PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Edited by **Andrew George**

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'Humankind's first literary achievement . . . *Gilgamesh* should compel us as the well-spring of which we are inheritors . . . Andrew George provides an excellent critical and historical introduction' Paul Binding, *Independent on Sunday*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Epic of Gilgamesh is best known from a version called 'He who saw the Deep', which circulated in Babylonia and Assyria in the first millennium BC. The Babylonians believed this poem to have been the responsibility of a man called Sîn-leqi-unninni, a learned scholar of Uruk whom modern scholars consider to have lived some time about 1200–1000 BC. However, we now know that 'He who saw the Deep' is a revision of one or more earlier versions of the epic. The oldest surviving fragments of the epic are the work of an anonymous Babylonian poet who lived more than 3,700 years ago. The Babylonian epic was composed in Akkadian, but its literary origins lie in five Sumerian poems of even greater antiquity. The Sumerian texts gained their final form probably as court entertainments sung for King Shulgi of Ur of the Chaldees, who reigned in the twenty-first century BC.

ANDREW GEORGE was born in 1955 in Haslemere, Surrey. He was educated at Christ's Hospital, Horsham, and the University of Birmingham, where he studied Assyriology. For a while he kept a public house in Darlaston. He began teaching Akkadian and Sumerian language and literature in 1983 at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, where he is now Professor of Babylonian. In 2006 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy, and in 2011 an Honorary Member of the American Oriental Society.

His research has taken him many times to Iraq to visit Babylon and other ancient sites, and to museums in Baghdad, Europe and North America to read the original clay tablets on which the scribes of ancient Iraq wrote. He has published extensively on Babylonian literature and religion.

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian

Translated with an introduction by
ANDREW GEORGE

SECOND EDITION

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Preface

My first encounter with the magic of Gilgamesh came as a boy when I read this book's predecessor in the Penguin Classics series, Nancy Sandars's prose synthesis of the ancient poems (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 1960). At university I was given the happy opportunity of reading some of the cuneiform text of the epic under the guidance of the foremost expert in Babylonian literature, W. G. Lambert. The work of recovering the text of Gilgamesh from the original clay tablets and preparing what will be only the third scholarly edition of the Babylonian epic has been my principal object of research for the past dozen years. During this time I am lucky to have benefited from the advice and encouragement of many of Gilgamesh's latter-day devotees. Among them I single out for special mention David Hawkins, my colleague at the School of Oriental and African Studies, who has also contributed the translation of a Hittite fragment on p. 54, and Aage Westenholz of the University of Copenhagen, who in the course of making an independent translation of the epic into Danish travelled with me the long and arduous road to Uta-napishti and back. To Antoine Cavigneaux of the University of Geneva and Farouk N. H. Al-Rawi of the University of Baghdad I am indebted for the use of their unpublished book on the Sumerian composition we know as the Death of Gilgamesh. Douglas Frayne of the University of Toronto has shared with me his work in progress on the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems. On several obscure points of Sumerian Mark Geller of University College London and Steve Tinney of the University of Pennsylvania have come to my aid.

The modern translator of Gilgamesh has the advantage of standing on the shoulders of those editors and translators who have gone before him. The list of scholars who during the last century and a half have contributed materially to the recovery of the ancient sources is long

indeed, but among them one should not fail to honour George Smith, who was the first to decipher much of the Babylonian epic and whose pioneering translations of 1875 and 1876 gave the world a first glimpse of its majesty; Paul Haupt, who in 1891 first collected the cuneiform text of the epic; Peter Jensen, whose transliterations of 1900 were the first comprehensive modern edition; R. Campbell Thompson, who in 1930 brought up to date the work of both Haupt and Jensen; and Samuel Noah Kramer, who in the 1930s and '40s first pieced together the Sumerian poems of Gilgamesh. In the often unsung task of adding to our knowledge of the text of the epic no contemporary Assyriologists can match the achievements of Irving Finkel of the British Museum, Egbert von Weiher of the University of Cologne and, especially, W. G. Lambert of the University of Birmingham.

New pieces of Gilgamesh continue to appear. This paperback edition differs from its hardback predecessor in being able to use on p. 87 a fragment of Tablet XI that came to light only in June 1999. My thanks go to its discoverer, Stefan M. Maul of the University of Heidelberg, and to the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin, and the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft for permission to quote it.

A.R.G.

London,
June 1999

Preface to the Second Edition

'New pieces of Gilgamesh continue to appear.' Two decades on from this book's first edition, enough new pieces have appeared to make imperative a full revision of the whole book. This revision not only includes many new pieces, and makes some changes to the translation in other places too, but also reorganizes the material in four chapters, not five.

