statements about the historical Gilgamesh. However, it is not unheard of for

¹² See Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, Writings from the Ancient World 19, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 117-126.

¹³ Frayne, “Sumerian Gilgamesh,” 110.

¹⁴ Frayne, “Sumerian Gilgamesh,” 100.

¹⁵ Douglas R. Frayne, *Presargonic Period (2700-2350 BC)*, The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia 1, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 55-57.

¹⁶ Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, 121.

¹⁷ Foster, “Introduction,” xi.

¹⁸ Foster, “Introduction,” xi.

there to be few historical references to Gilgamesh despite his heroic deeds – the kings of the Sargonic dynasty, who conquered vast expanses of territory and cemented their own places in Mesopotamian legends for millennia, never even mentioned their predecessors, and this causes confusion over which of Sargon’s sons succeeded him first (they never mention their father, Sargon, either).¹⁹

The most important historical rival of Uruk in the ED period was Kish, which as noted above was also referenced in the Sumerian Gilgamesh stories. Sometime after the collapse of Uruk’s unchallenged dominance in the late fourth millennium BC, kings of Kish began to wield significant power in Mesopotamia. The exact nature of the hegemony of Kish is unclear.²⁰ There are no extant texts of the kings of Uruk that reigned in this period and texts from Kish are few. One viewpoint is that Kish’s power was largely symbolic and was not necessarily related to the city of Kish.²¹ One text that supports this viewpoint is the famous Vulture Stele, which details a border dispute between two other cities, Umma and Lagash, from the Lagashite point of view.²² In this text, Eannatum, king of Lagash, mentions that at an earlier time, the king of Kish, Mesilim, drew the boundary between Umma and Lagash and it was the violation of this boundary drawn by a King of Kish that sparked the conflict between Umma and Lagash. We also have some texts from Mesilim himself.²³ In the late ED period, kings from other cities would take the title king of Kish. It would later come to signify, “king of everything,” a play on words with the meaning of the word “kishatum” in Akkadian.²⁴ It is difficult to say when this play on

¹⁹ For a recent discussion regarding this confusion, see Piotr Steinkeller, “An Ur III Manuscript of the Sumerian King List,” in *Literatur, Politik und Recht in Mesopotamien: Festschrift für Claus Wilcke*, ed. Walther Sallaberger, Konrad Volk, and Annette Zgoll, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 278.

²⁰ For a recent discussion of Kish’s hegemony in light of recent evidence, see Steinkeller, “Archaic Prisoner Plaque.”

²¹ For an example of this viewpoint, see Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 50.

²² For the inscription and a discussion, see Frayne, *Presargonic Period*, 126-140.

²³ For these texts, see Frayne, *Presargonic Period*, 69-71.

²⁴ For a dated, but comprehensive discussion of this issue, see Tohru Maeda, “King of Kish’ in Pre-Sargonic Sumer,” *Orient: Report of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 17 (1981).

words began. It may have already existed in the ED period, since Akkadian was already widely known, spoken, and a form of it was written as well. Maeda traces the usage of different titles of rulers, tracing them from “city-state” ideology to “regional authority,” to perhaps outright “imperial” thought.²⁵ Though I agree that the shift in rhetoric is important, it is not quite so ideologically significant, and that imperial ideology is developed in the late ED period. The king Eannatum of Lagash is the prime example of an ED monarch who launched campaigns far outside the boundaries of his own city-state, even attacking cities outside of Sumer, and briefly took the title “King of Kish.”²⁶ Though his control of these areas did not last very long at all, it shows that Mesopotamian kings were, in fact, keen on expanding their power to other areas and controlling them as well. Bringing this history back to Gilgamesh – all of these kings reigned after the time Gilgamesh was probably the king of Uruk, and these themes of expanding royal control over neighboring opponents are completely absent in the Gilgamesh epic entirely. In fact, in Gilgamesh and Akka, Gilgamesh, in the end, forgives Akka completely and allows him to return to Kish unharmed. It is thus possible that Gilgamesh himself predates the imperialist titularies and rhetoric developed by later kings, such as Lugalkiḡinedudu, Lugalzagesi, and arguably perfected by Sargon’s grandson, Naram-Sin.