In Chapter 1, new sources inform and enrich the translations of Tablets I, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII and X of the standard version of the epic. I owe knowledge of most of them to the generosity of two colleagues especially: Stefan M. Maul of the University of Heidelberg, who has used several in his own fine German translation, and Enrique Jiménez of the University of Munich. These new pieces of the standard version, read alongside other, older tablets and fragments, have increased knowledge of the poem in different measure, from single words to whole passages of text. In particular they have finally allowed the complete restoration of the grand opening passage of the prologue; brought a better knowledge of the giant dimensions of the hero; revealed that Enkidu and Shamhat enjoyed not one week of sexual intercourse but two; increased the accounts of the nightmares Gilgamesh had on the journey to the Cedar Forest; enlarged the description of the Cedar Forest and clarified for the first time the correct order of passages of conversation between Gilgamesh and Enkidu as they contemplate the battle to come; added detail to the heroes' assault on Humbaba, his pleas for mercy and their desecration of his forest; and filled out the passage in which Gilgamesh smashes the Stone Ones.

The five individual Sumerian poems of Gilgamesh, formerly relegated to the end of the book, have been brought forward in order to give them the greater prominence that their well-preserved state and

readability deserve. They now appear as Chapter 2. My translations of these Sumerian poems have also been lightly revised to take account of newly discovered fragments and updated knowledge. I am grateful to those who have shared with me new knowledge of the Sumerian poems, especially Konrad Volk of the University of Tübingen, Jacob Klein of Bar-Ilan University and Jeremiah Peterson of the University Museum, Philadelphia.

Several newly published tablets and fragments of second-millennium date make it ever clearer that the content of much of the Babylonian poem presented in Chapter 1 was already established in the Old Babylonian period. We can now observe that many early fragments of the poem tell Gilgamesh's story in much the same language as the later standard version, so that, despite the lapse of many centuries, many lines of poetry are held in common, usually in the same order. Consequently I have felt it permissible to arrange many of the early fragments in an order that matches the standard version, to suggest the skeletal remains of its Old Babylonian ancestor. This new reconstruction is presented in Chapter 3. Other early fragments, which find no place in that reconstruction, are placed in Chapter 4.

A.R.G.

London,
February 2019

Introduction

Ever since the first modern translations were published more than one hundred years ago, the Gilgamesh epic has been recognized as one of the great masterpieces of world literature. One of the early translations, by the German Assyriologist Arthur Ungnad, so inspired the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in 1916 that he became almost intoxicated with pleasure and wonder, and repeated the story to all he met. 'Gilgamesh,' he declared, 'is stupendous!' For him the epic was first and foremost 'das Epos der Todesfurcht', the epic about the fear of death. This universal theme does indeed unite the poem, for in examining the human longing for life eternal, it tells of one man's heroic struggle against death – first for immortal renown through glorious deeds, then for eternal life itself; of his despair when confronted with inevitable failure, and of his eventual realization that the only immortality he may expect is the enduring name afforded by leaving behind some lasting achievement, in tandem with the consoling idea, subtly expressed at the very end of the poem, that the human community is itself eternal.

The fear of death may be one of the epic's principal themes but the poem deals with so much more. As a story of one man's 'path to wisdom', of how he is formed by his successes and failures, it offers many profound insights into the human condition, into life and death and the truths that touch us all. The subject that most held the attention of the royal courts of Babylonia and Assyria was perhaps another topic that underlies much of the poem: the debate on the proper duties of kingship, what a good king should do and should not do. The epic's moral concern is also evident in the exposition of a man's responsibilities to his family. The eternal conflict of nurture and nature – articulated as the benefits of civilization over savagery – is also examined, as too are the rewards of friendship, the nobility of heroic enterprise and the immortality of fame. Artfully woven into

Gilgamesh's own story are the traditional tale of the Deluge, the great flood by which early in human history the gods sought to destroy mankind, and a long description of the gloomy realm of the dead. From all this Gilgamesh emerges as a kind of cultural hero. The wisdom he received at the ends of the earth from the survivor of the Deluge, Uta-napishti, enabled him to restore the temples of the land and their rituals to their ideal state of antediluvian perfection. In the course of his heroic adventures it seems Gilgamesh was the first to dig oases in the desert, the first to fell cedars on Mount Lebanon, the first to discover the techniques of killing wild bulls, of sailing ocean-going craft and of diving for coral.

Amid the momentous themes, the epic is full of absorbing moments, often just minor, incidental details which serve every so often to catch the imagination or to lighten the mood. The text explains in passing why temples take in orphans, how there came to be two New Year's Days in the Babylonian calendar, how the Levantine Rift Valley was riven, how dwarfs came about, why nomads live in tents, why some prostitutes eke out a living on the cruel fringes of society and others enjoy a life of attentive luxury, how it is that doves and swallows cleave to human company but ravens do not, why snakes shed their skins, and so on.

The spell of Gilgamesh has captured many since Rilke, so that over the years the story has been variously reworked into plays, novels and at least two operas. Translations have now appeared in at least sixteen languages and more appear year by year, so that the last decade has added ten to the dozens already published. Among the ten are two in English. Why so many, and why another? There are two replies that answer both these questions. First, a great masterpiece will always attract new renditions and will go on doing so while its worth is still recognized. This goes for Homer and Euripides, Virgil and Horace, Voltaire and Goethe – indeed any classic text, ancient or modern – as well as for Gilgamesh. But the difference with Gilgamesh, as also with other works of ancient Mesopotamian literature, is that we keep finding more of it. Seventy years ago we possessed fewer than forty manuscripts from which to reconstruct the text and there were large gaps in the story. Now we have more than twice that number of manuscripts and fewer gaps. As the years pass the number of available sources will assuredly go on rising. Slowly our knowledge of the text will become better and better, so that one day the

epic will again be complete, as it last was more than two thousand years ago. Sooner or later, as new manuscripts are discovered, this translation, like all others, will be superseded. For the moment, based as it is on first-hand study of very nearly all the available sources, unpublished as well as published, the present rendering offers the epic in its most complete form yet. However, gaps still remain and many preserved lines are still fragmentary; the epic is indeed riddled with holes. In many places the reader must set aside any comparison with the more complete masterpieces of Greek and Latin literature and accept those parts of text that are still incomplete and incoherent as skeletal remains that one day will live again.

The manuscripts of Gilgamesh are cuneiform tablets – smooth, cushion-shaped rectangles of clay inscribed on both sides with wedge-shaped cuneiform writing – and they come from the ancient cities of Mesopotamia, the Levant and Anatolia. Especially in the land that is now Iraq, there are few ancient sites that have not yielded clay tablets. Cuneiform writing was invented in the city-states of lower Mesopotamia in about 3000 BC, when the administration of the great urban institutions, the palace and the temple, became too complex for the human memory to cope with. It developed, with painful slowness, from an accountant's *aide-mémoire* into a system of writing which could express not just simple words and numbers, but all the creativity of the literate mind. And because clay does not easily perish when thrown away or when buried in the ruins of buildings, archaeologists provide us with enormous quantities of clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform characters. These documents range in date across three thousand years of history and in content from the merest chit to the most sophisticated works of science and literature.

Literary compositions that tell the story of Gilgamesh come down to us from several different periods and in several different languages. Some modern renderings disregard the enormous diversity of the material, so that the reader forms a mistaken impression of the epic's contents and state of preservation. In the translations given in this book the texts are segregated according to time, place and language, allowing the reader to appreciate each body of material for itself. The texts fall into four different chapters. To summarize, Chapter 1 presents the version of the epic in the Akkadian language that was standard in first-millennium Babylonia and Assyria, with some of its gaps filled with older material. This, if you like, is the classical Epic of

Gilgamesh. It was known to the Babylonians and Assyrians as 'He who saw the Deep'. In this book it is referred to as the standard version. Chapter 2 contains the five narrative poems in the Sumerian language, best known from copies made by Babylonian apprentice scribes in the eighteenth century BC, but certainly older. Chapter 3 gives a translation of older material in Akkadian, organized to form the skeletal remains of the poem at a time much nearer its date of composition, when it bore the title 'Surpassing all other kings'. Chapter 4 presents Akkadian fragments from the second millennium that do not have a place in Chapter 3; these include pieces of the poem from the ancient West – the Levant and Anatolia. In order to understand how the different texts and fragments of Gilgamesh relate to each other it may help to place them in the context of the long history of ancient Mesopotamian literature.

Gilgamesh and ancient Mesopotamian literature

Literature was already being written down in Mesopotamia by 2600 BC, but because the script did not yet express language fully, these early tablets remain extremely difficult to read. From at least this time, and probably much earlier, lower Mesopotamia was inhabited by people who spoke two very different languages. One was Sumerian, a language without affinities with any known tongue, and this appears to be the medium of the earliest writing. The other was Akkadian, which is a member of the Semitic family of languages and thus related to Hebrew and Arabic. The two languages, Sumerian and Akkadian, had long been used side by side by the people of lower Mesopotamia, though Sumerian predominated in the urban south and Akkadian in the more provincial north. This geographical division was enshrined in the terminology of later tradition, according to which the homeland of the 'black-headed ones', as these people called themselves, comprised two regions: Sumer, the southern part of lower Mesopotamia, and Akkad, the northern part. The bilingualism of the urban civilization of lower Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC perhaps resembled the division between French and Flemish in modern-day Belgium.

Texts in Akkadian appear in quantity from about 2300 BC, when the language became an administrative tool in the service of the first

great Mesopotamian empire. This empire stretched at its height from the Gulf to Levantine Syria. It was built by Sargon and his successors, the kings of Akkade, a city in the vicinity of modern Baghdad, which soon lent its name to the region round about and to the language spoken at the court of its kings. A legend describes how Sargon was a foundling like the infant Moses:

My mother, a priestess, conceived me and bore me in secret,
she put me in a basket of reeds, sealed its lid with pitch;
she cast me adrift on the river from which I could not arise,
the river bore me up and brought me to Aqqi, a drawer of water.[1]

According to tradition, Sargon rose to power by winning the favour of the goddess Ishtar. For nearly a hundred years his dynasty exercised dominion over the city-states of lower Mesopotamia and much of northern Mesopotamia too. The early texts in Akkadian dating from this period include a very small body of literature. Much more, no doubt, was passed down in an oral tradition and never written down, or only much later. Sumerian seems to have been losing ground to Akkadian as a spoken language from at least this time, but its function as the primary language of writing was bolstered by a Sumerian renaissance in the last century of the third millennium. For a short period much of Mesopotamia was again united, this time under the kings of the celebrated Third Dynasty of the southern city of Ur, most famously Shulgi (2094–2047 BC in the conventional chronology). The perfect prince was an intellectual as well as a warrior and an athlete, and among his many achievements King Shulgi was particularly proud of his literacy and cultural accomplishments. He had rosy memories of his days at the scribal school, where he boasted that he was the most skilled student in his class. In later life he was an enthusiastic patron of the arts and claims to have founded special libraries at Ur and at Nippur, further north in central Babylonia, in which scribes and minstrels could consult master copies of, as it were, the Sumerian songbook. Thus he envisaged that hymns to his glory and other literature of his day would be preserved for posterity:

For all eternity the Tablet House is never to change,
for all eternity the House of Learning is never to cease functioning.[2]

In this enlightened atmosphere the courts of the kings of Ur and the succeeding dynasty of Isin were witness to the composition of much literature in Sumerian. This literature we know best not from tablets written at the time, though some survive (including a fragment of a Gilgamesh poem), but from the scribal curriculum of the Babylonians.

After the rise to power of the city of Babylon in the eighteenth century, under its most famous ruler, King Hammurapi (1792–1750 BC), the land of Sumer and Akkad was ruled by Babylon. Though the people of Sumer and Akkad did not themselves refer to their homeland as Babylonia, which is a Greek term, it is customary to call them Babylonians from this time onwards. Sumerian had by then died out among the people as a spoken language, but it was still much in use as a written language. Mesopotamian culture was nothing if not conservative and since Sumerian had been the language of the first writing, more than a thousand years before, it remained the principal language of writing in the early second millennium. Much more was written in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, but Sumerian retained a particular prestige. Its primacy as the language of learning was enshrined in the curriculum that had to be mastered by the student scribe. In order to learn how to use the cuneiform script, even to write Akkadian, the student had to learn Sumerian, for, as the proverb said, 'A scribe who knows no Sumerian, what sort of scribe is he?'[3] None at all, for in this period the language of tuition was, at least in part, Sumerian. Falling foul of every regulation, one young student lamented,

> The door monitor said, 'Why did you go out without my say-so?' and he beat me.
> The water monitor said, 'Why did you help yourself to water without my say-so?' and he beat me.
> The Sumerian monitor said, 'You spoke in Akkadian!' and he beat me.
> My teacher said, 'Your handwriting is not at all good!' and he beat me.[4]

To prove he could write, the would-be scribe copied out, on dictation and from memory, texts in Sumerian. The most advanced Sumerian texts that he had to master were a prescribed corpus of traditional Sumerian literary compositions.

Nearly all the literature that we have in Sumerian derives from the tablets written by these young Babylonian scribal apprentices, many

of which were found in the remains of the houses of their teachers. The two largest such discoveries were made at Nippur, where the scribal quarter was abandoned at the end of the eighteenth century, and at Ur, where the houses in question are slightly older. More recently significant bodies of Sumerian literature from the same era have been discovered at Isin, a city just south of Nippur, and at Tell Haddad (ancient Mê-Turan) by the river Diyala on the periphery of north-east Babylonia, but most of these tablets remain unpublished. The private dwelling-houses of Nippur and Ur were not the royal Tablet Houses inaugurated by King Shulgi but they amply fulfilled the purpose he envisaged, the preservation of Sumerian literature for future generations. That now we are reading the songs of Shulgi again, four thousand years later, would probably have exceeded even his expectations, and it would have surprised him too that his libraries of Sumerian lived anew, as it were, in the tablet collections of Philadelphia, London, and other strange and far-away places.

The work of reconstructing the Sumerian literary corpus began before the Second World War and still continues. The pioneering task of identifying, joining and reading the thousands of fragments of clay tablets from Nippur, many of them tiny, was largely the work of the late Samuel Noah Kramer and his students at the University Museum in Philadelphia. His life was summed up by a teasing colleague as 'all work and no play', but there is nothing dull about being the first to read a tablet for nearly four millennia and Kramer certainly found much to be excited about. This was a completely new literature, the oldest large body of literature in human history, and its existence came as a total surprise to all but a tiny band of professional scholars. Many of these Sumerian literary texts are difficult and imperfectly understood, but it remains a serious failure of modern scholarship that their riches are not known more widely.

Among those Sumerian literary texts which have achieved some degree of publicity are the five poems of Gilgamesh, translated in Chapter 2. These are not the same as the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic, which was written in Akkadian, but separate and individual tales without common themes. They were probably first committed to writing under the Third Dynasty of Ur, whose kings felt a special bond with Gilgamesh as a legendary hero whom they considered their predecessor and ancestor. It seems likely that much of the traditional Sumerian literary corpus goes back to lays sung by minstrels for the

entertainment of the royal court of the Third Dynasty. The Sumerian poems of Gilgamesh are well suited for such amusement. The texts that we have, although known almost entirely from eighteenth-century copies, are very probably directly descended from master copies placed by King Shulgi in his Tablet Houses. Even so, it is entirely possible that the poems stem ultimately from an older, oral tradition. To some extent these Sumerian poems were source material for the Babylonian epic, but they can be enjoyed for their own sake too. Reading them takes us back four millennia to the courtly life of the Sumerian 'renaissance'.

Alongside the great mass of Sumerian literary tablets from the schools of eighteenth-century Babylonia, we have also recovered a little contemporaneous literature in Akkadian. This we call Old Babylonian literature. A few Old Babylonian literary tablets derive from the same schools as the literary tablets in Sumerian and also appear to be the work of apprentice scribes. These include a few scraps of Akkadian Gilgamesh, which are among the texts translated in Chapter 3. But though it seems that some literature in Akkadian was studied in the schools of this period, literary tablets in this language are so rare among the huge quantities of Sumerian tablets that it is clear they were not part of the prescribed curriculum. What narrative poems in Akkadian that we do have from the schools may instead have been copied down by students for fun, or even composed by them *ad lib*.

Other tablets of Akkadian literary works have been recovered from this period which are of less certain provenance than the school tablets. Some of them are finely written and were evidently kept, perhaps by individual scholars, as permanent library-copies. Among these are three Old Babylonian tablets of Gilgamesh which contribute significantly to our knowledge of the story: the Pennsylvania and Yale tablets and the fragment reportedly from Sippar. These are also translated in Chapter 3. Another masterpiece of Babylonian literature known from late in the Old Babylonian period is the great poem of Atramhasis, 'When the gods were man', which recounts the history of mankind from the Creation to the Flood.[5] It was this text's account of the Flood that the poet of the standard version of Gilgamesh used as a source for his own telling of the Deluge myth. It also provided a striking model for the story of Noah's Flood in the Bible. Other Akkadian literature begins to appear at this time, such as texts expounding the Babylonian sciences, divination, astrology

and mathematics, and incantations in both Sumerian and Akkadian whose purpose was to ward off evil by magic means. So the Old Babylonian period was an era of great literary creativity in Akkadian, but the school curriculum, at least in the centres we know best, was evidently too hidebound to reflect this development and stuck firmly to Sumerian.

The Old Babylonian Gilgamesh tablets reveal that there was already, at this time, an integrated Gilgamesh epic, which, as the Pennsylvania tablet reports, bore the title *Shūtur eli sharrī*, 'Surpassing all other kings'. Works of ancient Mesopotamian literature were rarely created out of nothing and the origins of this epic probably also go back to an oral tradition. Certainly the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh tablets are far from being translations of the individual Sumerian poems of the scribal curriculum, though the two traditions hold in common several episodes and themes. The Old Babylonian texts bear witness to a wholesale revision of Gilgamesh material to form a connected story composed around the principal themes of kingship, fame and the fear of death. For this reason one suspects that the Old Babylonian epic was essentially the masterpiece of a single, anonymous poet. This epic, 'Surpassing all other kings', is only a fragment as it is now preserved, but many find the simple poetry and spare narrative of this poem and of the other Old Babylonian material more attractive than the more wordy standard version. Some stanzas of the Pennsylvania and Sippar tablets, especially, are unforgettable. To explain what is meant by the standard version of the Gilgamesh epic it is necessary to continue the story of Mesopotamian literature.

Some time after the eighteenth century BC the contents of the scribal curriculum changed radically. We next have large numbers of school tablets at our disposal from the sixth century on, but the best witnesses to the nature and contents of the late scribal tradition are the several first-millennium libraries that have been excavated in Babylonia, especially at Babylon, Uruk and Sippar, and in Assyria. Assyria is the Greek name for the Land of Ashur, a small country to the north of Babylonia on the middle reaches of the river Tigris that was home in the early first millennium BC to the greatest empire the Near East had yet seen. Foremost among these late libraries is the collection of clay tablets amassed at Nineveh by the last great king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC).

Like Shulgi before him, King Ashurbanipal claimed to have been

trained in the scribal tradition and to have had a special talent for reading and writing. His education had been all-round, however, and had encouraged intellectual development and martial pursuits equally, as this summary reveals:

> The god Nabû, scribe of all the universe, bestowed on me as a gift the knowledge of his wisdom. The gods (of war and the hunt) Ninurta and Nergal endowed my physique with manly hardness and matchless strength.[6]

This is clearly a statement of the ideal schooling for a royal prince, the same then as in Shulgi's day and as now. Though we do not certainly possess any tablet actually written by Ashurbanipal, it is clear that he was an avid collector and, by good fortune, much of his collection is still extant today. The royal libraries, housed in at least two separate buildings on the citadel of Nineveh, had at their core a small nucleus of tablets that had been written more than four hundred years earlier in the reign of King Tiglath-pileser I (1115–1077 BC). To these were added the collections of at least one distinguished Assyrian scholar and, in due course, the libraries of many Babylonian scholars which were apparently appropriated as part of the reparations that followed the bitter hostilities of the great Babylonian revolt (652–648 BC). By royal command scholars in such cities as Babylon and nearby Borsippa were set to work, copying out texts from their own collections and from the libraries of the great temples. They did not risk incurring Ashurbanipal's wrath: 'We shall not neglect the king's command,' they told him. 'Day and night we shall strain and toil to execute the instruction of our lord the king!'[7] This they did on wooden writing-boards surfaced with wax, as well as on clay tablets. The scriptorium of Nineveh was also engaged on the task of copying out texts. Some of the copyists were prisoners-of-war or political hostages and worked in chains.

Among the texts that were copied out by Ashurbanipal's scribes was the Gilgamesh epic, of which the library may have possessed as many as four complete copies on clay tablets. Whatever was inscribed on wax has perished, of course. After the sack of Nineveh by the Median and Babylonian alliance in 612 BC, Ashurbanipal's copies of the epic, like his other tablets, lay in pieces on the floors of the royal palaces, not to be disturbed for nearly 2,500 years. The royal libraries of Nineveh were the first great find of cuneiform tablets to

be discovered, in 1850 and 1853, and are the nucleus of the collection of clay tablets amassed in the British Museum. They are also the foundation stone upon which the discipline of Assyriology was built and for much research they remain the most important source of primary material. The first to find these tablets were the young Austen Henry Layard and his assistant, an Assyrian Christian called Hormuzd Rassam, as they tunnelled in search of Assyrian sculpture through the remains of the 'Palace without Rival', a royal residence built by Sennacherib, Ashurbanipal's grandfather. Three years later Rassam returned on behalf of the British Museum and uncovered a second trove in Ashurbanipal's own North Palace. Rassam is something of an unsung hero in Assyriology. Much later, in 1879–82, his efforts provided the British Museum with tens of thousands of Babylonian tablets from such southern sites as Babylon and Sippar. Neither Layard nor Rassam was able to read the tablets they sent back from Assyria, but of the find he made in what he called the Chamber of Records Layard wrote, 'We cannot overrate their value.' His words remain true to this day, not least for the Gilgamesh epic.

The huge importance of the royal libraries found at Nineveh by Layard and Rassam first became widely known in 1872 when, sorting through the Assyrian tablets in the British Museum, the brilliant George Smith came across what remains the most famous of Gilgamesh tablets, the best-preserved manuscript of the story of the Deluge. His reaction is described by E. A. Wallis Budge in his history of cuneiform studies, *The Rise and Progress of Assyriology:* 'Smith took the tablet and began to read over the lines which Ready [the conservator who had cleaned the tablet] had brought to light; and when he saw that they contained the portion of the legend he had hoped to find there, he said, "I am the first man to read that after two thousand years of oblivion." Setting the tablet on the table, he jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself!' One hopes the George Smith who made his discovery public was a figure more composed and fully clad, since the occasion was a formal paper delivered to the Society of Biblical Archaeology in the presence of Mr Gladstone and other notables. This must be the only occasion on which a British Prime Minister in office has attended a lecture on Babylonian literature. Assyriology had arrived, and so had Gilgamesh.

While other libraries of clay tablets from ancient Mesopotamia

seem to belong to individual scholars and often comprise the work of the scholar's family and students as part of their scribal apprenticeship, King Ashurbanipal's library, which was far bigger than any other, was the result of a deliberate programme of acquisition and copying. The purpose of this labour was to provide Ashurbanipal with the best possible expertise to govern in the manner that would please the gods. 'Send me,' he commanded, 'tablets that are beneficial for my royal administration!'[8] With its reflections on good and bad government the Gilgamesh epic certainly came into this category, but it is clear from the contents of the libraries of Nineveh that the phrase summed up the entire scribal tradition current at the time.

The scribal tradition then current comprised a very different body of texts from that copied by the apprentices of the Old Babylonian period. Much of the Sumerian corpus was no longer extant. Almost without exception, those few texts that survived from it had been supplied with line-by-line Akkadian translations. The Akkadian literary texts known from Old Babylonian copies had been considerably reworked and many new texts in Akkadian had been added. The written traditions of the great professions had been incorporated. Many of the treatises on divination had been enormously expanded and the incantations of the exorcists had been organized and placed in series. This work of revision, organization and expansion is known to have taken place at the hands of many different scholars between seven and four hundred years earlier, in the last centuries of the second millennium. The labour of these individual Middle Babylonian scholars resulted in the creation of standard editions of most texts, editions which remained little altered until the death of cuneiform writing a thousand years later.

The Babylonian Gilgamesh epic did not escape the attentions of a redactor. This by tradition was a learned scholar by the name of Sîn-leqi-unninni, which means 'The Moon God Accepts my Prayer!' By profession he was an exorcist, which is to say that he was trained in the art of the expulsion of evil by prayer, incantation and magic ritual. This was a very important skill, whose principal applications were treating the sick, absolving sin, averting bad portents and consecrating holy ground. We know nothing else about Sîn-leqi-unninni, except that he was considered their ancestor by several well-known scribal families of Uruk, in southern Babylonia, that flourished in the late first millennium. Current opinion supposes that he lived some

time in the thirteenth to eleventh centuries. He could not have been the original composer of the Babylonian epic, for a version of it already existed in the Old Babylonian period, but probably he gave it its final form and was thus responsible for the edition current in first-millennium libraries, the text that here we call the standard version. Even so, we cannot rule out the possibility that, between Sîn-leqi-unninni's lifetime and the seventh century, changes were made in the text he established.

The long epic poem that the ancients attributed to Sîn-leqi-unninni was called in antiquity *Sha naqba īmuru*, 'He who saw the Deep', a title taken from its first line. A glimpse of the nature of Sîn-leqi-unninni's revision can be obtained by comparing the standard version of the epic and the older material, which is of course only possible where a particular episode is extant in both. The later epic often follows the Old Babylonian epic, 'Surpassing all other kings', line-for-line, sometimes with almost no changes in vocabulary and word order, sometimes with minor alterations in one or the other. Elsewhere one finds that the late text is much expanded, whether by repetition or by invention, and even that passages present in the Old Babylonian epic have been dropped and new episodes inserted.

Something of the intermediate stages in this development from 'Surpassing all other kings' to 'He who saw the Deep' can be learnt from the scraps of Babylonian Gilgamesh that survive from the era in which Sîn-leqi-unninni lived. This material falls into two groups: texts that come from within Babylonia and texts that come from outside it. The first group comprises only two tablets, from Nippur and Ur, translated in Chapter 3. They closely resemble the standard version of the epic attributed to Sîn-leqi-unninni, but there are differences. On grounds of content and style it is hard to say whether these tablets are witness to the text as it was immediately before Sîn-leqi-unninni's editorship, or immediately after it.

The existence of the second group of tablets, from outside Babylonia, needs some explanation. In the fourteenth century, at the height of the Late Bronze Age when the eastern Mediterranean was dominated by the great powers of the Egyptian New Kingdom and the Hittite Empire, the *lingua franca* of international communications in the Near East was the Akkadian language. Kings of Assyria and Babylonia naturally wrote to Pharaoh in Akkadian, but Pharaoh replied in Akkadian too. The Hittite king and Pharaoh likewise corresponded

in Akkadian, and, when writing to their overlords, the minor rulers of the Levantine coast and Syria used the same language, though often shot through with local Canaanite and Hurrian idioms. This Akkadian was written in the traditional manner, in cuneiform script on clay tablets. In order to learn to compose their lords' letters, treaties and other documents in Akkadian, local scribes far from Babylonia were trained in cuneiform writing, and they were trained in the time-honoured way, by rote-learning of the lists, vocabularies and literature of the Babylonian scribal tradition.

This was not the first time that the cuneiform script had made the journey to the West. The first known occasion was in the mid-third millennium, when cuneiform was exported to Ebla and elsewhere in Syria and texts in both Sumerian and Akkadian went with it as part of the skills that trainee scribes had to master in order to acquire the new technology. In the nineteenth century, Akkadian had been written at Kanesh and other Assyrian trading posts in Cappadocia. In the eighteenth century it was widely used in Syria, not only in Mesopotamian Syria but also close by the Mediterranean Sea, and it even appears at Hazor in Palestine. But in the later second millennium the spread of cuneiform schooling and scholarship was wider still.

The result was that tablets inscribed with Akkadian scholarly and literary texts were copied out at Hattusa (modern Boğazköy), the Hittite capital in Anatolia, at Akhetaten (el-Amarna), the royal city of Pharaoh Akhenaten in Upper Egypt, at Ugarit (Ras Shamra), a principality on the Syrian coast, and at Emar (Tell Meskene), a provincial town on the great bend of the Euphrates – just to list the principal sites. Except for Amarna, all these sites have produced tablets of Gilgamesh, as too has Megiddo in Palestine. These texts are translated in Chapter 4. Some of the material from Hattusa, which is the oldest in this group, is very similar to the Old Babylonian epic that we know from the Pennsylvania and Yale tablets and clearly predates Sîn-leqi-unninni. The texts from Emar, which are several centuries younger, are much more like his text, though again, it is impossible at present to determine whether they precede his work or not.

Other Gilgamesh texts from the West are abridgements of the Babylonian epic, or reworkings of it, and are probably local developments. Indeed, the epic fired the imagination then as it does now and adaptations of it were composed in local languages. So far a Hittite

version and a Hurrian version have come to light, both found in the archives of the Hittite capital. Though Hittite is pretty well understood, Hurrian is still barely comprehensible and our understanding of both versions of the Gilgamesh story is badly hampered by their fragmentary state of preservation. Therefore no rendering of them is given here. Not so long ago it seemed that a Gilgamesh text had also been composed in Elamite, the language of a people who occupied what became Susiana and is now Khuzestan in Iran. The tablet, discovered in Armenia, far from Elam, was published promptly and in due course translations followed. However, further study revealed that the text was, in fact, a private letter with no connection to Gilgamesh at all. This development elicited from one scholar the wry comment that the document was 'a good illustration of the fact that Elamite remains the worst-known language of the ancient Near East'. With the Akkadian language we are fortunately on much firmer ground.

The standard version of the Babylonian epic is known from a total of 73 manuscripts extant: the 35 that have survived from the libraries of King Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, 8 more tablets and fragments from three other Assyrian cities (Ashur, Kalah and Huzirina), and 30 from Babylonia, especially the cities of Babylon and Uruk. Ashurbanipal's tablets are the oldest. The latest manuscript discovered so far was written in about 130 BC by one Bel-ahhe-uṣur ('O Lord, Protect the Brothers!'), a trainee temple-astrologer of Babylon. By that time this once mighty city was much diminished in power and population but, in a country whose inhabitants had long spoken not Akkadian but Aramaic and Greek, its ancient temple was the last surviving bastion of cuneiform scholarship. From the 73 surviving manuscripts it is possible to reconstruct much of Sîn-leqi-unninni's epic but there are still considerable gaps. To fill these lacunae it is sometimes possible to fall back on the older material in Akkadian and for one episode it is even necessary to utilize the Hittite version. The result of this reconstruction is the text given in Chapter 1. There, in order clearly to distinguish between text of different periods, old material used to bridge lacunae in the standard version is explicitly identified in editorial notes.

The standard version of the epic is divided by Babylonian tradition into sections. The definition of a section is that it is the text customarily contained on an individual clay tablet, and so the sections are