One theme in Gilgamesh that is echoed in many historical texts is the expedition to the cedar mountains. The Cedar Mountains most probably refer to Lebanon and the area around it. The wood from the cedars was utilized in many important construction projects, especially temples, with Gilgamesh himself mentioning that the scent provided by cedars is pleasing to the gods the construction project is dedicated to. This was an important task that was completed not only by monarchs with imperialist tendencies, but also by leaders of city-states.²⁷

²⁵ Tohru Maeda, “Royal Inscriptions of Lugalzagesi and Sargon,” *Orient: Report of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 40 (2005), 4.

²⁶ Frayne, *Presargonic Period*, 125.

²⁷ A prime example of this is Meskigala, lord of Adab. See Frayne, *Presargonic Period*, 33-34.

It is difficult to say anything definitive about who King Gilgamesh might have been. We know that the circumstantial evidence and references in the epic and in the Sumerian stories place him in about 2700 BC. We know that in that period, the Sumerian city-states were in several intercity conflicts, with one of the main rivalries being that between Uruk and its northern rival, Kish. Enmebaragesi, a king of Kish mentioned in the Gilgamesh epic and stories, has texts from about the same period that prove his existence. The walls of Uruk were also constructed in that timeframe. The historical Gilgamesh was probably a king of Uruk who was able to resist the campaigns of the kings of Kish, constructed the walls of Uruk, and undertook a journey to the Cedar Mountains near or in Lebanon, which is an activity also attested in royal inscriptions from the Early Dynastic and Sargonic periods (though of course, Gilgamesh's combat with Humbaba, the forest guardian, is not found in the royal inscriptions). Unfortunately, the several edits, revisions, and compilations of the Gilgamesh stories over the course of several thousands of years prevents us from knowing what details are original and which ones are later additions or alterations to better suit the time period in which it was edited. However, some of the details of the Gilgamesh epic and stories paint the portrait of a powerful, if not exceptional, king of Uruk who was an important actor in the inter-city conflicts that plagued Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, prior to the arguably imperialistic unification efforts of later kings such as Lugalzagesi and Sargon.

**ՊԱՏՄԱԿԱՆ ԳԻԼԳԱՄԵՇԸ ԵՎ ԱՐՔԱՅԱԿԱՆ
ԻՇԵԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ Ք. Ա. ԵՐՐՈՐԴ ՀԱՉԱՐԱՄՅԱԿԻ
ՄԻՉԱԳԵՏՔՈՒՄ**

**Նշան Քեսեբեր
(Ամփոփում)**

Գիլգամեշի էպոսը իրավամբ համարվում է միջագետքյան քաղաքակրթության ամենակարևոր կոթողներից մեկը: Էպոսի հետքերը կարելի է գտնել տարածաշրջանի ժողովուրդների բազմաթիվ էպիկական պատումներում, ավանդազրույցներում, ինչպես նաև Աստվածաշնչում, ինչը վկայում է նրա՝ աշխարհագրական լայն ընդգրկում ունեցող ազդեցության մասին: Գիտական գրականության մեջ կան բազմաթիվ ենթադրություններ էպոսի ծագման և նրա գլխավոր հերոսի մասին: Էպոսից մեզ հայտնի է, որ Գիլգամեշը Ուրուկի թագավորն էր, և ինքն է կառուցել քաղաքի մեծ պարիսպները: Բայց ո՞վ էր իրականում պատմական Գիլգամեշը և ինչու՞ էր նրա կերպարն այդքան հիշարժան: Այս հոդվածը քննում է Գիլգամեշ թագավորի՝ որպես պատմական կերպարի մասին առկա փաստերը: Գիլգամեշի էպոսում և առանձին պատումներում առկա որոշ տվյալներից, ինչպես նաև պատմական անուղղակի փաստերից կարելի է եզրակացնել, որ նա ուժեղ և յուրահատուկ թագավոր էր և կարևոր դեր խաղաց վաղդինաստիական կռիվների ընթացքում, որոնք տեղի ունեցան Շումերական քաղաք պետությունների միջև: